Lower Frequencies

by

Cheswayo Mphanza

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Written under the direction of

Rigoberto Gonzalez

And approved by

Jayne Anne Phillips

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When Ralph Ellison, in *Invisible Man*, writes “who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” It is a question and a statement about the nature of writing, or crafting in other forms of art, within a black body. What my thesis, Lower Frequencies, aims to do is to interrogate this nature of blackness through writing in aesthetics and poetics that traditionally fall outside of the preconceived notions we have regarding blackness. To speak for someone is a loaded phrase because it implies that the speaker is thoroughly attune to the condition of those and what he or she speaks for. So in poetry, what does it mean to write ghazals and villanelles, forms outside of what we consider blackness, and have them still interrogate the means of blackness. Maybe the end goal is to reconsider Ellison’s sentence into “Who knows what can be spoken of on the lower frequencies, if not you?”
LOWER FREQUENCIES
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I was born with a language seared on my tongue. My first words were lacerations. I sipped from the same bottle of pale ale as my father before he rocked me to sleep in my crib. I hunted a rabbit with my uncle. When he turned to take in the scene of the woods, I let it go and we slept hungry that night. I have starved a mad dog until it could learn to kneel to me by how I tipped its bowl of food to the ground. I witnessed my brother hiding behind a Laurel Oak tree, the gunman just feet away, inhaling the air coming from the lakefront. I have taken a goat’s young and skinned it for a mat— the mother’s eyes invade my vision when I stare at children with bruises. I once kissed a woman in an Apostolic church and was sure I made the pastor, who caught us in the stairway, jealous of how I crafted my own holiness. I have held a chicken down before my grandmother cleaved its neck clean. I ate its body whole, sometimes chewing the bones. I have licked the blood from my wounds, letting the sores fester into scabs. I peeled each one off, reminding me the body lives by shedding.
Shawn tells me his pops is thinking about
starting a chain of funeral homes in South Shore—
Stillborne & Son. After I move my gaze
to the seagulls plucking strands of meat
from chicken bones in the sand, I tell him
it’s a good name. It’s like grabbing
something in murky waters, not sure if you
are ready to bring it to the surface. Sort of
like being baptized and waiting for
the preacher to decide how long should
you wade before you are cleansed. Made holy
in the first light your eyes open to.
Welcome...
Stay safe... What up lil’ nigga? Are y’all hiring?
Damn, where my food at? Someone will be with you shortly... Fuck I look like?
Niggas is wild out here youngblood... What you know good? Guess who got shot?
Man, fuck the mayor... Loud, loud... Them kids bad as hell...
Sisters, can I interest you in some oils? What you is? Man, you got me fucked up...
Oh, sing it Chaka—sing it! Shit ain’t sweet over here, boy...
No one got your back like you got your back... What your name lil’ mama?
When these damn potholes gon’ get fixed? Y’all got any leftovers y’all throwing away?
What you on? For real? Put it on something... Is you black? Like from here black?
I’m trying to put your face in place; not in front of a t-shirt... Girl, please...
White folk gon’ move in here soon... That’s the second son she lost this year...
Where you from? Shit man; just working... Cornbread ’bout the only good thing in this place...
Put some hot sauce on it... That old couple by the window ain’t got to pay...
Bean-head ass... Black man! Fix your hat boy... Young man, there are elders here...
Y’all niggas tripping... You one of them college niggas huh? We’re out of catfish today...
2 Buses go downtown. Got the Metra and lakefront. Can’t believe they left all this for niggas...
He was shot over the weekend... Yeah, I’m due in 6 months...
Loose squares, loose squares... What would you like to drink? We got a problem?
Damn, I swear I just seent him... Would you like to try the special? So you not gon’ talk?
This ain’t good for my blood pressure—diabetes too... You steady playing...
That’s Ron Isley there boy. Your granddaddy knocked your grandma up to that one...
This Chicago, nigga... Man, I’m tryna get put on... This nigga... How was your meal? You look like the type of brother not scared of a book...

Is you one of them Nation of Islam niggas? Thank you for your service... Aye, check it out...

Let me fix you a plate—go around the back... Y’all don’t know nothing ‘bout this...

Is brothers gon’ work it out? I don’t know; You tell me what’s good? I mean, you aight....

