# CHAPBOOK EXPLORATION

**FP POETRY LAB** 

# PUTTING TOGETHER YOUR CHAP

### INTRODUCTION

Chapbooks function as a unique and vital avenue for publication today. Whether you have ten books under your belt, or zero, chapbooks remain a challenging and inspiring container for your poetry.

I've included here the three winners we've had at Frontier Poetry since 2018: Xiao Yue Shan (selected by me), Naima Tokunow (selected by Jericho Brown), and Frederick Speers (selected by Carl Phillips). Each of these little books offer different and valuable lessons for your own efforts to create a compelling and excellent experience of poetry in 15-30 pages.

I encourage you to imagine your work in chapbook form! Personally, when I'm putting together the finalists for our contest to send to the judge, I always keep an eye on books that express themselves as punchy and singular projects. I consider how the books aim to craft that 30-45 minute experience of sitting with the poems—how serious they are about identifying as unique and unified objects of deliberate meaning.

Your main takeaway from this packet of materials is an ingrained understanding of the Anatomy of a Chapbook questions—while not every editor or reader is articulating these questions exactly so, I sincerely believe the ability to answer them confidently for your own work will only improve it as a poetic experience for your readers.

—Josh // Editor, Frontier Poetry

# WHAT'S IN HERE

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- 4. How Often I Have Chosen Love by Xiao Yue Shan
- 5. <u>Shadow Black</u> by Naima Tokunow
- 6. In the Year of Our Making & Unmaking by Frederick Speers
- 7. Opportunity Cost by Abby Johnson

### BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHAPBOOK

'Etymologically speaking, "chap" is related to "cheap"—from OE ceap, meaning "trade"-but most agree "chapbook" is specifically derived from "chapman," the itinerant merchant who peddled like items across Europe, Britain, and North America from the 16th through the mid-19th centuries. Hucksters of the "imagined community's" periphery, these peripatetic emissaries of such "squalid, degraded" products linked urban centers to their outlying rural districts. A Chaplinesque and Whitmanic trade, chapmanship was not without its mischief and modest larceny. Sometimes chapmen doubled as petty thieves or highwaymen, a fact underscored by their profession's affiliation—a multiform binding—with Hermes, the original nomadic trickster: protector and patron of travelers, merchants, thieves, orators, and poets, and overlord of the in-between, of borderlands and interstices, who freely traverses dimensions, mortal and deific, conveying souls into the afterlife.'

— Kyle Waugh of Poets House

### BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHAPBOOK

'At first this meant the poetry of the early Modernists — writers like Ezra Pound, H.D., T.S. Eliot, and Djuna Barnes — who published short-form leaflets of their work, as well as placing it in collections and literary magazines. It also saw currency with Dadaists in Europe, and in the tracts of the Russian avant-garde. But the chapbook continued to have an ambivalent relationship with the aesthetics and distribution methods of high and low culture. Soon the 20th century brought its own technological changes, in the form of typewriters and mimeograph machines that put the power of textual reproduction more directly in the hands of writers than ever before. These tools were eagerly seized upon by Beat poets of the 1950s. The utilitarian manuscripts they hacked out of their typewriters may seem like a far cry from the nostalgic designs of Arts and Crafts printers like William Morris, but there is some political coherence to this unlikely pedigree. The creators of chapbooks have always been concerned with circumventing the official channels by which writing is allowed to make itself available to a public. Over the course of the 20th century, this labor was to unite authors as disparate as feminist consciousness raising groups and Star Trek fans, as the chapbook morphed into the zine.'

- Nellie Pierce, "A Very Short History of the Chapbook"

The following section details the internalized questions that I as an editor have found myself asking of each chapbook submission I read. The Head to Toe is part of my sequential first read, and The Bones are more holistic examinations.

I encourage you to apply this anatomy to the chapbooks included in the materials here. This will give you a clearer vision of the reader's experience and expectations around your own chap.

### Head to Toe

- 1. Title
- 2. Table of Contents
- 3. First Five
- 4. Middle
- 5. Final Three

## The Bones

- 1. Emotional Urgency
- 2. Connective Tissues
- 3. Gratification

### <u>Title</u>

- 1. Does the title make me want to grab it off the shelf? Why?
- 2. What promises is the title creating in the reader's mind?

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

3. Does this ToC suggest care and consideration by the author? How?

4. What are the emotional and imaginary bounds of the book suggested by the titles of the individual poems? What sort of experience will this book be crafting for the reader?

# The First Five

5. What is the core concern of the work? Is it urgent and compelling? Why?

6. Does the first poem grab the reader, emotionally and imaginatively? How?

7. Is the book meeting or frustrating the expectations set up by the title and ToC?

# <u>The Middle</u>

8. What is the shape of the emotional experience for the reader so far? A journey? A mosaic?

9. Does the book utilize a sense of surprise to keep the momentum going? How?

# <u>The Final Three</u>

10. How exactly does the end reach for a sense of emotional and narrative satisfaction?

# <u>Osteology</u>

A. What is the core emotional concern of the book?

B. What elements of language/story does the author utilize to build connective tissue between the poems?

C. Draw or describe the shape of the reader's emotional gratification.

## SUBMITTING YOUR CHAP

# <u>The Cover Letter (example)</u>

Dear editors and readers,

Thank you for taking the time to consider my work. I appreciate everything you all do!

Short synopsis. (~75 words).

Sincerely, Your Name

3rd person professional bio. (50-150 words)

## SUBMITTING YOUR CHAP

### <u>Finding Submission</u> <u>Opportunities</u>

Submittable's Discover Duotrope Entropy's Quarterly List

# Editors & Consultants

Shipman Agency's Workroom Kwame Dawes Maggie Smith EJ Colen

### <u>Other Resources</u>

Bullcity Press Podcast Four Way Review's Chapbook Conversation

2018 CHAPBOOK WINNER

### SYNOPSIS

Color and light and life invigorate Xiao Yue Shan's debut chapbook-or, in her own words: "a thrill of poppy and chrysanthemum". How Often I Have Chosen Love explores the rediscovery of her nuanced and complex family, her nuanced and complex sense of home, the nuanced and complex history of China. From the flag in Tiananmen Square to the apartments of San Francisco, Shan complicates our sense of home and history by filling every reflection and every moment with the bursting blue light of Hong Kong, the delicate sprawl of blooming vegetation—envisioning a creation myth that seeks to have "no tale of falling." In the voice of a modern woman of two nations. Shan's work finds her deepest authenticity. Her rich palette of color, of flower and nation and jewel, is an achievement only Shan's unique perspective could conceive. Xiao Yue Shan is an emerging poet whose words and heart beat with the exact rhythm of our times.

