



SHADOW BLACK

Naima Yael Tokunow

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Winner of the 2019 Frontier Poetry Chapbook Award
Selected by Jericho Brown

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PRAISE FOR TOKUNOW'S POETRY

"The poems in *Shadow Black* move from startling moments of subtlety to satisfying passages of rant. Naima Tokunow is also a poet of the body, and in that tradition she calls for the liberation of the black body in particular: "It refuses. It declines. It makes its own." I'm so glad to have these poems in my life."

— Jericho Brown, Judge of the Chapbook Contest & author of *The Tradition*

"*Shadow Black* eludes and surprises, a palimpsest against which Naima Yael Tokunow projects the difficult ontology of a lyric identity destabilized by paradigmatic forces meant to corral queerness and femaleness and the facets of a bi-racial identity. Tokunow is a limber lyric poem with a diamond-hard edge that will '...find the way to make teeth/and to open [her] mouth for them...'"

— Carmen Giménez Smith, Co-Director of Cantomundo & author of *Be Recorder*

"Naima Yael Tokunow's *Shadow Black* is one of those rare collections that punctures its reader with singular focus and force, lingering in the body like an unseen bruise. "I do not make Shadow Blacks, but I record them. On all of our bodies," Tokunow writes. The work orbits around this figure, the poignant *Shadow Black*, a monster of racialized imagination—and investigates the central question: what does it mean to be seen while black in America? to "come up from the grave buzzing"? Tokunow is a poet of the body, searching every bit of flesh, soft and hard, for the reality of its history, of its wounds and its resurrections: including Charleston, including child birth, including the deaths of young black boys at the hands of police and headless girls forgotten, unclaimed.

Shadow Black's poems are tightly wound, angled with energy against their specific and deliberate forms, often prosaic, often menacing and eager for the soft mouth of a reader. Riding on the tension between academic, prophetic, elegiac and manifesto voices, Tokunow employs language that seeks moments of penetration and surprise. To experience this collection is to experience the myriad responses, violent and hopeful, to the projection hugging so much skin in America: *Shadow Black*."

—Joshua Roark, Editor of *Frontier Poetry*

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EPISTEMOLOGY OF SHADOW BLACK

You should be amazed at what whiteness can build. Shadow Black is not a body, but is projected onto our figures, lithographed over face, skin. You know what a shadow is. The dark area between body and the light. Now, imagine the shape was moveable, just darkness standing up in front of you. Imagine that Shadow looks like a monster—yellow eyes, bloodied teeth, skin hot to the touch. Or sexy and still monstrous. A forked tongue, a winked flick. Whiteness believes that Shadow Black will bleed their muscle dry. And yet they keep manufacturing Shadows. You may remember when a person looked at you and saw Shadow Black. You may remember the wide of their eyes, mucus and starving.

I do not make Shadow Blacks, but I record them. On all of our bodies. Sometimes, I see us breathing slowly, and with cinematic eyes I watch the mass of us expand and exhale like a giant fungus underneath the earth. I know that this image of brown limbs holding on to each other, uncountable heads gaping and mawing in unison may not be accurate. I recognize that this image is not unlike a mass grave full of black skin. It's the function of Shadow Black to keep us in funeral. How do you stare at Shadow Black without becoming? The eyes that you open are not your own, are owned, the deed still sweaty in a breast pocket of someone else's jacket.

As Shadow Black, my own body isn't impeded from being, but the uncoupling that stops me from being able to touch myself, to see with my own eyes seems impossible. That is the true trick of oppression, its ability for retinal takeover. Even my mirrored self is adjunct. These poems become my first words. I mourn and learn prayers of self, here, as the Bodied Poet. In the safe house of this book. But still. I was not voiceless as Shadow Black, only muted by the outside. Shadow Black functions like cotton in the mouth, between the gums and cheeks, against the throat—a certain plugging. Visibility is having a throat and tongue. An unencumbered mouth. To be seen.