We hope you dine with us again...
Bite your tongue and let your teeth graze across the surface.
Let some blood leak so you can taste something this street sheds.
A muffled mouth here breathes better than an open one—
hush and let your body do the talking. What walk do you wield?

Let some blood leak so you can taste something this street sheds:
simmer of boys who check for wavering struts— learn to open whole.
Hush and let your body do the talking. What walk do you wield,
being cautious of what your teeth might bite and graze in dimmed alleys?

The simmer of boys who check for wavering struts, learning to open whole.
Part your lips, sharpen your tongue, release something they can live on,
but be cautious of what your teeth might bite and graze in dimmed alleys.
If you announce this street as a birthright, where men die standing upright,

part your lips, sharpen your tongue, release something they can live on
by letting the weight of the mouth’s saliva marinate the words.
If you announce this street as a birthright, where men die standing upright,
open and they will live by chewing on the gristle of your words,

letting the weight of the mouth’s saliva marinate. The words
seasoning your speech to something fitting their callused taste buds.
Open and they will live by chewing on the gristle of your words—
biting your tongue, letting teeth graze across the surface.
Someone must have confused her solitariness with loneliness. Maybe it was from the bus driver on the 26 South Shore Express who picked up the faux snakeskin wallet she left behind and made a stop by her apartment on his lunch break. This is how some people think romance begins. To his disappointment, all my mother could offer was a “thank you.” It could have been that the neighbor who delivers newspaper coupons to her apartment, carefully marking the sections with sales for “lady products,” finally took his chance in the elevator. You think it would have been nice if your father wrote her one, but you don’t know your father. If he can write, afford an envelope or a stamp, get a good pen, a crisp sheet of paper, scribble something of nostalgia and longing, then rush to the post office to deliver it overnight express.
Ode to the #6 Jackson Park Express

after Tim Seibles

The fungi express. The unused funk in Bootsy’s bass lines
and riffs. Illicit pleasures of what bodies on the south side
lust for, blasting from speakerphones: I wish I could
give you this feeling; I wish I could give this feeling.
The distant stares at the side of your sooty windows
gave me a sweeter scent from the Swisher Sweets
and Black & Milds; the musk of all the marauders
who rode you in the summer, bullet-eyed and waiting
for triggers to clutch. Early morning
wake up calls from the woman in rags,
who stood in the front preaching of Jehovah,
saying she was a witness to a testament I could not
believe in. Tithes and offerings spent on Cheetos
and honeybuns, salvation in gyros and baptism
in mystic drinks. Seats I gave up to black women
who all reminded me of the women that raised me
over dominoes and house music. Thank you
for holding my mother and all those women
who worked over time, how intransigent
their bones must have become, fighting
the temptation of rest on your hard seats,
while clutching their purses, accustomed
to the malice of your comfort. Thank you
to all the bus drivers who did not use
their bulletproof plastic doors on 79th
and let on passengers who rode
without paying, knowing the heavier toll
their bodies carried. Curse the bump
of its stop when it ran over the neighbor’s
daughter, the mother running to each
scattered limb, trying to piece back
body parts and how we all watched
in melancholic wonder, maybe thinking
it was possible. I did not cry that day. I went
with a friend to a corner store and attached
my arms to bags of chips, touching and leaving
corners that hugged us, feeling like all I will
ever know is 75th & South Shore Drive.
You are numb
  to the hollow longings

boys whisper of home:
  the boarded buildings

with calloused edges
  and their tempting corners.

They point to the street,
  the corner store's open

dark doors, but you know
  they mean your body.

Sometimes you are the corners
  holding rusted men

and women sinking
  into pulpits of vodka nips

and bum wines, dragging
  their bodies on gravel, rancor

slipping off their lips. You are
  the blaze of South Shore,

knocking skin off
  your knobby knees. A pain

that tries to pacify a ripe prime,
  but you slap the bruises

until they quiet, hushing the wounds
  with a crackling whisper.
Phantom Pain

When sleep stutters
in its pace to reach me,
I sometimes retreat
to the swelling scenes
of my budding days
and unfurl the images
of our family’s portraits,
always missing my father.
How they haunted me
at night, before I could
consider the kindness
of morning, and I awoke
as a type of solid ghost,
staring at my mother prepare
breakfast in the kitchen,
wondering what ghoul
she escaped to raise me
with some flesh left.
How I Cry With My Brother