### AUTHOR

#### Xiao Yue Shan

1993. poet and essayist. born in dongying, china and living in tokyo, japan. co-editor-in-chief at spittoon literary magazine // editor and designer at tokyo poetry journal // blog editor at asymptote // poetry editor at cicada

2018 CHAPBOOK WINNER

### EDITORIAL NOTES

There were two main things Xiao Yue and I discussed during the editorial process of publishing her chapbook:

- DETAILS
- 31 Pages
- 17 poems
- Mixed style
- 6 poems previously published
- selected by Frontier Staff

- 1. The connective tissue between the poems.
- 2. The ordering of the poems.

HOIHCL, you'll see, is different from the other two chaps—whereas the other two are very intentionally structured around a central project or aim, HOIHCL follows the more traditional mode of collecting together poems written over the course of years, perhaps with disconnected original intentions, into a meaningful whole.

This meant that we had to really focus on how the poems spoke to each other, so as to become ONE book, instead of MANY poems. Particularly, I ask that you pay attention to the imagery of the book, the colors, to see how we worked to create a single atmospheric experience.

This also mean that the ordering of the poems had to wrestle disparate topics into one unified emotional journey. See if you can find some techniques we used there (hint: see the ends of poems and the beginnings of poems).

2018 CHAPBOOK WINNER

### YOUR RESPONSE

### QUESTIONS

- What was your favorite poem of the collection?
- What's your favorite line?
- Your favorite image?
- How does the work's themes and concerns engage with your own life?
- Does this structure feel compelling to you? Why?



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Xiao Yue Shan Visit my website at www.shellyshan.com

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#### PRAISE FOR SHAN'S POETRY

"Xiao Yue Shan's poems are both alight and firmly buried into the earth at the same time. What a wonderful discovery of Shan's poems. In a poem, "the worth of a woman's life in China," Shan writes: "in china they say a man is like a mountain/and a woman is like a river. it is because we spread/to fill empty spaces." Shan's poems both create spaces we didn't know existed and spread to fill them with new words and combinations of words. Definitely a poet to watch!" — Victoria Chang, Guggenheim Fellow & author of *Barbie Chang* 

"I'm bonkers for these poems. Be still my heart. The love of this world, its inhabitants painted with all palettes from dusky to florescent to bloody, infuses every line in this volume. Like many of 'us' today, I am drowning in books. This book made me want to drown right in its pages. I'll be reading it on repeat." — Jordan A. Y. Smith, Editor-in-Chief of *Tokyo Poetry Journal* 

"Creation myth does not do justice to the ambition of Xiao Yue Shan's poems which, by straddling the mythical-poetic and the historical, transform both into a vision that is completely the poet's own. Shan's lines have the effect of being simultaneously heavy and effortless—a quality that rhymes beautifully with her speaker's prevailing attitude of critical fascination with the world. From the injustices of history to the injustices of the present, from the joys of childhood to the wisdom of adulthood, Shan's poems bring us into intimate engagement with her inner world" — Simon Shieh, Editor-in-Chief of *Spittoon Literary Magazine* 

### FOR MY MOTHER, 张冠伟 FOR MY FATHER, 单连泉

#### when I was four years old my parents took me to tiananmen square

#### 1.

in the train car from dongying to beijing, the light, 3am humming, sleeps in strange directions. different weights

of yellow. I close my eyes, dizzy. mama's warm hand greying exhale against my forehead, the world

escapes by in the window, like fleeing. I didn't realize it was we who were running, and everything else

was still. it takes time to figure out different kinds of quiet. like how colours come

to belong to their names, and if blue ever gets bluer. there are boiled chestnuts in mama's coat, and she cracks them for me

one by one until we arrive at tiananmen in time for dawn. the sun

looks as if it was put hastily in the sky. hesitant despite having risen the same way for ever. a flag is raised

into it, as if this is the thing that makes and unmakes the day. feed the dead raw silk and organza. feed them gold-plated sunflower seeds in water-chipped ming bowls, holy basil, wild ginger. feed them white buns with hearts of brown sugar, spooned porridge under pink cotton guilts in bouts of childhood fever. feed them freshwater pearls. they were loved. they were the most loved. in a garden plant 200 or 1000 orchids, shoot the bulbs into the ground. pile gunpowder over them. hope they will still grow stalks of colour. feed the dead soft plums and seawater. give them something to bite on, before you begin to remember.

#### 3.

mama knit stories. a woman who filled the ocean with milkstones, a girl and a rabbit and a peach tree

on the moon. stories steeled in centuries that sang our blood a chinese blood. myths barefoot to the strain

of erhu strings. a sky boiling under nine suns, crossing seas upon a sword— stories

we do not negotiate as we do facts about how many died and where. and when. and men packed like tindersticks, some light between them. I watched

mama's shoulders downward in front of an oil portrait, hung over a fiery shade of carmine that everyone knows

means lucky. I'm in a green dress. papa takes my photo, standing

in a thrill of poppy and chrysanthemum, under the painting of a man who looks like my grandfather.

#### 4.

let me walk down the paper-white roads of chengdu one more time. let me green my arm in the waters of songhua river, glance over my grandmother's table. let me watch the steam weeping from windows down shangde avenue. let me do it without bravery.

let me swim in the yangtze. let me

touch the softening cheeks of my mother. let me put my daughter's shoes on for her. give me time to figure out how to be more than water. let me see my home town through the smoke of my uncle's cigarette. let me please see november. let this day pass without my having done anything to end it. 5.

it is a red light that sounds through the flag and I am experiencing, in a little life, the closest thing yet

to prayer. the palm, the white glove, the breast, fine

and whole. no one admits june fourth through the gates, so we all stand around flowers and little girls and we say;

pretty. remember our names do not have long to live either. we are lucky if they even grow old with us. oh, and, the day is the thing

that gets blue and bluer. someone had a dream that heaven could be a modifier for earthly

peace, then men died, and the next morning we woke up complicit. liars when our feet

touched the land. with noonshine sounding copper on my wrists, I watched papa's spine iron

with pride. his china, the spring front ancient and careful, our breathing not filled with ghosts, but

mulberries. chang-an jie is ripe and glossed with bodies, smoking and laughing and beginning things. I looked both ways and couldn't see

the end of it.