SELF-PORTRAIT AS SHADOW BLACK

I am Shadow instead of girl.
The amulet for the thing,
instead of the thing itself—

the article that was my whole body.
An object that needs no specific name.
The thing that does not wish.
That one we need not ever know,

an inanimate. No muscle or tightening.
Distinct from a living. Remember,
here, thing doesn't have sentience.

Shadow Black is thing
made to do activity. Shadow Black
is just circumstances. Just scrim.

It's not an accident that Shadow fits
neatly underneath a shoe heel.
A thing can give reason for pity:
a poor, poor, poor.

Not to be all things—just this one
special interest. This easy
projection. Like I said, before: scrim.
It's not by chance that you can look
right through me.

MENU

I don't feed my skin enough
good milk even though I talk about it
all the time I don't feed it good things at all

I worry sometimes that I'll be killed
and I'll be ashy then too my skin won't do anything
by itself then and maybe somebody will worry

and in cremation I'll become ashes which is different
I'll be burned right through to the bone
and I won't have to see all of my people burdened

I worry sometimes that I'll die before I should
have because someone killed me in all of my
brownd inches and I never really thought I could
be killed

I always thought my pretty would save
me flash dimple and toss hair and not die
and maybe it's shameful to say that out loud

because every black body moments before becoming
dead was exquisite and they weren't saved
I never imagined that I could be truly hurt

because of all this education until a man
didn't ask me for credentials when he threw me against a wall
with his gun and badge just watching and itching

I used to ask myself all of these self-pitying questions
but I try to remember I don't feed myself
enough good things so I'm changing

the question *I am bless I am bless I am*
bless which is more of a burning out of all the ways
I have been taught to leave my body hungry

I took a bath and rubbed myself in oil and rubbed
until circulation turned my underskin pink
and purple and cherry and brown

WATCHING BLACK MEN DIE ON THE INTERNET

An exploded heart is not a zinnia.
Is not something red and spooked,
it doesn't flower. At first, it keeps blood
in its corners. Drinks and spits and
drinks and spits. How was it plucked?
With garden shears, with handguns.

Your body was sucked into a metal rip
of tide. Bullet as black hole, you as black hole.
A gun made easy fragments of your organs.
Your heart, a ball under a tire, bulging.
Your blood must have panicked, and shocked
with so much iron, stumbled.

I would like to build back your body
in this poem, but you are not customizable,
only mercury tipped and burning.
They grew you monstrous, your body
flail— your flail— your body flailing,
a marionette on one ugly, digital loop.

Who held the camera that put you here,
your body not yet gray with injury. Who saw
you and couldn't reach out. The space between
forms thickened, demanded inertia,
got only a little: that watching body stuck.
That watcher, this poem, nauseous with recording.

I cannot blink you back, but I imagine your
heart shooting up from your body, un-target.
Sitting in front of my computer, I have no magic.
Your dead heart plays like a worn-out album
at a party—the needle pops, the warp shows,
and skips and skips and skips.