We muzzle the mouth until screams
or swelling moans exhaust themselves
    in the body, recycling all the carnage
into something useful: rage and
the courage it needs to blossom,
    the dismal loneliness required to live
or leave this life.
The Swelling Scene

Starts with the leaking bathroom faucet that keeps you up most nights. Missing window blinds covered by the clothes you have outgrown. Roaches scattering when you turn the lights on at 2am. Matchboxes next to the gas stove. Your mother’s blood pressure and diabetes medicine laying on the mahogany table with a gimp leg. Rusted TV antennas in fixed positions—you pray no one disturbs them. Neighbors upstairs making a type of love that forces you to listen. The torn couch you have been sleeping on with its springs digging into your spine. Helicopters cutting through the sky, spotlighting a beam of light. Streets you bravely walked through in your youth before caution was the word that lingered on everybody's mind. The bus stop with the lovely black woman with the eccentric hats who wished everyone a good morning before boarding. The blue hue of police cameras flashing on corners as young girls jump rope in the parking lot of the Currency Exchange. The barber who taught you how to woo women: “it begins with a clean haircut.” Rest in peace tattooed into shattered walls on every corner. Beauty Supply stores with wanted posters—you recognize some of the faces. Grease pit restaurants with bulletproof windows separating you from the cashiers who always ask you to scream your order. Slaughter and Son Funeral Home (the son always reminds you “Chicago is good for business”). Park benches still etched with your initials and the year you became bold enough to carve into anything that let you.
We grind our bodies on the rise.
   Lick last night’s fog from
   our lips and rub the pain
from our eyes we captured
   and stored with a cruel vision.

Someone prepares breakfast
   in the kitchen. Crisco oil
   crackling in the black cast
iron skillet. We wait with upward
   noses and salivating mouths

for today’s tenderness. Some flesh
   to interrupt our craving to strip skin
   off live things from cartilage,
breaking their innocuous bones.
   Smoke sizzles the room, tenderizing

our lungs, that familiar scent that sent
   us to love the city’s unscaled
   sides. Possessed by a brewing,
bitter cool that lulled us to lawlessness.
   Do you want to see a dead body,

lounging in an alley in the recycling
   bin? Hopefully our bodies
   will be slain on softer pallets:
fresh cement; the sandbox at the park
   that drew us to each other

in our blazing childhood; or maybe a bed
   we prepared ourselves. We fear nothing
   sacred will be scribed on our headstones:
“Beloved son…beloved brother—” epithets
   we wasted to be threaded and bound
together. If there is another life, we wish
to transfer this one and our corpses
to the next. When God meets us,
embalmed in South Shore’s rigidity, He will know
we were baptized in his blithe.


Ode to My Back

Our history is a deep curve
winding in frequencies of pain
and acquiring numbness. How you bend
and slingshot my body into bodies trying to trespass
our bondage, but I trust my fall will always
be covered by your halfway spin for my left uppercut
to land on those without your good posture.

Bless the masseurs who dedicate their lives
to caressing your pain and the X-Rays
that try to read the delicate calligraphy
scribed all over you, but what can they tell me
I have not already felt? The tub of boiling water
from my childhood that peeled
your skin, cooking the bones;
the back spasms that followed, sending me to my knees
from a sneeze or heavy morning cough;
the lovers who you helped me put
on their backs; short men who folded before you,
wishing to match their backs against our kinship.
I too was told by my father
I should kneel and pray
to him. He said his judgement
was divine. His claim that

the dorsal sides of his hands
brandished my mother

holy when they brushed
her face. He said those

were not bruises
he gave, but blessings.

One day I decided
I was as big as my father.

I too wanted to rule
my own kingdom and

have someone to shake
a psalm out of from the rattle

of my hands. Father said
there could only be

one God. After laboring
our fists against each other,

I later found myself
in the driveway coming

On Job
to consciousness at his
  blurred image standing

over me. He opened the front
door and left it open after

going inside. I shut
  my eyes and sank into

the concrete. I knew then
I learned something

about mercy before
crawling and dragging

myself into the house
  on all fours, kicking

the door behind
  to close.
You can be the hard-faced titan in Timberland boots, a bomber jacket, chained to a corner of your choosing. You can scope the city from the shattered windows of high rises with inviting names: the Gardens; the Courts; the Homes.