#### and hong kong in 2001 was always this shade of light blue

papa was a communist making parts for it wasn't quite proper coming home with black oil but I guess we the kitchen at night and bare hot-july chests yellow slick skin grease throat laughter white-blue hong kong dusk through the open the balcony brimmed stalks of lucky bamboo it was so I curled on half naked overflowing ashtrays mama putting on lipstick occasionally threatening and the hungry skyline into the neon basin around the table they were taxi drivers shined woks loved their country papa had skinny arms mama wore hoop earrings sometimes I wish we with 50000 yuan that they kept laughing popping caps doing bad impressions some teresa teng song a smell of smoked duck in that 400 square foot where no one ever got

mama worked in a factory airplanes for girls to stay out all day on the pales of fine necks needed the money shined of cigarette smoke men swilling warm beer steamed chestnut shells glass spilling laughter peppering our mouths window with pots of laundry water red-gold ribbon curls too loud to sleep papa's knee among the sunflower seeds black sesame cakes over the steaming stove to call someone's wife no longer fit of shing min river red cheeks red palms low-level beaucrats pulled rickshaws just enough skimpy black moustache a filthy mouth never left china a single suitcase chain-smoking off green tsingtao bottles of their bosses swaying the hot air steamed sweet potato one bedroom apartment to finish a sentence

### the girls of harbin

for my mother, zhang guanwei

they call them northern lilacs, winter beauties. they say coralhawberry cheeks in nomadic january, that between the baroque quarters of songhua river you can see the small hem of a gold-brocade cashmere kissing the ice-crushed curb. they say in harbin, you can watch girls just walk, forever, that she sweeps through the city and the streets make music against her body. in heilongjiang, the days are so short for so long, but the light loves the skin it lands onseemingly staying for awhile, breathlessly frosting, hinting of water, before washing itself away. they say the further north the further you are from heaven. and maybe that's why the girls here are milk-bathed, long-necked, laughing, shaking out their hair from glazed-shell pins, looking at you that way. no matter where they are, they're thirsty for a winter that blurs the edges of when their shoulders meet the air, pale as horizon. they say when russia came with its railroads and cathedrals and black bread, it was girls with whom they drank vodka from porcelain bowls, tearing red sausage teeth-first from coal-charred steel, girls with eyes and lips satin as ricepaper, girls measured with peaches, girls daughters of refugees and criminals and girls who knew the needlepoint of new snow against raw fingertips, combing through the land, knitted with ice like lacework, for something, oh, anything to eat. it is because the winter-earth has been thawed by blood, here, that they say you will never hurt a girl from harbin. that she wears honey on her breath but doesn't talk sweet. that she'll break a window before she opens a door. that she eats ice cream in the dead of december, licking a black sesame drip from a bare wrist. girls in harbin know to never complain about the cold. they press it to their chests as a bouquet of bluebells. or a blade under the sleeve. and through shuangcheng to yilan you don't get tired of watching girls walk. the winter chrysalis shedding in mid-may turns the day orange, dripping so, and you'll see them in their thigh-skimming skirts, lips just-bitten red, throwing a sudden black braid over the shoulder, tossing easy a wind that always blows north-ward, disrupting the timid spring day like a wild peony bursting, breaking the bud with one flick of a silken skirt.

#### ornithomancy

on peace boulevard some engine thunder sends stray pavement tumbling, and in the black dust of travel an ear is put to the ground to hear the idiolect of footpaths, mineral-old, still somehow speaking. language pulling knots in the veins of the city. traffic serving its metronomic, hypnotic purpose. beijing whose cartography was modelled after the angelic. from gem-windows thriving skyward, the dimmed land still gathers up breath and smoke all in some apparition, a city in gauze looking almost like heaven. a city in bandages amidst its own demolition. no one will ever again say that it's just like we never left. what's left? camphor and paper houses. the orange light is purple and grey and too-blue.

between the slender courtyard walls it seems everything is counting on all this being kept just between us. a carved sparrow trying to fly from the pear-wood frame before its contractual, imminent expropriation. a city clerk marries his pen to the page and two days later mingshan houjie is smoke and knee-deep in a red rage, ochre brick broken from walls once laced through with the scripture of thin broths, secrets, ceremony. the children born on this ground were always ancient. their stunning bodies calling backward, backward, a lineage of soil and clay. here we buried milk names. here we lit golden bells. and as the razing rhythms on we lock the doors that no longer serve their purpose of protecting. at our feet shatters a sparrow's wings, wide amidst chipped sprays of chrysanthemum, toothless eaves, pale tiles scattered like petals.

#### willingly into the muting blue

all the while down minsheng road the cars curl around one another, almost kissing. in the dark looking enough like bodies that it was easy to forget they had people inside of them.

smog glared against the sky. grey on grey.

somebody said this wasn't ordinary traffic. somebody had a hot dinner waiting back at home.

eight pm sees teenagers just out of class. angels against glory-white doorways. the convenience store named after the moon. hand-warmed bottles of too-sweet tea. pink cream pastry, bare forearms and cheeks blue and perfect in the cellophane light.

wives, holding plastic flowers, spilling over the street-corner. someone invents the tangerine peony.

in the middle of the qizheng courtyard a tall bust of venus, piano-white. shadows doing work hands cannot. no one knows who built her or why one shoulder slopes, our marbled swan in foreign river-water. no one lives in the qizheng buildings, not for a long time.

pride, maybe. or guilt from not coming home more often.

goldfish tied to hooks on the pavilion we're still laughing.

streets of oyster-shell pattern.

the tallest gravestones in the huang shan cemetery are still the ones for the russians. mandarin prayers for slavic names. stalks of closed tulips. tissue-paper aster, carefully purple, frosting over.

it is said that the ghosts of the occupiers feel just as at home as the ghosts of the occupied.

woman selling hawberries in syrup outside the old synagogue. between her and the arched doorway a pure, white space.

beer and warm vodka. beer and warm vodka. she sits at the table in her high collar opening bottles all night. beer and warm vodka. she drinks when they tell her to drink. she smiles her small, close-lipped smile.

the sound of water being poured into a hot wok is so familiar it reminds everyone of their mothers.

cars parked on sidewalks. cars the meeting place for furtive trades. cars driven into walnut trees.

back end of a truck filled with green-stained wooden slats. front end of the truck nowhere to be found.

the gift of grapefruit on a tuesday. the shop just got them in. how do you eat this? she asks, tapping the rippled skin with a fingernail.

the thing about uninhabitable places is that you have to wonder who lives there.

don't fall asleep in the car. your spirit won't know the way back home.

easy to tell who was raised right by the way they pick out fruit. heaviest ones are the juiciest. thinly pressing the bursting skin of a nectarine. knuckles knocked against watermelon rinds.

her needle digs tiny tunnels along the seam, the thread following like river-water.

cold that the air freezes clean. nothing leaves a trace, save for the astonished breath turning into snow.

in the window: silk, dried plums, cutting board, wool socks.

they said that all the pretty girls were cabaret hostesses, and all the ugly ones were dentists.

a man reads the paper and shells beef into white buns, selling them for eight yuan through a half-cracked door. glass impressioned with grime. letters in red and less-red.

in winter harbin is a diamond. city somehow orienting itself around its prisms.

she's in bed wearing a yellow nightgown. light from other apartments sheening colour on her still face. her little hand on top of the crochet pillowcase.

we are still inheriting linens from our great-grandmothers.

tomorrow is the sun and moon nestled next to one another. then the sky.

day red day blue day.

