A Feather
Looking for a Bird to Grow On

by

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A Feather
Looking for a Bird to Grow On

Hop on
to a furious gust
you tiny promise
of flight you
one day dream
The Myth

I have a little dick.
Isn’t that crazy? Superman

with a little dick.
Sometimes, I masturbate

while flying—
ass to the planet. Hands

with spread fingertips
have lifted sputtering

planes & curled into
earth-shattering violence.

These reluctant hands lazily
stroke like they were meant

for something more.
Imagine Lois’s surprise

waiting anxiously
as I rolled the spandex

from my hips to my ankles.
I drew my cape around

to the front in suspense.
She thought it was a joke.

like I also had some dick
shrinking power.

She comes
to me like she

is the hero
now.
Photo of a Blue Camaro Found in My Mother’s Jewelry Box

I was a blue hawk soaring
low among old ships
anchored to the earth.
Once, (maybe
more than once,
she wouldn’t tell you)
your mother was so sexy
she looked in my rearview
mirror and changed
nothing. Just pressed my pedals
into a gallop. If she could,
she would have reached back
and smacked my metal haunches.
When young men
thought her so serious,
your mother winged
off the black, asphalt
earth with a swerve
into the current.
Left me parked
at a stop light—
a family photo album.

High heels strewn on the floor.
Engine still running.
Light Eyes, Black Skin

I am a mixed child. Not like black and white but stained glass. Dab a finger in soft melanin. Watch the deep, red bones sway. Father says, *Dewar’s and water. And church.* Always church. Always lifting arms up high, bending at the wrist. Mother says: *G'on now.* *G'on talk to God like you wanna.* A solemn innocent soprano and the swag of a young albino man in a hand me down suit with new shoes. He plays the snare, the snare the drum kick reverb of a goat hide stretched thin over my mouth.
We (the Lightning Bugs)

When I was young,
I clomped through
the falling dusk
of June and clasped
my open hands
around lightning.

What does lightning make
of a giant god eye
blinking into the mouth
of its new cave?
The subject and shutter,
The flash

when a sight is captured
on a dark-sky-film, then
released in one luminous breath
to charge into the night.
Join tiny buoys
calling for attention.
Ballet

When I sit in the front row,
the windshield on my bus opens
like drawn curtains and suddenly
*I am flying*

skipping off
the tops of cars
letting my toes
slide along

the dusty metal. Look
how lazily seagulls flap
and take flying for granted.
Look at the crows

lined up along
the railing
of the bridge
as if the breeze was

made for sitting,
as if this air
wasn’t blowing back
my nappy hair

like a mane
peeling over my shoulders
and making a beeline for
the past. I am glowing

like a morning moon
hovering over
a slow dance routine
to see if anyone is smiling.
To the Mayor’s Son, Who Smiles on Demand

Before he went into the Air Force,
my uncle said that his afro,
grown long, gave in
to its weight and hung
over his ears.

*It is hard work to be this black*
it would say, before releasing
a tight fist into a open palm.

You are learning how to style
a brown body
into an act of resistance.

How the dance and saunter
become a code.

How your brimming
sneer could be a hairstyle,
coarse as bark. Then,
sure as a hot comb
your lips loosen,
release the tightness
and bend outward
into a tithe.
When the Area Code Changed from 201 to 908

I am 11, playing the Boyz II Men tape I dubbed from my brother’s CD when he left his room open like a treasure chest of cool. I walk one and half miles to school rather than have my mother drive me—rather than be folded hands. Instead, I am a dance ensemble with earphones. I sing loud until I am within a block of the school’s front door. Then, matching the infantry stride, I slide into a boot-scuffing saunter.

*

We stand on the block everyday between classes, the cross roads of all major traffic passed by. We wanted to see and be seen—it was where Brooklyn at in the way we imagined it: boisterous and unflinching. With easy instigation, fights broke out often enough for real talk until the principal forbid hanging out by the water fountain in the hallway. The block faded back into the current.

*

Tchaikovsky. Who? He composed The Nutcracker. Deez. Sometime in his 20s, my brother began to enjoy classical music, which is strange because it doesn’t seem like something people do. Not if you were once young and cool. Once after a night at the bar we went back to his apartment. He insisted we listen to Symphony #6. My brother conducted. I made up words to sing.
While Others are Watching

When I’m at work
pretending to be
the whole crowd,
pretending this
black skin is just
the right shade
to “speak well”
stepping out mis-
matched—all nappy
and sounding like
the king,

my co-worker says
Lawd! They don’t know
how black I am.
She lets her moss
covered scalp be-
come a petting zoo.