Don't bother asking your mother who your father is, but you can become the boy women can't wait to become a man and then become a boy again, clutching their sides. You can claim you made love to the most beautiful women South Shore has to offer on the edges of its lakefront on a cool day in August. You can hold a second eviction notice and sleep in summer's blaze without the electric bill being paid. You can steal the flames from the warmest parts of the city you aren’t allowed in, but to give the flame’s contents away, the potency of the fire, is a sucker move.
Women are suckers and so are the men who call them ladies. Some prefer a helping hand going up the stairs or stepping down some horse drawn-carriage. I prefer the deacon’s hand rattling the legs like an usher’s hand on the collection plate at an afternoon service.

And maybe I might cool my lust with communion vials of wine. Lord, I am not a saint; I want the devil’s heat to stir inside me.

Hell sounds like a lovely place for unfinished women who wish to reach a different kind of holy ghost, being handled in devilish ways. Honey, pour me a fifth of 90 proof rum, some fire water for my baptism. I want to find the place where packs of witches, sorcerers, and voodoo women hang, conjuring repossessed spirits. Harpy women who lust after flesh resembling their own. O, when I am called to this place, I will leave bundles of my rag-tied past in some alley, then pack my best negligees, shot glasses, perm pressers, and strapless heels.

I will join these women in a haggard home and let them cast their spells until I become enchanted and charmed in our malice.
The tin bucket rattles against my hip when I walk to the well for water. I am eight, rolling my pants to avoid the mud around the well. The water sitting in a twenty feet deep hole, nursing critters and our stubborn thirst. The rope at the side, I tie a windsor knot to the handle, tossing the bucket in well water.

I ground my bare feet in the soil, cautious of my balance as I tip and drag the bucket back and forth— avoiding critters— until it gathers well water.

Across the field, I spot the rusted metal sheet laid over the old well. (Water must have gone bad by now). I pull the bucket, like we pulled the body out of the well water of the first hole we dug. We looked for hours. Not realizing we mistook the loud splash heard at the well for a heavy rock. Thirst called me to the well for water when I saw the drowned neighbor. A deep, bloody cut in his knee from the fall. He would have been my age, but he was floating in the well water.

My mouth dry. I tried to swallow hard on my saliva— all I could think of was my thirst. I tossed the bucket in, trying to scoop him out of the well water.

The tin bucket comes up, tilting on its sides. I lean back, clutching rope. The water splashing, as if begging to be returned to the well’s water.

We went thirsty for a week, I assumed. I threw stones in the well. The water still, bruised with the neighbor’s blood. Uncle said “well water no good.” The body came up, water pouring from the soaked clothes. (At night I heard the rattle of the bucket rustling in the old well water—
some thirst can’t be quenched). I retrieve the bucket, unhooking the Windsor knot before I lay the metal sheet over the hole holding the well water.

I fill a glass, sipping carefully. When asked: *what does Cheswayo mean?* “My protector in Nyanja”— a metal sheet covering troubled well waters.
I bet Prez thinks he is heroin cool,  
    floating on the thin, sinking  
    sheets of ice in a crisp drink

icing his veins. He must think  
    he knows how to speak tongues  
    with one curl or furl

of his sopping lips  
    sucking the gold-toothed  
    and parched mouth

of another woman who heard  
    him play, but was oblivious  
    to the malice surging.

He probably picked her up  
    with a line about how a woman's body  
    is like a saxophone,

cressing her waist with the  
    weighted history in his  
    rigid palms, running

chilled fingers around her spine,  
    reaching for keys in her ribs,  
    pressing until she sounded

like bebop. Who could love a mouth  
    loaded with unabridged languages  
    resonating in the residues

of his gums? The burgeoning plaque  
    and funk of not giving a fuck  
    one too many times;
the stifling cavities acquired from numbing
the mouth with the coolness
of coke. I wonder

where he finds air after spoiling
his lungs with a frozen and thawing
drink, muddy like brandy

with its drying burn, or ancient
like gin, what my mama calls:
the deadbeats-no-good-two-
timing-ass-nigga’s-drink-of-choice.

Prez, a prisoner of cool, pities those
who have tried drinking

from both glasses—my father,
moonshine mouth scented,
stumbles home over my mother,

with her own platinum-toothed
and thirst-ridden mouth
from a brisk drink.

My father breathlessly whispers: Baby,
you are some kind of instrument—
blindly looking for the keys

in her ribs, when they could've been strings
or woodwind tone holes, so unaware
of what sounds she makes.