#### the nation of aphasia

when a writer goes missing in china we take the red and gold paper emblems that display the character for luck off of our doors and paste them over our mouths. and we go back to the old books to learn again what we've learned for millennia, that you can command armies or recompose history or traverse from xian to changsha to mount lu or buy a dozen eggs and none of it will mean that your life is a promise your country makes to you. hong kong is a dewdrop glittering in mid-january. we close our eyes to take its temperature, trying to find just the right word. the rain only a sweet-tasting silhouette against the gleaming skyline. late-day light spreads a white sheet over the windows and no one can see in. no one can see out. still, no one ever thinks this is the day someone will knock on the door asking you to identify your husband by his handwriting. how is it that we have made a culture out of paying a heavy price. wearing out stones with water. chasing the sun across the eastern front with our poems closing in behind us like lost birds. the gardens we do not tend. the paper boats we do not try in the yangtze. imagine your life is the thing that is trapped on the tip of your tongue, the word that is almost realized, but you can't quite think of.

#### ideogram of morning

over rooftops written timidly into the city like fiction, we waited

for the day thickly blue between our teeth

pristine cotton light unpacking flora onto our limbs

chiaroscuro of cold juniper silvering wisteria

trying to start with our bodies a dialogue about colour

we bore witness to our own creation myth

and the red was in exactly the right place

you were a perfect compromise a truce on the white concrete

like someone all of a sudden thought

to build into a window what the light looks like as it is passing through

#### explain to me fate as if I were a child

how do things come up to be next to one another. streets with no names pressed poorly upon mountains, molasses twilight holding the day, hip pushed to hip during rush hour, and old photographs leaving yellow oil upon the new. the city-bound flocking above the river-water, the benevolent laying her hands on the unforgivable, the living light that eagerly tenderizes the dying one. how does a child meet the future just so, how do sprouts meet their flowers, how do various evenings meet in the kitchen over broths and breads. how many pairs of hands carried fruit to this bowl. what rhythm of music led some eyes from here, to a place a little more dangerous. how did we come to be with one another, here as if enchanted, with no more reason than two grains of sand, and no less intoxication than two winds, infuriated by the distance they've both had to come.

I lay my head down on a pillow pilled with characters, yellow tracks and traces of the name I was given. I sleep on chinese every night. I speak dialects inside my head, words strange and pelagic. words harnessed to a shore. language that asks for directions back to the main street, for a second helping, for a mother. there is a child whose head fits where mine does, upon cotton worn to silk by years and years of sleep. I do not know how to speak chinese that does not belong to the child. I know how to ask for milk but not scissors. I know how to ask to be held but not to explain why. I bite down hard on a word. black sesame word, warm tofu word, morning words. in the mid-minute above waking I remember every moment of a dream, before forgetting.

#### when you plant a seed in vietnam it grows and grows

the mekong seems like the edge of the world but it can't be. that would mean we came

from somewhere,

but behind there's nothing but green. moon, moths, the oily throats of wild banana trees

all green.

the woman rows the boat and she is green, her skin takes root. this water, thick and dark as the mouths

of doves,

seems home to even far away places. a man dips his feet into it, sways. holds. he is drinking. light freezes

and does not touch.

palm fronds and straw-stems and blue tarps float and then are swallowed. here the earth

takes from us.

everything we relinquish and abandon she receives and weighs in her hand, forces it

to bear fruit.

fruit that is sweet to the point of seeming mysterious. here our bodies are salt and

the light licks at us

as if we were a wound she wanted to heal. here one only has to open a mouth to be relieved

of thirst.

the whole air is here. whole days of clouds. we fall sleep in sweat and smoke, safe knowing

we will wake up green.

#### search by no light

by the antibesian waters of tokyo bay I search my body by no light

learning and naming what I alone can touch leather pearl paper silver

where and how within me contains artillery who put it there why

the moon admitted courting river birches light does not blanch hand prints water stains

upon the skin past touches lie powdered sifted and merging

the secret taste the bullet rising my creation myth has no tale of falling

#### easier if we cried

sitting across from one another with cigarettes we keep forgetting, san francisco hanging like sheets to be kicked away in the middle of the night. I can tell by how beautiful you are becoming that something different will be said. careful to salt the words before you let them leave. july daze was gauzed around our shoulders, heat that alighted wildflowers, that convinced the sweet out of the wine. you are so thin I would believe someone's rib was used to make you, all deep breaths and clicks of your bad wrist. the bare leaf of your upper back, you're sitting so still but your body looks like

it remembers falling. you say, and then I woke up and this guy I've never seen before was having sex with me. our stupid, heavy language. this wooden, through language that makes a fist out of your beautiful mouth. words naked by light, green-olive bitter, soaked with evening. we always knew we weren't new things. you would point at my collarbone and say, this hollow here, showing me the places love would discover. slights that act as stopping-places for sandy water, jasmine-smell, lips that could not be redder. you say when the right person touches you it feels like grasses growing up between cobblestones, and then you woke up and this guy you've never seen before was- that sounds like rape, I say, too quickly. I don't want to think about it that way. you said. the small linen of your skin, knitted with blush. fingers stiffened in the shape of a pistol. the car that forgot you were in the trunk when it dove into the river. I'm always putting out my hand to find ashtrays

that I didn't know were there. if you never say never, you can't say nevermind. I don't want this to be one of those things where I reach out to take your hand and discover that they are the same size. you are so small, on the other side of the table. candlelight sculpted a mirror of you in the glass, smoothing down the corners. you, softer. I want to not be scared that you would be scared if I touched you. it's for selfish reasons. I don't know how to fix fruit broken with bruised, full bites. peach flesh and shrapnel on your chair. I can't think about it that way, you said, so, so, beautifully. the perfect note of your skin to punctuate the sentence of you and I sitting there. it was july in san francisco. I was holding the word rape in front of your mouth like a knife. all this intention we sacrifice to the open air. I want to pick up the telephone of your mouth and use it to call backwards, ask to speak to you then, just one more time. the silence before you say hello,

on loop. that hollow there.