Who hasn’t slipped
thru the bars, just
to touch the quietly
painted set? Let
them praise the
hieroglyphs as
beautiful pictures.
I won’t cover my
mouth like grass
and blue blood.
On the 6th Day

My mother sits stroking my father’s hair. Matted tufts of yellow curl resist her insistent smoothing.

My thoughts clamor in the lull between tracks of sterile noise playing on the small CD player in the corner of the sterile room. The next track begins, a hum stirring my mother’s lips. Her hands reach for my father’s swollen mannequin fist.

Unexpected notes burst from her mouth breaking the white noise to finish the song verse,

...all of my help cometh from the lord.

She moves closer to his face. My father’s lips strain against the breathing tube. Monitor beeps fade as the choir reaches the chorus, my mother takes the lead and raises her voice with an crackle, my help, my help,

all of my help cometh.

The record sounds like 25 years ago in my mind
my father looks at me—

it’s Saturday morning again.
My mother in the kitchen singing
Whitney Houston coming from
the speakers from her mouth—

The youngest son, I am
a single tear drop glimmering
on the white tile floor.
My father’s eyelids

tremor. My mother,
raiser of boys and men,
has blown the Good Book open
into a revival.
On Dating a Farmer

in the morning
the flicker of one light
can illuminate
miles
your shine
is the last thing I see
eyelids closing
What Lovers do

I am one of two lovers
on a morning romp in a house
where the Caribbean
has crept up to the windows
and let a little wild inside.

I think we must have always been lovers,
to know our craft.
For love is
what lovers do.

Are lovers like chefs fussily choosing
the eye color of the unborn?
Or are they 2 thrushes
in a nest of legs wrapped
around a thin shell.
The surrounding jungle
perspires tiny droplets of saliva
with our mouths open wide
sounding a battle won—

That must be it. Lovers
are born to wage war. Listen
to a hummingbird’s wings
spasm. Skin colliding
as the crest of a wave breaks
over the rocks. Again.
The 21st Week

The sound in the fetoscope is strong today.
It is a tidal wave on repeat.
I am standing, looking up

at a live acoustic band
feeling the notes crest
on stage and crash

down on the crowd.
I can hear the bass guitar thrum.
How does it know

the pattern? The drum kick
turns me to thunder.
My lungs expand and clap.

How does a voice know when it’s ready
to resonate breathing
into song.
The Sale

We watch the faded red Nissan
drive away for the last time,
hoarse engine growling—
the muffler devoured
by some NJ pothole.
Remember the thrust

of our hips pressed
the hood concave, playing
the choppy funk of a scratched
Kelsy Davis CD, the winter
Brooklyn smashed the tempered glass

and stole your shoes—left one
on the corner of Utica Ave.
Remember sleeping on the roof
on an Arizona service road,
(sunrise felt like being waterboarded

by hell). We meant to fix the broken
windshield, driver-side window, door,
mirror, fender, bumper, dash,
tail light, trunk, the slim-jim still
rattling in the door frame.
Realization While Watching a Rihanna Music Video

With life
so much is already on stage
The stars,
   especially the bright,
are always performing
whirling
   along an illuminated path
flaunting
lips pursed on the edge
of a patent leather
   smile

pulsing beauty
and wickedness
   always
   sex making
   if not love

then a sine wave
   flung from finger-
   tips to the spine
   clutching their chest full of air
a promise of song to come

What is the video on mute?
   A small bright set
   in the mind’s corner.

When the siren ends,
I realize
   I am already set to music
   and would wring this life dry
   just as the stage,
empty of everything
   even breathless.
After *The Prisons: A Lofty Arch* by Giovanni Battista Piranesi

These scratched tally marks
will rearrange themselves as verse.

That is what thoughts do
when alone.

Take a cupped handful
of petals, toss them

into a slow shower.
When the sky finishes

filling in
the monochrome

will loosen from its lips
and chip away

vivid slips of paint.
Even Knowing We’ll See Each Other Again

These mornings mimic our worst fears.
When the dark is still a blanket
a train whistle tears our embrace;
our last kiss catching only air in the rush.