I stare at my father, my voice
restraining a coarse hoarseness
hissing my disdain. How uncool
and unlearned his frigid fingers,
    unable to locate where the body
    needs to be pressed,

plucked, or gently tapped. His fear
    of the sinking sheets of ice
    in a cold drink

the only time he can conquer cool
    when he shrinks in himself, unable
    to hear the music of her soul.
The Infinitive

To tip-toe over mountains
To barricade hills
To draw water from dams
To lay a hammock across the Arctic ocean
To steer Apollo’s chariot
To embezzle a pint of unfiltered air for you
To whisper without the wind's gossip
To bump my head against Jupiter
To two-step with Godzilla
To catch lightning bugs with my mouth
To wrestle Andre the giant
To cast over you a shadow of light
To build the eagle’s nests
To raise my arms without folding
To muzzle the sun
To hold steady Dante’s ladder
To build you constellations
To be a witness
To color your eyes a shade of serpentine
To place "kick me" signs on God's back
To levitate with grounded feet
To see the sun in moonlight
To adorn hail as earrings
To laugh with coarse lungs
To wave our flags and banners
To leave without turning
To cry rainstorms
To wear your shadow
To speak thunder and lightning
To braid your hair in patterns of filigree
To bathe in clouds
To soothe your back with my palms
To saunter in a darkroom
To find you there
Our fingers dive, cross and hook, 
sewing crooked alphabets mid air.

Chicago's morning rust hidden 
between our ridges. The heat 
we steal from something 
or someone warmer than us 
to soothe the ash around 
our hands. Our palmar sides 
wrapping each other's fingers, 
tracing the scabs, callouses, 
and craters in our knuckles. 
How we test our strength 
and memory of what lethal language 
these hands inherited. How we lock 
and hold, waiting for the other 
not to let go. Our offering is a language 
of bruised tendons and ligaments. A prayer 
we scribe through sky. Brother, I long 
for your palms to graze mine, 
pulling me closer into the vacancy 
of your chest and easing my back 
when you hold me, knowing 
I am kept by the malice you reserve 
for those who don't share our embrace.
I do believe you, Teddy Pendergrass. I too have been on the rope-a-dopes of love, soaking in fists from women who do not believe a man can be down, but I am obsessed with the body—its gentle measures, holes and ridges, soft cuts and dips. I want to take care of the body. Provide and preserve imperturbable layers of skin to coat the flesh after its shedding. Soothe its unseen agony even nudity cannot make transparent with all its talk of vulnerability and tenderness. When I make love Teddy, I want to feel symphonies led by mad men, their brutish genius nestling and rustling in the underbelly. The bone’s moans and crackling grooves. The lower frequencies of the voice. I want to crash with them, re-create the cacophonous sounds and bellows of my primitive past, my despair and longing to be wrapped in the charged electric, elasticity of the body.
Sometimes I dream of a solar eclipse in my eyes I have grown too weary of the naked eye and its weaknesses in the light beyond gentle reflections and their sensitive images there are darker hues sinister colors and obscene visions I want to wield to drink spirits and howl blasphemies to speak ghostly and ghastly rattling god with evocative gestures to lust after saints and turn sacrilegious their divine convictions gospels of loneliness and martyrdom do not bury me gently I do not want to be perfumed and catalogued bones or delivered the denizen’s dozen bouquets of orchids tulips and carnations I want to be a pile of fresh ash to fade into some ominous place I want to breathe in the nauseating scent of holiness curse believers and laugh softly with a sanctified woman in the shadows take me to a sacred rock where I'll give my testimony about vision and its impaired sightings fragmented scenes and disturbing revelations deliver me from these eyes I want to close them and fold myself in their unreliable darkness and be brushed into locks of wind
It’s the foolish innocence of Sili in the film that gets to me. A bare-footed girl on crutches walking the streets of Dakar selling newspapers. Dubbed: La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil. After earning 10,000 francs, she buys her grandmother a parasol. When I am asked “have you been back home yet?” I think of Sili laughing at me before asking “What do you have to give Lusaka?” and “Haven’t you lost the language?” Which means to lose everything. My eyes moving between the subtitles on the screen and Sili’s mouth twisting between French and Wolof. When the jealous street beggars take one of Sili’s crutches, she yells Nous continuons!