#### inheritance

my mother says about hong kong: that wasn't your life. that was my life. she meant the chicken boiling with anise on the stove and the rouge pinking the edge of the wooden spoon. the broth she raised to her mouth to taste, she meant I couldn't taste. too young. she put cotton over my mouth when we went outside. air softened. it was her life. all skins of oranges left outside to dry and the anthemic thunder- this is not the life I want for my child. that was her life. I run into hong kong on the street in the summertime. I say I got off the plane and came right to see you. she wears orange. rouge. my mother's face. upon her so few places to lie. we sit in a cafe in sheung wan with pink cups eating bean cakes, and later I call my mother to say I found our old apartment building. that I had walked up the blue stairs and laid my hand on the door. hong kong a neon neckline, long hair glittering with ship-lights, crystal balls, storm velvets. it's her life, yet I had come, and grown my hair, and happened upon the eastern sun like a moon. a life pearled into stories served on porcelain into the mouth of a hungry child.

#### the diaspora roommate

coming in from doorways opposite into a room that seemed to face whichever way the sun was coming in, all of the time. you were hanging clothes with your shoes on and the room was pendulous with your testamentsyour furniture. your pictures and a quilt draped on the bed made by your grandmother. when did you get here, I asked. a little while before you did, you said. and we stood for awhile unsure pebbling our individual scripts with our few common words. can I sit there, I pointed to the velvet-looking window seat. actually, that's a family heirloom but you can sit here, you pulled up a wooden chair. I smiled. you did too. I pulled green dates and candied hawthorns from my pocket and we shared them. I felt precious to be with you, when you told me stories about here. the room was warm and water white from the tap was cold and good. you asked me, why did you come? and I said, I heard good things about this place. you liked that. you nodded with pride. we slept side by side that night. you on your bed and I on my coat spread out on the floor. I didn't have very much. you understood. I knew that you were here first. you agreed. but when the patterns of this world began to show upon my skin I felt as if I were home. you didn't disagree. after awhile I seeded some small pots with anise and papered the drawers pink and yellow. at night you asked me questions and I answered them. my father's farm. chives and cabbages. the mountains. some places especially enchanted

on the edge of october. you let your hand fall and touched the floor, as if testing the temperature. I lit sticks of incense stuck into oranges and told stories infinite as the evening, you played records that did sound exactly like blue. sometimes I called home. sometimes we shared cigarettes. sometimes we spared one another the little indignities of writing names on bags of apples. sometimes we didn't. we varied in shape and left trails of different colours as we moved here and forth, across the room. I loved you from certain anglesyour different astrology, newspapers, and you loved the things I gave without knowing. the sweet taste of salt and sheets of wild silk, thin as sprouts. some things we never managed to teach one another. the feeling of hot oil. prayers. the xi of my name. you soundlessly replaced certain things of mine. a word here. a taste, a colour elsewhere, and when it became cold I sometimes pulled your grandmother's quilt from your bed and wrapped myself deep within it. I did not feel guilty to know what was yours, and what was mine. we lived without consciousness. we were not careless though from beyond the window it may have seemed so. we did not have a mutual language by which to explain why. the small room and its white concrete walls unfolded in various blooms. single light. multitudinous voices. our respective breathing revolving. you, who was here first. and I, who was here anyway.

#### in which we have never returned from our wars

when waiting becomes something to measure eternity with and because time is without quantity it is able to detain a whole country in dark oaken stasis violence was shared equal between the land and the bodies of our youth during of 1969 the winter spaces gouged deep within them as if something green grow there may one day

eventually all things come to rest on the horizon even our children the stiff fields of maize and sorghum continued to be tended for new seed even as the mothers on their knees within them paused again and again disbelieving the barren days unfolding letters from their sons who were somewhere in xinjiang or siberia and having to find one of the three men left in the village who could read

november bleeding into february my father answered a knock at the door every couple of weeks receiving mail from his classmates who had not been able in their school days to afford gloves he read passages aloud to waiting parents it's just a little cold not so bad sometimes he received lightbulbs as thanks in brown paper still warm

my father the patriot believed in the greatness of country willing to die and the men many by ice by starvation ordinary deathsfor it still the bodies deified by frost seemed shameful like all things done where our mothers cannot see

strangeto thinkthat a nation can build itself upand wideand greywithout days ever seemingto have gone bymen blackened by snow andliving on paperwith them standingso still like thishands open like this

#### the worth of a woman's life in china

never looking backward. never calling out their names. your accusers. your torturers. picking up the long-soft fruits of a gone summer, never straying too close to the water. in china they say a man is like a mountain and a woman is like a river. it is because we spread to fill empty spaces. because we allow for greenness. it is because they drink freely from us. because they carve routes upon us. because when our lifeless bodies are swept into the delta it can be said that we are simply returning. they may then rinse the blood from their hands with our hems. perhaps it is that we slowly darken with their dirt, their sand, their spit, their sweat, their urine. in the dim throb of moonlight a thousand chinese daughters melt into the fertile soil. millet will be grown there. oilseed, cotton. and in the speed by which crops of autumn come a thousand more girls will be bowed, mouth-first, into the land. to be seeded, to be plough, it cannot be seen from above, but only from looking backward. yet when standing upon an edge one does not glance behind, but only beyond, so it is that these daughters continue to become wives, continue to become mothers. so it is that the good women have survived! upon the paths crawled deep by slender forearms, by black plaits shorn close to the skull. upon the ground cultivated by a monthly blood, good women have walked. those who take no notice of their scars, for they no longer hurt. truly we have come far. truly we have come here. here the daughters of this splendid, instant metropolis are dwelled and glittering into hotel windows, oscillating rings of bluish light, jacquard gowns and jewels upon the toes of high-heeled shoes.

their soft bodies threaded in and out of bedroom doorways and rimmed with pastel laces. yet baited by the crystalline frame the silken bed is beaten into a hook upon which the act of using is synonymous with the act of making love. yes, the glass candelabras. yes, the swollen green rings of jade. yes, the millennial shade of lipstick! yes, the lozenges made from pearl-dust! they are escorted from girlhood in the blaze of a pinking glory! nothing like the university students of the revolution who plucked slivers of bamboo from the deeps of their thighs. nothing like the childless mothers of northern earthquakes. nothing like porridge and boiled cabbage every night, violence has slipped into richer clothing. it has been cured from stone into diamond. yes, it can no longer be said that we are worthless, for we can be weighed, wrapped. we can be sold. we can be purchased. at train stations and fruit stands and fragrant department stores, and of course, what can be bought can also be stolen. they still pull us into gutters. pass us off to fellow soldiers. they have used the mouths of bottles and the branches of firs. they still do, though there are new, more intricate ways to destroy. new concrete steps stitched crooked to the side of the same cascade, same river. same wreckage, same water. where have we travelled in never looking backward. never naming our devourers. our inflictors. what is the worth of a woman's life in china. I'll tell you. it is the life of every man who has spit into her water.