RAISING SHADOW BLACK

The baby doesn't remember departure, can't move the right way, too full and fleshy.
The baby plays idly and then crawls on piss-stains, not her piss or her carpet, just a
part of the room. A collection of skin bits; domestic ephemera. Her abdomen will
stay hard with milk bloat, her bones won't cap. She will for a long time be seen as
a toothless baby on a dirty floor. This is the directed way of seeing her. Piteous and
darling. This scene is constructed to make you look around your living room and
sigh happily. Your house is clean. Your baby fed. When they let her teeth come in,
she'll become a schoolgirl, stripped of baby, and she'll try to learn. This is difficult.
She is made pre-remedial, unlistening, loud. Made is the operative word. Made is
the verb. Made is the doing. If she is lucky, her mother will siphon her hair plaits
flat against her head. Other girls will see her braids as their braids. They will bring
scissors to class. They will cut at the scalp. She'll know how to spell y-e-s, her
plump tongue pushing. It sounds familiar. She is taught to draw girls in taupe and
peach white and under-the-nails pink. She is not these colors and that's the point.
She's not girl, they tell her with crayons. She will not know her darkness as intimate
or tender. She comes up. Looks too skinny or thick enough, it doesn't make a
difference. They grow her hair, breasts. They say that she knows all of the sexual
positions. That she's not saying no even if that's what it sounds like. There is no
choice here. The baby she was on the carpet didn't know and the girl won't either.
She can eat. Licks or nibbles or her jaw unhinged. They'll give her that. But no one
taught her how travel through, to be airborne. What she needs is altitude—thin air,
wind that slices around her, the kindness of blue, blue, blue, and only more foward.
Watch her try now, her un-knuckled hands flapping, her mouth pursed in
concentration. Not her fault that she was never allowed herself, in her own stretch
and creasing. Is she a baby now, or a girl. Hard to say. If she's lucky, someone will
siphon her hair plaits flat against her head and hold her fleshy body up in the air
and say *Let me remember you how*.

GOOD HAIR

Be mix // black olive is olive // Girls say “good hair” // long wavy // not curly no curls
// just waves and waist // I haven’t done anything // to be // fully black // and see
nappy // I are just black // so what is good hair to you // 100% black hair all the time
hair // What is good // hair // good // black girls?

Here it’s laid // fancy girl rounded // Hair skirting up and down // not out // Here she
swish // shoulder hair finger hair through // Girls suck teeth // how bout good hair //
No press no burn // Girls don’t make hair // just get it // good // Good hair is hair that
is considered

That word is flat // that world // It only is good // A lot of black like bone hair // you
do not have to be mix // They call good hair // directly I mean directly not black //
but indirectly isn’t black // not from that area // loose types // It’s really history // co-
lonialism and slavery and all that // So there are movements // to grow back out and
grow // without // that kind

THE TROUBLE WITH CRAVING WHITENESS

Your meal is set—
they gave you the girl to eat.
You finished all her hipped blonde
but your eyes still soften with hunger.

Your jaw is weak because you aren’t
taking enough in: vitamin D, iron, good
medicine. Just one blue eye and then the other,
only their sweet gristle and chew.

This is a collaboration
between seamlined bone, her perfect choke
of hair and your mouth. Strands twisted like twine,
the gauzy film of scalp, the skull beneath, all yours.

How do you butcher beauty, how does the meat
breakdown. You fillet fat from muscle
and between your teeth you can chew at all
of her sinew—what a glutton for Beauty you are.

I look in the mirror after—
you are really still raw umber in flat glass,
still pinched at the breast, after all that gorging.
Your face keeps chestnut, lips pressed out from your teeth.

You search for shinywhite under the brown,
check your hairline, your irises. You pat
your distended belly, an invocation of your ugly.
You know what comes next.

You eat the girl.

SHADOW BLACK AS HEADLESS GIRL

She is a toothsome Shadow Black
in the street and under a motel bed
and even in her own imagined home.
I know some of them still want her
because she's beddable,
decapitated like this. I know
that some of them will use her
to soften their guilt, like *see I get it*.
You do not need excuses to tear
apart a dead black girl's body.
You do not need her name.
She won't get airtime, fundraisers,
but if she does, they will use her as a warning,
don't be this child, as if any of the babies
who will become Shadows
will control how they are seen as bodied,
or more than just a body's line.
I don't normally write to whiteness,
but here, look, this poem is for you:
some of you will not look at us
and say *damn*, because you think
we're still beddable, even without our heads.

AS A GOOD MEAL

They bite and I am bitten.
They stay complicit in chew.
It is polite to nod, to slurp
your plate up, to belch,
in some stories. But now,
they only wants to taste
the way I taste, all that good fat,
that oil and slime.