And adorns yellow sunglasses, performing a crazed dance while singing a French song. The beggars confused, not sure what to make of Sili’s act. The intimacy of language I’m severed from. Or you could think about Diouana, La Noire De..., who leaves Dakar for France, but returning becomes a sort of shame. I share Diouana’s ambivalence to the idea of home. So what then to make of her suicide in the bathtub? The window open to a view of the Champs-Élysées. A Senegalese mask she places over her face. The knife at the side with blood stains. The burden of France serving as a post-colonial trauma, but I’m still not sure what my relationship to America or Zambia means.

A white Frenchman, Monsieur, finds Diouana and returns the mask to Dakar, but a boy chases Monsieur with the mask. Haunting him to the point where he can’t shed Diouana, or Diouana can’t shed him. In this sense, I see Zambia
and America not as places of distance, but a reminder of the trauma
or condition of self-transformation for the immigrant
and native—Sili’s broken legs in a barefooted dance on a dirt road
in Dakar, Diouana’s death in a porcelain bathtub in Paris.
I know so many children named after precious stones, travel-destinations, and fine cognacs: Sapphire, Jade, Sahara, Remy. When they are called, I imagine them to come as a metaphor. So what does it mean that of course I fall in love with the diamonds on display as I window shop the downtown stores of Chicago or lack mobility while under the influence of Courvoisier, wondering if Quatre Bornes is a beautiful city to walk through while inebriated? Maybe it is saying something about the parents who named them and how desire is a form of want that comes in all things insatiable. Like how I stare through my window blinds at my neighbors making love while I hold the part of me I'm learning is my lust for wanting to reach what is beyond the body. I want so many things outside my reach, but sometimes my desires overwhelm me and they start to linger, seducing me into exhaustion. Like those children with names reminding parents the looseness of their grasp. Or me at dinner with a friend, gently asking him to pass the courvoisier and how I mean to say pass me my wants.
It was the morning after independence—

Césaire’s *Negritude* in the background

and *Carmen* turned into a post-colonial

humanitarian project to understand

the exotic other, but without Ousmane Sembène

to give the film its vision. Watching

Djienaba Diop Gai as Karmen, *she who*

*wreaks havoc*, turn the screen into

a backyard party entices me, but I become

self conscious of my body when

her dress cannot contain her. She smiles

into the camera, telling me

my gaze is welcomed at a cost. But what

currency can I offer not rooted in

some sort of exchange always requiring

someone to lose something only

to gain a fraction of it back? I'll settle

with Dakar at night where I am

called by the music of hips: Djienaba’s walk—

the rattle in her legs a bare footed

dance in white sand. A child’s delicate step

on his mother’s back. I ask the screen,

reflecting Djienaba’s shadowed face:

Are you a morning song, bees

gossiping while they suck the nectar out

of anemones and angelonias?
Or an evening song where a shrike

seats on a barbed wire fence,
plucking strands of meat from the impaled
chest of a wren? I too am compelled
to hear the body not as a drum, but as a
wind instrument. The looseness
of Djienaba’s voice filled with air

the way drunken men surrounding
her wail her name, but don’t have
the mouth to swallow and hold

its consonants. (The women at the side
trying to pacify their desires).
Some yell: “I want to learn to fold

your name at the back of my mouth,”
“I want to learn to pronounce your body
and enunciate its ridges.” Djienaba
teases back and I learn all seduction is
is a type of deception we allow.
When she calls to the men, (seducing

the women with her eyes), she releases
a raspy and crackling note into their mouths,
letting them call it beautiful.
Pastoral

In the backfields of my grandparent’s farm
in Chikumbi, I held a slingshot fashioned

from a broken branch, formed into
the letter Y. Two bands of black and red elastic

tethered to a pouch nesting a marble. I saw
a Lilac Breasted Roller, watching me

from the top of a Zebrwood tree. The Roller
fluttering its wings to taunt me. I pulled on
the pouch, launching the marble. The body tumbled
against tree branches before it landed on the soil

beneath me. The bird on its back, struggling
to flap its dead wing. I forced the marble

into its delicate mouth, cracking its beak
until the marble protruded in its throat. I laid

on my back next to the Roller. Gently rubbing
the marble. The feathers on the dead wing

ruffled. I dug a hole and tucked the Roller in,
    sticking my slingshot in the dirt as a headstone.