#### how often I have chosen love

how often I have chosen love in the chestnut of november when the night cracks open and is yellow the dusk lifts the city up towards mid-air how it stays there pendulating and trembling grasped in the palm-sized wind

daily how I have chosen the lemon tree hanging over the slatted rooftop and tatami shade copper-colour, time-stoned every shape of the moon having made itself upon it bearing fruit such heavy living fruit to be picked by no one

how every rained-in morning spoke itself in unison just as I have chosen to meet it and all the distance was electric pretty girls standing paled roman windows spun with wire along the circle paths of daikanyama river pebbles

how I have chosen to love a city that takes from other cities the whole of tokyo a lockbox overflown with photos of flowers passing the bike rack by nakameguro station upon which miki had brushed her hair and taught me dirty words in japanese few leaves clinging I imagined I heard the sound green made threading the cherry trees how often I have chosen the sumida and the sight from the middle standing on the red bridge looking at the blue bridge as a man pours half a bottle of whiskey into the river and it whirled inward like a handprint

should I mention the fingernail moon

how I had once boarded a train to ibaraki and peeled mandarin oranges until citrus drowned the stale air I watched heels dig perfect circles into the snow and seedlings shot up from where precisely they had stood it was easy to imagine what could be watercolour a painted moment otherwise gone saved for later

names of people do not come as easily as the names of rivers at the photographic museum I saw a flock of birds all rise at once save for one who nailed a piece of the ground underneath him

how often we sat by the heating lamp smoking our different cigarettes as their tails drew non-figures upward we read them as symbols you did not look at me at first and then you looked at me my hand was painted into the dim in yanaka the trees grew into houses and we did not spend too much time thinking about who lived here before how clouds turned into gold once they touched the ground in shinjuku how lightbulbs shed their cloud-glow upon those who kissed under them

ikegami: in the mute plum garden combed through whitely by generations of hands starlight is vivified when reflected off the skin of a plum

how I had walked on music shed by passersby careless leaving strings of words dangling handed to me adjacently from both sides even sometimes laughter even sometimes ginger flowers passed over and I took them

the acquiescing light tied around wild-pink buildings by some hand wishing I take it a sign of my good youth that I am still enraptured by sunsets

how I was taught the right way to pray with a ten yen coin by someone who loved me up an uncountable number of stairs the jagged papers spun as though the forces of our shadows inhumanly elongated ruffled the hems of a spiritdom there were three anonymous flowers growing from the stone

how often fresh figs were cracked against the concrete linings in toyama-koen capsuled in droplets of lilac sun their sweet smell how often I have chosen love upon this ground every block charted by prodigal feet, by unnamed rulers in the onset of winter a cartography emerges a heart startles heavy traffic blindly intersecting in tokyo where there is no patience after having chosen

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Thank you to these publications, in which the following poems originally appeared:

*Redivider Journal:* "the nation of aphasia" "the girls of harbin"

*Grain Magazine:* "and hong kong in 2001 was always this shade of light blue"

The Asian American Writers' Workshop: "ornithomancy" "梦"

*The Briar Cliff Review:* "the worth of a woman's life in china"

Aesthetica Creative Writing Annual 2019: "easier if we cried"

# SHADOW BLACK

2019 CHAPBOOK WINNER

# SYNOPSIS

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.

# AUTHOR

Naima Yael Tokunow (née Woods) is an educator, writer and editor, currently living in New Mexico. Her work (and life) focus around exploring black femme identity, kinship and futurity. She is the author of three chapbooks, MAKE WITNESS, published in 2016 by Zoo Cake Press, Planetary Bodies, out from Black Warrior Review in 2019, and Shadow Black, selected by Pulitzer Prize winner, Jericho Brown for the Frontier Digital Chapbook Prize in 2020. She is a fourtime Pushcart Prize nominee, a TENT Residency Fellow & has attended The Home School workshop in Miami. She proudly edits the Black Voice Series for Puerto del Sol. New work is published or forthcoming from bone bouquet, Bayou, Winter Tangerine, Nat. Brut, juked, Diagram and elsewhere.

# SHADOW BLACK

2019 CHAPBOOK WINNER

# EDITORIAL NOTES

Shadow Black is an example of a chapbook driven by a singular focus on a singular topic. For Naima, that is the lived experience of being Black in America.

# DETAILS

- 34 Pages
- 17 poems
- Mixed style
- 12 poems previously published
- selected by Jericho Brown

When editing Shadow Black, we were really focused on trimming the fat of the book we wanted to better enable the direct experience of its emotional journey and prophetic voice. Naima made some difficult decisions about a few poems that were cut from the original manuscript, though one or two others she remained steadfast as necessary to the book. A side note here: always feel welcome to push back on any notes you recieve! It is your book, and ultimately, you're the one that has to live with it as an intimate expression of yourself, forever.

As you read Shadow Black, I recommend paying attention to how Naima organized and delivered a unified experience that explored the racialized body, culminating in those final poems that send the reader reeling. What would happen if you switched the beginning with the ending? What would happen if you removed "OUT OF SHADOW I CAME" from the work?

Another strength of the work is its mixed use of form. Pay attention to how Naima worked to keep the reader interested and engaged by inviting newness into the work through the forms of her stanzas and lines.

# SHADOW BLACK

2019 CHAPBOOK WINNER

# YOUR RESPONSE

# QUESTIONS

- What was your favorite poem of the collection?
- What's your favorite line?
- Your favorite image?
- How does the work's themes and concerns engage with your own life?
- Does this structure feel compelling to you? Why?

# SHADOW BLACK

Naima Yael Tokunow

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Naima Yael Tokunow Visit my website at www.naimaytokunow.com/

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Winner selected by Jericho Brown.

# SHADOW BLACK

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

## 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 browned 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.

#### **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.

#### 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

#### **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-yearold 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.

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.

#### 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 // 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**

#### **OUT OF SHADOW I CAME**

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. 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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Self-portrait as Shadow Black" was originally published in *The Harpoon Review*.

"Eulogy covenants" and "Burning at god" first appeared in *The Boiler Journal*.

"The trouble with craving whiteness," "Shadow Black as headless girl" (then, "Shadow Black as a dead girl), and "Shadow Black: a timeline (then, "Shadow Black as the news") were published in *Glittermob*.