When the dark is still a blanket,
my train leaves piercing the night.
Our last kiss catches only air in the rush.
Dragging me from your arms with a creaking lurch,

my train leaves piercing the night,
spilling the dawn.
Dragging me from your arms with a creaking lurch,
the hardest part is when I give up the fight—

spilling the dawn
tear drops on a fresh white sheet.
The hardest part is when you give up the fight,
crawling back into the warm place my body once slept,

tear drops on a fresh white sheet.
Oh, shivering angel in the snow!
Crawl back into the warm place my body once slept,
these mornings only mimic our worst fears.
The Commuter Crowd Thins as the Weekend Approaches

I imagine these Friday mornings
like strokes from a paintbrush and
the weekend as a beautiful can of blue.

The ghost of someone loved and lost,
come back again. Who will I see on a Friday
night, in a sexy fever mating
to dancehall in a Brooklyn basement?
Some wine that takes my dry lips
and gives me red lust. On Saturday,

little, plump, brown & yellow finches
bounce along a Jersey City walkway and I
am in love with the same girl again.

On Sunday, each time my grandfather
tells a story, it grows
details—still making their way from

Oklahoma. My mom's accent
in prayer over dinner with gran-deddy
streaking his wavy Choctaw hair—a forgetful gray.
On Other Days, Dawn Arrives like a Grey Shadow

How many fiery sunsets
will it take before the sun
simply rises as ash

with the moon still in tow
dawn arrives with this exclamation
in death—the same

words gusting over the horizon
a sigh too heavy
for tears
The Side Door to Heaven

Using a sharp needle to pierce
a patchwork of coal skin,
I stitch my arm
back onto my torso.
It's a routine mend. This body
that used to have hair like a peach
and feel like a warm, dry tongue
is a canvas drooping from its frame.

My wife thinks one more treatment will be my salvation.

I think I will lie down today,
run my fingers through
hay drying on the end-of-summer field
and become a flower
pressed between two pages.
Drinkin’ Deep from an Empty Bottle

Hip Hop is a dark moonshine shuffling musty feet on a clean subway car

laying down with crisp dollars on a cardboard sheet drummed with rubber souls.

Wet with spittle, the mic is an old trombone faded to dusty ginger

from cupped prayer. Man, if that mouthpiece could open your wounds

with salt, it would cuss yo mama. The fruit never asks forgiveness

for turning into a sweet ferment.
Zoi-philiac

*The sexual attraction to the living. (As defined by The Dead)*

The calloused palm of my dry hands
spread open to embrace him, brush
fingers across his face until
I feel the sticky skin detach

and rip away from my body,
thin meat strips ready to be cured.
Forgotten words decay against
the inside of my teeth, a tomb.

My lips peel back, a deathly grin
(a fleeting vision of torn flesh)
but the salty metallic taste
is my own. I lick his hand wet

with blood. I kiss him on the mouth.
Remember when I was living.
This is How Loss Works

The first time we dance to Coltrane,
a memory that expands
   as a breath
until desire has turned
   crippling ache
and
   the moment is complete

silence.
Play the record
again. We make love
   on a thread-
bare carpet,
       fingertips pressing
the flesh
into long notes.

A hollow moan escapes
my lips. Remember

sneaking into a grave
displaying the polished bones
   on a clothes hanger—
a white gown—
   rattling.
I interlock my hands
   with its smooth digits.

Tell me you love me
like the first time.

The dance quickens,
   the gown whirling
   a pearl wind.
I dip my lover
in a bed of ash.
Safety Instructions for Black Youth

First, find a recently dead man
with skin like moonlit snow.
Allow his blood to drain.

Undress. Lift the skin on his arm
with a sterile scalpel and pierce.
Discard scalpel.
Using your fingernail, separate skin
from muscle like a fleshy grapefruit,
guiding your finger around
the curves of his joints. Nimbly navigate
the jagged creases of his jaw, eye
socket, skull, his entire body.
Keep the rind intact.

When you have peeled this man
into a costume,
press its moist interior onto
your hairless black
cherry skin, smoothing
the wrinkles underneath
your buttocks.
Stretch the pale chaps over your knees.