My palms tightly pressed against the grave
to mute the shaking underneath me before

I heard the call from my grandmother;
my retreat to her side. One hand clutching a live
chicken’s neck, the other a knife. I steadied my hands
on its body. The knife severing the head,
    turning its black eyes into clear marbles.
As Thomas Sankara

My friend, drink with me. Let’s down the sluggishness of day with a rainstorm of a drink in our throats.

A liquid pouring to cover our quandaries when one can no longer hang on by life’s moorings.

Sometimes I fantasize of freedom: bourbon at the marquis, Amadou Balake filling speaker boxes as women in garbs whirl their bodies in scrambles. Freedom isn’t always a revolution with uniformed men, cocked with batons and rifles, scorching the little beauties left in our cracked streets in the name of uprise. Why not a child with a rumbling stomach muddying new shoes in bliss, the last glass of palm wine pouring when the body wails enough. Friend, when everything eludes you, look to the sun’s frazzled light when it rests in the underbelly of Lake Tengrela, the street lights flashing different hues, where I tend to linger, wanting to vanish in their dimming glow.
I know this world is a well
dry of what the tongue begs
the mouth to open for. I know
when the wind's groove will
bring the bashfulness of rain.
The place where breath is held
when one can no longer carry
it. When I am called to fold,
dig my grave in the plot of land
scarecrows fear to guard.

Clothe my body in the stained
and recycled fabrics of the south
side. Adorn me in a necklace
of loose cigarettes and *Wild Irish
Rose* bottles. Drag me through
Stony Island and its unlit
streets, coating me with its soil.
Give me the aroma of debris.
I do not know where they buried you.
Our history is one of not being marked.

I wonder if your permanent bed carries
a tombstone claiming me as some kin

of yours. If they prepared your body
with the eucalyptus and lavender oils

I was told you wanted in your will:
to be adorned in a linen suit, sporting

snakeskin shoes to match your casket.
Father, often I wonder of the place you

were delivered to after the last shovel
pitched its share of dirt to keep you held.

Am I by birthright due to meet you
there? Adorning polyester clothes and

secondhand shoes I imagine you
would have made me polish into a shade

of dusk. I prefer if we would have met
in a living place. Until I find your grave,

I will carry these bags of stones
like Prometheus’ son, tossing them over
my shoulders, not knowing what
is resurrecting behind me.
Reprise

You're nobody until somebody kills you
was the anthem peeling off my tongue.

Dreams of being a man who tastes night
with remains of sun tucked in his back

pockets. Thank God for the ghettos without
mirrors. Windows with anti-reflective glass—

damn me if I see my reflection. What man
will I see hiding behind his mother's legs?

Death, I lust for you and the stardom
you bring. The lives crawling through spring’s mist

over your graveyards. What is more reliable
than your arrival? Your pull into phantom cars

and their closed curtains. God, if you accept
me, know heaven is vulnerable to the habits

of my past. I will clip the wings of angels
at night and loan them flightless bird feathers

in the day. I will cry with God and sell his
tears as holy water. I will blow into Gabriel's trumpet

and resurrect those I lost in my youth. When
I land on a deathbed, make my funeral open casket.

My hands should adorn a cane with gems.
A suit tailored for the dead. Faux gold teeth

to rot with me in warm soil. A casket
with a sound system— there is a song I want
to mute when buried. When this life is finally snatched into the afterlife, take it to hell's pawn shop.
That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure

I want to be amorphous.
To linger in my body
and not be held by it.

Sometimes what I feel
has a difficult name— I want to hold
something outside
my body. Have a serrated
beak for a mouth, but still
carry a gentleness
to clasp and not snap
the loose limbs of a tree
then build a lofty nest,
but lately I fold into
something amiable with
gawking teeth: a boy
who walks staggeredly
to keep his cool. Night
makes a muffled sound
and I resound into something
leaking light. Somedays
I ask am I log-bodied?
Soaked in smoke to release
my cry at the fires setting
me ablaze— the crackle
with which I break.
fin
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Cheswayo Mphanza was born in Lusaka, Zambia and raised in Chicago, Illinois. He earned a B.A. in English from Middlebury College. His work has been featured in or is forthcoming from *New England Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Vinyl*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *RHINO*. He has received fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Hurston/Wright Foundation, Callaloo, Cave Canem, and Columbia University. A recipient of the 2017 Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers and finalist for the 2018 Brunel Prize in African Poetry, he received his MFA in poetry at Rutgers-Newark.