"Good hair" and "Redbone" were both published in Divine Magnet.

"Devotions resurrected" first appeared in Juked.

"The right pain" was first published in Foglifter.

"Epistemology of Shadow Black" is forthcoming from Apogee.

"Watching black men die on the internet" is forthcoming from Diagram.

"Raising Shadow Black" is forthcoming from Hermeneutic Chaos.

# IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING

2020 CHAPBOOK WINNER

### SYNOPSIS

IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING invites the reader into an experience as wide, and as mystical, as the blue sky. The search for love, for the lover, for the self, for friends-the book makes what is universal incredibly individual and incredibly compelling, like all good mystic expression, and does so through a unique and innovative form that challenges the reader to stop, ponder, and discover its unique rhythm. There's thunder, there's the sweet relief of gentle rain, there's the Good making faces in the clouds. For a book inspired by the calendar of a year, ITYOOM&U expresses a deep urge to create its own structure, its own intuitive sense of time, and inspires in readers just the same sweet realization of how to MAKE a life: "if it is to mean / anything in the thrilling / dark, it must be, / my friends, / that this desire, / unloosed, will be, / you, you..."

## AUTHOR

Frederick Speers is the author of So Far Afield (Nomadic Press), a finalist for the 2018 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in AGNI; Diode Poetry Journal; The Drum Literary Magazine; Forklift, Ohio: A Journal of Poetry, Cooking & Light Industrial Safety; Impossible Archetype; Lovejets: Queer Male Poets on 200 Years of Walt Whitman; Ofi Press Magazine; Tahoma Literary Review; Portland Review; The Straddler; Salamander Magazine; and Visible Binary. He lives in Denver, Colorado with his husband and their two dogs. www.frederickspeers.com

# IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING

2020 CHAPBOOK WINNER

## EDITORIAL NOTES

While Naima's Shadow Black is an exercise of sustained focus on a singular theme, Fred's IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING is instead an exercise of sustained

# DETAILS

- 17 Pages
- 14 poems
- Innovative form
- 0 poems previously published
- selected by Carl Phillips

focus on a form or means of expression. With the very first poem, you'll see just how unique the book actually is.

Like Terrance Haye's AMERICAN SONNETS FOR MY PAST & FUTURE ASSASSIN, or Tyehimba Jess' OLIO, ITYOM&U seeks to compel an experience through a consistent and unrelenting use of formal innovation. Notice how part of the experience is the forced learning of how to actually read the text—what does this do to the reader? What state of mind does it invite and/or reject?

These are always questions poets should be considering when they are working through such careful and deliberate formal manuevers. While working with Fred, we considered deeply what exactly the form was doing to compound and complicate the themes of the work? How did it add rhythm and texture to the experience that would have been missed otherwise?

While reading, pay attention as well to how Fred has worked to place more through-lines in the poems, to unify the journey, through colors and time and narrative.

# IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING

2020 CHAPBOOK WINNER

#### YOUR RESPONSE

#### QUESTIONS

- What was your favorite poem of the collection?
- What's your favorite line?
- Your favorite image?
- How does the work's themes and concerns engage with your own life?
- Does this structure feel compelling to you? Why?

# IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING

Poems

# FREDERICK SPEERS

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#### PRAISE FOR IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING

"A spartan prosody resembling the brief notations on a calendar forms the foundation of this suite of poems composed inside enormous silences: flowers isolated in fields, the bare spots around them saying so much about living, thriving, surviving: 'knowing/ better —// & yet,/ every day,// daring to/ step outside'." –D. A. Powell

"Written in a series of cells that are reminiscent of the cells of days, and the larger field of the month as time amounts across a cycle of reckoning, the poems *In The Year of Our Making & Unmaking* are subtly evocative of space, and movement, specifically of the archaic notion of rhythm that is not a regular measure or dance, but rather improvised, and provisional shapes we're able to compose out of and against the overall (and overwhelming) flow of bodies in the world. The visual prosody of the poems opens up our reading through this elsewhere rhythm: 'On some / plateau // in the / distance // the universe // is a flower,' is not exactly a gesture the poem literally holds if we're playing by the rules, reading left to right, top to bottom; it is, however, one of many such constellations, epiphanies of language & image that this book makes possible for the reader to alight upon and experience as a momentary freedom, a heaven in a wild flower." –Jeffrey Pethybridge

"Friends, read this slim wonder of a book. Urgent, moving, and restlessly inventive, *In the Year of Our Making & Unmaking* is both an accounting of and reckoning with mortality, beauty, and love. Frederick Speers constructs a physical body for time itself—a body that breathes, breaks, thrives, and passes right before our eyes in the shapes the poems make on the page. Elegies, love songs, and pastorals find new incarnations in Speers' hands. This is a book to brand our hearts, dazzle our minds, and refresh our sense of what a poem can be." –**Kirun Kapur** 

"Even more resonant upon a year of immutable losses, *In the Year of Our Making & Unmaking* is a meditation on the limits of the human body: the distance between us—void of human contact, in a field of buildings—where only the sea is heard 'echoing the sky.' It is in the natural world that we find solace, in the company of 'the wildflowers/ with their different, if somewhat repetitive play/ up & down the quiet median.' Another day in quarantine, now made clearer by the absence of human interaction, where the memory of each other makes the next moment possible. Speers perceives a world that is dark yet made meaningful through memory." –**Ruben Quesada** 

"Speers' poems take place in a time that's circular and layered, offering us 'old and new ways of being.' Months are blue, receptive, spilling one into the next, thin skinned. Months may make promises that outline failure, or refuse to play the field, or visit old haunts. Hours chart everything from moral failings to a Black-capped chickadee at the bird-feeder. Moving deftly from fear and sorrow to vast, blooming hope, Speers makes music and sense of an inimitable version of our world, one we are making even as it makes us. One 'making me feel/ like all you've/ made in the field,/ a flower feeling I've made.' This collection is wild with life." –**Rachel DeWoskin**  IN THE YEAR OF OUR MAKING & UNMAKING

An irremediably unhappy person is outside the laws of the earth. Any connection between him and society is severed finally. And since, sooner or later, every individual is doomed to irremediable unhappiness, the last word of philosophy is loneliness. —Lev Shestov

When there's no future How can there be sin We're the flowers in the dustbin —Sex Pistols

### **Blue Month**

the day of your death	any day in my life	is a frame	for	what is	& isn't	impossible to lose,
an aura	around	the space	where the leaf	was,	is becoming	clearer,
unfairly blue,	the likes	of which I,	in truth,	never	thought	to touch,
having radiated	of	nothing that much	myself,	& now	that it is	later, far later,
breathless you,	you	hum me this tune				