Don the mask last—
cover your face completely,
pull the scalp on like a hood
and smooth the silky hair back.
Fear

She reads the news
reaches into the wreckage
pulls out a familiar
face to lay
on the kitchen table
gently smoothes
the crinkled skin
with her palms.
She gives the face
a name she knows—
her younger brother Teddy
the peach-faced
sophomore. Imagines
a blackened child
seat on the highway
median. Perhaps,
it is nothing. Perhaps,
it is a spear thrust
into her chest
and removed
leaving a frayed
hollow.
Blank Gravestone

Friends read the name out loud
letting spirits slip in

between the seams of their skin.
My wind-worn face

has become a veil—
a blank slate.

Now pedestrians slide past
excusing themselves to a stranger.
Before Ashes, Before Dust

I imagine bones
rising from
the earth’s surface

smooth and naked
like a body slipped them off
and secretly tucked them

amongst layers
of dust. I imagine them
marbled. Winding

paths of cinnamon
trails into their joints.
This is what wrinkles look like

beneath gnarled skin:
the endless rings
in an oak tree—one life

in reverb. Then dying
the echo settles
into rest.
Nappy Roots

nappy is a
twisted root
a dark me
clinging to my feet
stretching out
with the sun
Storm

at the same time
water rushed the docks
and left a yacht parked
on the city concrete
before the lights
went out
a few hoodies laced up
like boxing gloves
had Sandy slow
dragging—exhaling
a charcoal stream
of swag
a silent walk with
a skully pulled low

some people say
she look like
an aunt we once knew
always talking
that existential shit
but when she hear that music
oooohh when she hear
that music
she’s wet
and wining hard
to a riddum

they say she spit
blacker than a warm
coal porter
brung the night
brung the howl
arms spread wide
coaxing the sea forward

some people say
it won’t the sea

water just start rising
in the street like the city
was finally swinging low
going home
they believe it too
just gon sit on this step
and ride this mothafucka
down

some people say
she a cold whisper
come through the walls
and you can feel
your life flicker

she leave like she always do
a cardboard sign
in the hand of a beggar
an old towel, dank with
the spill again
Vitiligo Within

“I’m gonna make a change for once in my life
It's gonna feel real good, gonna make a difference
Gonna make it right”

I don’t know at what point you begin to hate yourself,
Studying the mirror: finger tracing the outline of the face,
the one you no longer refer to as “me.”

A W.M.D. in a belt buckle used on an eight-year-old boy in Gary, Indiana. “I swear to god, lil nigga you gon’ get this shit right.”

These “Whites Only” (Unless You Can Sing and Dance) lounges, this Chitterlin’ Circuit that became American Bandstand. This self-hate makes suicide look like mild irritation. Carve your children from the soap you scrub across your face with the hope that it can wash this Race.

In 1979, the first rhinoplasty.
As if someone could put primer on a dance step:
slide, cool   pivot   slide.

In 1980, the second rhinoplasty.
If you ask me how Michael Jackson should be remembered:
don't let them forget his afro. Don't them forget his James Brown.
Don't let them forget he's the invention of breakdance
on a small pox blanket.

In 1984, the third rhinoplasty.
Have you ever seen a photograph of a firefly in black and white?
Imagine this spark, the monochrome smile.
Remind them he died still a Black child.
A potato peeler removes the years of a people
who have always lived too intimately with the sun.
I heard they hid from him the origin of rhythm,
(don't let Michael know it's a Black thing).

A boy in North Carolina who calls Blacks
“niggers” and Asians “chinks” because
his daddy does. These are his shoes.
Don't tell me, America, you don't recognize
your child, The offspring of Mary Kay and Jim Crow
on the news – high cheek bones, wavy hair, Nordic nose.
Don't act surprised at which doll he thinks is pretty.
“A willow deeply scarred”

In 1986, the fourth rhinoplasty and cut a cleft in his chin.
Each year that passes, the news magazines
begin to impress in your skin. The vitiligo within.
Tattoo your face with bleach bottles full of English tea.
Telling the White mother of your children you want your babies
to look like her – white skin and light eyes.
Even if you are the king of everything cool,
you still understand what popular is supposed to look like.
It's scary how good the acceptance feels. How the kids
at school will crowd around, how you will moonwalk
because you're the only one who can.
You're a crop circle.

Ask me how Michael Jackson should be remembered:
remember him how he would look through Katherine’s eyes.
See a Black boy drinking from a “Whites Only” water fountain.
Stomach the rusted melanin and just keep singing:

“I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer”

Italicized quotations are from Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror.”
Street to Sean Bell's Father

There are secrets I hold,
last words whispered
that fire-hoses
and street sweepers cannot clean.