They order: chitlins and their hot rubber,
fried chicken, okra cooked soft and
mucus green delicious.

They say this is just appreciation.
Say things like *be grateful* and *cross-*
cultural and *don't your people*
like to be eaten? My body hangs
off their bottom lip avoiding
tongue, avoiding lick, but I know
that I'll get got like second plates.
Their healthy appetite threatens.

They order just a little more:
potato salad, hot pink crab salad,
spoon-rich mashed yams.

They love to be moaning
with their mouth full, smacking
on my good savor. They say
things like *authentic* and *heavy*
and *I don't know how you people*
eat like this every day, as if we
plate black women for ourselves.
As if we've made this for them at all.

They order: peach cobbler with too much
sugar crumble, ambrosia salad wobbly
and secretive, pudding

Their stomachs hurts, bloat slightly.
They smile like a cat that just ate
the black girl, their forehead
sweaty with digestion.
They say things like *yum* and
I'm soooo stuffed and *de-licious*.
Feels good to eat something that
they'll never had to feed.

To-go: headcheese and crackers,
rib combo, pig feet with
their sour cloven toes

I do not bide my time, I do not
wait patiently for their mouth
to lick my bones, suck the cream
marrow from them, though they do.
Know that all of their plates are learning.
I will find the way to make teeth
and to open my mouth for them.
Their hunger is not the only one brimming.

DEVOTIONS RESURRECTED

I was six years old. I didn't fear the dead, fear birthing, both with their muscle strain and press. The losses that they imply—the pregnant body and the spirit. My six-year-old body did not produce sweat that stank, hair, blood. As a black child I didn't know my dangers in being.

To make a cast of that first body, I'll flint, become kiln, grow bone bulbs out of old trauma. This is a gorgeous spell that's never worked, but I keep lighting, sowing, hatching flame. To call back all of my lost parts, I dress in baby hair, talcum, calamine, cottons.

I used to skin my knees and pick the scabs and eat them. I'd pet the sweet pink new skin, uncovered. How lucky I was—seeing ruin in my body and only giving tender hands. To know scars as resurrected skin and to give them my loyalties.

My body was plastered in black and red freckles, hair like stitching, cracked rivers of skin. This has not changed. These parts still make my body and yet, this body is not my own, held by other's eyes just enough that sometimes I look at it unacquainted.

I wish I could sleep like I did. The greedy way I spread myself in a bed, arms and legs splayed. Unafraid of taking space and using it. I used to be unwakeable, heavy weight against my pillow wet with spit. The spellcasting doesn't help with sleep, the whole world still undimmable.

My body had capacity. My legs kept me awake at night, growing. Bone stops making a way for itself—I am no longer this expanding thing, opening up and towards. What conjure can you make for that. Not needing height but wanting my body to gesture towards some other future.

THE RIGHT PAIN

This is not to say that our bodies only hurt in ways that hurt us. I learned to find my silky membranes, pursing and kissing.

Early, I learned the way to turn
my figure obsidian, make my body glasscracked.

Pressed my pubic bone, little and longing,
towards the plastic nose of my white teddy bear.

The carpet matted under my toes, burned
that skin as I pushed into it.

My weight pressed the bear and its nose
into the floor, and my lap to it all.

Rocking like this for hours, my knees glowed
kinetic, jaw clicked, teeth threatened to pierce

soft lip. I was wrapped in the slap-shock of climax.
I rocked so much I cut myself on the inside.

It burned to walk, the soft little lacerations rubbing
against themselves. But I still wanted the bear, white and stiff

haired, white and unsoft, until I came enough—blood
filling my face, fingers squeezed around each other,

around themselves. The pain could not stop me.
The pain became a part of the play, I inflamed to it.

I remember those interior injuries—the burn that
the bear gave my body along with its pleasure and so,

I take my lovers and say *touch me here*
and put my thumb against my Adam's apple;

put lover's palm to cheek to cheek again.
I say *make me flint* again, say *rub me out*.

SHADOW BLACK: A TIMELINE

Death of Shadow Black
Shadow Black dies during arrest
Cops fatally shoot Shadow Black after chase
Deputy shoots Shadow Black to death during altercation
One Shadow Black Dead in Police-Involved Shooting
Shadow Black Shooting Fast Facts
Police Identify Officer, Shadow Black Involved in Fatal Shooting
Watch Video of Shadow Black Slowly Dying in Jail
Shadow Black Arrest Record, Criminal History, Rap Sheet
Law enforcement sources say Shadow Black suffered
What We Know About the Shadow Black Arrest
Shadow Black's arrest, death and the aftermath
Shadow Black riots: City emails show chaos, confusion
Thousands Rally in Shadow Black
Violence and Chaos: A visual timeline of Shadow Black
Shadow Black largely peaceful
Shadow Black Cost Estimated \$9 Million in Damages
Protesters demand prosecution of the officers involved
in Shadow Black shooting
Following Shadow Black, Killings in City Soar
From Black to Shadow: The consequences
of government-sponsored segregation
The part of Shadow Black you haven't seen
Police kill unarmed Shadow Black on false facts
Chief defends cops who didn't use body cams
in Shadow Black shooting
Shadow Black death: Autopsy shows homicide, paper says
New body camera video from Shadow Black Death released
Medical examiner says Shadow Black had multiple gunshot wounds
City looks into Shadow Black police custody death
Fundraiser to benefit officers charge in Shadow Black trial
Shadow Black's Death Ruled a Homicide
Services set for Shadow Black, Accidental Police Shooting
On Attending the Funeral of Shadow Black
Who was Shadow Black?

CHARLESTON

Here is their room. Open, cleared but
for a circle of faces, familiar. See the
all in their room. It encompasses.

Prayer, like a sheer curtain, a god
made with two hands pressed together.
See the steeple drawn with their hands
up to the ceiling. Here are the people.

The books are the same books
they've had in this house all this time.
Gold edges, soft leather and oil-thin pages.

Their good books are opened and ready
to church each other in god. All of the doors
come open and the church is
not quiet—at first with welcome talk,

with *comesitdowns*. Communion makes
small gods of them all. The room is filled
with ceiling hands pointing: here is the all,

you can see it. The church becomes too loud,
and they begin to be opened, the people
are open, their bodies like doors. Their bodies
like hinges between the steeple and god.

This is not his poem, the one who ripped open
the room. He has already taken too much space.
This poem is their poem, their noise.

This is not the poem of their opening,
even though they open in it. Can we focus
on the moment right before, in their house
with lights and gold and tens of warmed brown

fingers making a god. Can you hear them,
see the people unopened here. The doors and bodies
and ceiling and books all humming and church.

REDBONE

Redbone // the correct black // in their hair and skin // light or light // but not just
reddish // Each term: light or light // However, the term is Black // for any high-yellow
girl // who is not still called // but is used to describe // who can happen light

You can call redbone // too so much // It wouldn't be used // in vernacular // but
technically you'd be used // in vernacular // right? // Nowadays it has too sexual // bright
light sexual // and heavily a tone

Get called the time // simply woman simply and Black // but lighter // but lighter // but
lighter // Hey Red // like boys standing Hey Red // Some think Hey Red yellow // is
saddity // Hey RED if you don't answer // don't come call // HEY RED // Skin as clock //
HEY // skin as what they know // you for // RED

THE TAKING OF SHADOW BLACK

He didn't ask her to kiss, just pressed her
against the wall of the sweaty club and
took her mouth, the whole thing, and had it.