Movies would have you
think souls lift gently
from their body.
This is not so.

I saw a man
with substance like sound
torn away from his body like paper
ripped in half.

He left
a message for you.
You will know where
to meet him.
2nd Amendment Unabridged

“A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” – 2nd Amendment of the United States Constitution

This is a freedom.
This is food on the table,
the death of some
so that others may live.
This is war—
now at a distance.
This is conquest
and reload. Conquest
and reload.

This is the end of a people.

This is a president.
Reload.
This is a revolutionary.
Reload.
This is Red Summer.

This is not for food on the table
anymore, this is for sport.
This is a pump action.
Reload.
A black beret in Chicago.

This is the job. This badge
and this shield. To Serve and Protect.

This is another black man.
Reload.

This is a duty. Salute
this uniform. I use oil
to clean the barrel
and polish my pride.

This is cold
pressed against my temple
but warmer than the cold
that's inside. This is Goodbye.

This is a thirty round clip.
Reload
fully-automatic Internet kit.
This is my fucking respect!
This is Sandy Hook.
   Reload
   This is Columbine.
   Reload.
   This is Virginia Tech.

This is security tucked away
a dull .22 six-shot semi in a purse
I call it my A-train escort, girl, niggas
out here is crazy!

This is tradition.
This is an heirloom. My father has a gun
and I know where he keeps the key.

This is the unmistakable click
of a hammer coiling
like a fist.
We Should All Feel so Free

While riding on the 4 train today, after much contemplation, I have determined there is no gentlemanly way of telling a strange woman that her nipple is sticking out from the top of her under-sized T-Shirt. A piece of marshmallow escaping from between two Graham crackers! The amusing thing about this crisis was the reaction of my fellow passengers as they were each exposed to the transit wardrobe malfunction. From the woman—who upon spotting the Bon-Bon jailbreak reached to her own blouse, grasped the flirty collar tight to her chin and then wrapped her scarf around her bodice like papier-mâché—to the double takes, the instant text messages and the tall brotha in the skinny jeans filing his nails who exclaimed, “Oh My Jesus!” We often reveal parts of ourselves that we forget are there. Still too human for these uploads to separate us. Because, after staring (for like fifteen to twenty minutes) I realized this wayward nipple wasn't much different than others I had seen before! I imagined myself slowly unbuttoning my own shirt and releasing my own nipple, if only to make her nipple less the center of attention. I imagined our nipples frolicking at their secret freedom like neighborhood play pals sneaking out after dark. I laughed out loud at the thought of our nipples climbing out of the window with toy guns, uncoordinated. Mine—lopsided with a floppy grin. Hers—a little fat boy with a shirt too small to cover his belly. Then the woman looked at me. And I looked at her… nipple. And she looked at her nipple. By the curse words and switching of train cars, I took it she did not find the same metaphors as I did. But I wish her the best and her nipple the freedom it is fighting for.
Aerodynamic

I am a long story
laid out on
a factory rooftop
one arm trailing

over the edge
my fingers drag
on the breeze.
I am using my teeth
to untie delicate knots.
I am pawing at the earth
No one sees me
coming. I am doing yoga

on a spit
naked
and turning slowly.
I am sweaty

and cayenne.
Remember
12:00AM
at the Sugar Shack.

Remember when my hair
was so knotty
we uncovered
an accent I lost.

Just wait
until you see
the crowd
that gathers

when I draw
open
my rib cage
and beat it

like two fleshy wings.
Wait until I lay down
on a million blades
of grass and bleed out.
A Memory is a Place We have Been Before
For an old friend in Brooklyn

I've been prayer
buried beneath a scowl
with a muh-fucka on my lips
& a beat on my finger tips

I've been a dance
coiled like a spring
a beautiful black—oh
this ol' thing

I've been old shoes
polished new
The kind white hipsters
like better used

I've been the color
of plum, flavored
by a sweet, sweet
sticky sap

I've been a sexy raucous
waiting for a train
a thick tree root bursting
through a concrete square

I've been
this neighborhood
ain't yours

This neighborhood
ain't yours

These stairs ain't
dEE-lap-pih-DATED
They just weathered like
a stooped old man &
don't need fixing

Just like stories
like memories still
smoking