She got in a cab and the boy got in the cab.
He didn't see her get in the car, he lied.
Squeezing the fatness of her breast,

her belly, her legs, he didn't get permission
as he measured her with his fingers. The girl
became Shadow Black, and she had no tongue

which was fine, he had enough for them both.
He lied. On top of her in her city apartment.
The boy made her into Shadow Black

in these moments. The boy enjoyed Shadow's
quietness, her still black body. It seemed to
open right for him. He created a soundtrack—

moans instead of silence, moans instead
of *stops*. Shadow had no tongue,
but he used enough for the both of them.

He spread Shadow and licked
where sweat had collected. Shadow
Black didn't breathe the whole time.

It's not by accident that shadows
don't have mouths. The boy told Shadow
that it was very beautiful, very perfect,

just what his whole body needed.
He asked it not to unlearn Shadow Black,
to keep moving as he pointed.

He had taken the body
that it belonged to, hadn't asked.
Shadow kept on being still, missed the body

but was glad she was not here for his
unsanctioned show. The boy slept in the bed
beside Shadow, like a milk drunk baby.

Shadow Black plotted, dreamed of murder,
of the full black body it used to be
filling up the whole room.

Shadow woke up next to the boy,
figured how to make its hands into real hands.
She stretched them towards the boy
and pushed.

BURNING AT GOD

I've seen fires. They crowned the mountain and that makes them sound holy. How close does a burning mountain make the moon. Can you write a poem about burning these days that isn't about god. The moon is a god. Does a church wall burn like a mountain. I've seen wildfires. Heat rubs and rubs and flames. That's how mountains go, cooking pine. This poem keeps asking me for question marks but these are not. Can you set a god on fire by burning its floors. No one is afraid of the moon god burning. It's bloodless, bleached. These are not questions. Look, they burned the floor black. See, they've cooked the crosses. Can you write a poem about burning god. Point to the charcoal and say, look.

Somehow the burnings and the murders conflate. My partner asks me *what are you thinking about*, and it's the computer and its depression. Its little warm bottom heats on my lap and shows me the Charleston news and its depress. I listened to an old radio show where a boy tried to burn a house down and doesn't—the trucks come too early, the fire barely licks the windows. Is that something different, getting hard from burn, like a power transfer: dust to dick. When the fire keeps flinting.

The wood is sanctified against. The wood is sanctified and nailed and look at the grain. We are god with the wood. We are not moon god or bible god or man god. We are grown brown and we are grained by our skin's ash, lotioned again and again. How do they smoke the spirit out of a body. They took the walls and the floor. They took the wood with which we are god and licked its corners. We are not moon. See, how to sift through ashes. See, how they make the street a chimney. We do not wane. The grain needs no house and yet it was a house and yet it is now not. A church echoes. They meant to get the skin's grain but they only burned wood. They meant to get the god but they couldn't see it. There is force in their fire but not the right kind.

OUT OF SHADOW I CAME

Shadow Black is in front of a woman.
A cardboard cutout that proceeds her,
stops her body from being seen
in all of its angles. Her language is clocked,
her Shadow Black measured
to fit their sawtoothed form of blackness.

They bring their heel to the edge
of Shadow and they grind at Shadow's
edge, they expect Shadow to gesture at that touch, to
understand any violence done to Shadow
is a part of their right as its creators.

The woman starts to pick at Shadow,
searching Shadow for places to breach.
It takes years, to find the perfect fissure,
and first it only takes a finger,
then she fits her whole hand through.
And so, I become.

The story is about me now, it's about
my body that is not yet fully my own,
that is only now becoming not Shadow Black.
My forming isn't decent, isn't reputable.
I am naked and born

out from myself. Unwaxed I am
already full of lines, the breadth of my skin
like a fingerprint flexing. This is ritual—
because it is just how my ancestors were born,
and how my goddesses were cleaved,
like Athena but without the father,

their own heads split open to bear their bodies—
this is yeasty and ribbing and makes the filling of me.
I become and I put my palms
to my body, and I scream at the loudest decibel
to make sure Shadow Black no longer stops my voice.

My body is not a nigger body.
It refuses. It declines. It makes its own.

I have something to say to you. I have something to scream about. I am a former Shadow Black, fingernails long, thick with placenta. I have just come out from the nothing you tried to make me. That you made me. That you succeeded in making.

When you imagined me, you saw back flat, legs spread and wet for you in gratitude. As Shadow Black I was meant to be gracious and full of rigid tongue for you to suckle. Or to raise to you in contrast. To mammy you as my own. What nigger isn't a wet nurse.

Now you look struck. The creeps seem to have embalmed your face. You are afraid of my potential for making a monster of you. You liked me better before. Without nails, without this body drenched and bawling. Here I am undoing your entire making. I hope you can smell the stink of my breath on your back.

I stick my fingers down my throat
and for the first time I feel the pooling of saliva
rush my mouth and out comes something
milky and viscous and sour smelling
and that it's the bodies of all
the white girls Shadow was made
to want, given to devour,

and that their acid finally had a stomach
to corrode and intestines to convulse
and a throat to open and close for.
I vomit until my breath sounds like
plaster breaking—I never knew dryness like this
—and my teeth rot a little, their clefts turn soft.
My mouth will always bear the decay

that Shadow Black was made to know
intimately. I run my fingers
along my teeth and give each one a funeral,
the first deaths of this body, the first
of many memorials. I am eulogy and
coffin and the first shovels of wet dirt. I
write a sermon with my opening words.
Make grave with fresh palms.

For a moment this I is light. Light
isn't right. Maybe lighted. My body is stretched, my
rib cage feels loosened somehow. From the back.
I feel my wings growing. I didn't know
I'd have flight and yet, here I am, face wind-shone,
teeth cracked, hands like a demon's, breaking into
the air. I am not a bee, but I buzz, my
frequencies sing out into infinite.
I honey and wing my way farther
up, with face glassy and perfuming.

Who told you this body was a nigger body. This body is gospel. This body rips its arms out. Flies. You can't even see this body, and so you guess, you clumsy-stitch a face of all the Shadow Blacks you've ever made. You think you've seen. You are wrong. I am not Shadow, I am my own-made god full of bones and rotted teeth and I remember where you sleep.

Imagine I am bathing myself in a tub full of salts.
My skin, an organ now, slips against water,
its warm pulse moving with my breath.
I am drinking coconut milk and humming wailing songs.
You may be imagining, but I am here and real.
My hands have softened, loose joints tapping porcelain,
and my body is full of rest, saltwater, blood.
I am not flying, but I have not forgotten.

I am she. I prepared. I have become something more than what you can count on your hands. I don't care if you've known the air like this, because this is my story. I am one million times myself. I can die and you can kill me, but I will stain your soft-written history. I will come up from the grave buzzing. But I am not dead and I have made everything and the air and the wings and the body.

EULOGY COVENANTS

Pray for the good live flesh. You pray.
Don't talk about graves anymore. Try not to think of falling.
The falling you've seen on the news lately, their hands up,
 their bodies made to fail.
You welcome ice cream and cake and cookies. Know
you should go elsewhere to find sweet things.
Sometimes you don't have the energy, you want easy sugar.
Turn water into lemon tea. You don't drink wine these days.
Grow flames in your belly from all that acid.
You wait for the heat to bear witness, that burn in your stomach.
The violence of our erasure feels enormous,
 and we know the whole of it.
Your fear of the dead is familial, like an apron wrapped around you.
Pray for the good live flesh. Amen.
Hope that after all this that you remember how to make good love.
Recognize that there is a chance in the poem
 to be more than an undertaker.
Write down every name you've ever known.
Make a whole new list of covenants. Between you and the bodies. You
promise your bellied heat to all of the names that you don't know,
 those already gone.
Promise your poems to yourself.
Make a whole new language for praying grief.
Pick up and pick up and stop from falling.
You see every fear, full and waiting. You don't run.

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