# One Month Spilling Over into the Next

			if the universe	is	a field, & you	are there walking
toward me	on some plateau	in the distance	extending	itself, in fact	extending all	in all the ways
that matter, if	the universe	is a flower,	tell me	the first	you see, &	likewise I
in good faith	will say what I find;	then	let's compare	roots, stems	leaves, blooms:	if from the same
family, consider	each, slight difference:	red, maroon	petal, wound —			

# **Receptive Month**

				−& if they are	from different	families
how might	they be similar:	blue	maybe, blue	as blue	as the sea	echoing
the sky:	one generation	of Blues	singers	showing up	in the performance	of the next
like cloud- bursts,	drum rolls,	our lives	emptied throughout	our lives	filling in for each other	old & new
ways of being	not the same	empty pool	likening this	to that, a reflection	like nothing else	on earth

# **Rupture Month in the Logic of Remembering**

you <i>—you</i> make	me	feel	like a flower	in a field	all	alone
you make me	alone,	feeling	like	a flower	making	a field
of feelings	without	you,	making me	feel	like all	you've made
in the field,	a flower	feeling	I've made	your making	a field	of me, alone,
you make me,						

feel —

# Month of the Anonymous North American

		god of	sod,	carpet	each	bald spot
with Bluegrass	the forgotten leaves of	St. Augustine	bent like	weary	Buffalo	among Wheatgrass
a thorough mixture	past & future	whispering	in bed as though	memory	wandering quietly	lasting in the shapes
of this moment	stirring	the multitude	asleep	deep & fertile	alarms	of this life
held in my arms	what is never just	uniform	or a little	yielding		

					when I converted	when I was cured
(one hasn't	happened yet)	though I see them	next to each other	all the time,	gorgeous men	amusing to a point,
something that feels	in- between	there	&—	not there	moaning with	silence
to find	happiness & sorrow	fucking	forever	in the back room,	hands on my head	calling my name
in the dark	of my bones,	another's light	taking root—	becoming	my charge,	my only charge

# Month with Tripod & Shrine

# In the Hour of My Moral Failings

Its wings flutter, what I thought	was a sprig
of Queen-Ann's-Lace: one idea	making
clear it's another: the butterfly	flies
from view. For many, to disconnect	is
a privilege, like tuning out	the news.
Like the painter, who dabbled	in oils, once telling me
that to make a scene	
even sadder, just add a point	of light.
True, I will not think of you today —	all
day & with dwindling	sadness:
ady a white a white and	Sudifessi
every gutter & storm-drain leads	
	here,
every gutter & storm-drain leads	
every gutter & storm-drain leads away. At any rate, I'm still	here,
every gutter & storm-drain leads away. At any rate, I'm still watching the wildflowers	here, in front of me,
every gutter & storm-drain leads away. At any rate, I'm still watching the wildflowers with their different,	here, in front of me,
every gutter & storm-drain leads away. At any rate, I'm still watching the wildflowers with their different, somewhat repetitive, play	here, in front of me, if
every gutter & storm-drain leads away. At any rate, I'm still watching the wildflowers with their different, somewhat repetitive, play up & down the quiet median—	here, in front of me, if

# Month of Promises Outlining the Failure

I don't believe	I doubt as much as	I did;	somewhat unnatural,	given time	& today's	god- forsaken
scenes —	praying half- heartedly	as they do;	now I find	faith in my life	beginning a second	skin, soon
enough & shedding just	enough to allow	a good boy	in a bad lot	to fall	behind what	he could have been,
sluffed in rings,	the transparent cost to being	always in need,	begging for what	have you—	evolution's love?—	like an itch
for what can never be	found — even when	it draws blood				

## **Thin-Skinned Month**

			you	sick	fuck, is this	what gets you
off? The sheer	mass	of our	collective	loss? To think,	you	don't exist in the slightest,
at least not	in the way	one might	picture	you—& still	you	get
our sweet music	&	the final word	about the music	we′ve composed	for you— in fact	you get both
the notes & the	strummed silences	that, as we wake,	without	fail echo		

# Month Refusing to Play the Field

					here, the center of all	these movements,
somehow remains	unmoved—	honey- comb,	honey	—if love is	Good & always	Good, then
love I'm afraid	love can't be in search of	what	is Good:	the core belief	not withstanding	the rest
dance where	the love-	that- dares-	not-	speak-	its-name	&
the-death-	my-kin-	will-not- claim	encircle worlds	so sickly sweet	night & day—	come, follow me

## The Hour of Death's Herald as this Black-Capped Chickadee at the Bird-Feeder in Our Backyard

Endearing, isn't it, how your little song clearly ends as you eat, each note turning into its own unbecoming seed-shell, seed-shell, seed-shell?

#### Month for the Rest of My Life

pill + pillpill + pill

# Exposed Month with Red & Yellow

			every living gay	kid has been called	faggot!	from across
the empty lot,	walking somewhere	alone—	as all the various	lots, everywhere	forge like candle wax	to form
this single flame—	smoking the twisted rope	we burn without	change,	revealing so much more	by hiding it,	flaunting it, or
walking somewhere	all the same;	knowing better—	& yet, every day,	daring to step outside	clearly	there can be
no such thing	as divine love	without us	burning bound- lessly	the cold here & there		

#### Hour of Paths, Steps & Lanterns

Cloud after cloud after cloud—the night that night wouldn't be anything momentous, I could tell: grass on the grave-plots all trimmed —except the last on the hill, where the gray overlooks. Wouldn't be anything noteworthy I could tell already from here, nothing at all so neat about that lonely headstone—only that it leaned a bit, was soot-colored & cool against the disheveled crest of the hill —but mostly, one would say, overlooked. Soon

where flowers had once been placed, nearer to where I stood, something like petals grew, as it started to drizzle; then another, a little fainter & then another, further up—O, if followed, I figured, this might be new. I knelt down on the wet path hoping for a closer look. (There was no moon.) I did, then, only what I felt you would do. Before dawn, up the same weathered stairs I wandered ahead of myself, step after step after step—humming a minor tune.

					if it's true	I won't survive
my inflammation,	this phoenix	of in- difference;	if it is to mean	anything in the thrilling	dark, it must be,	my friends,
that this desire,	unloosed, will be	you, <i>you</i> with	every last gray	& resplendent feather	of you,	you,
you,	you	shaking	prophecy,	if you wish, out	from you	taking the stem
of my un- petaled hope	for your	own, then leaving it	all behind for	others to lift up, high	enough & freely	in time

# Month Revisiting Old Haunts

# **OPPORTUNITY COST**

2021 CHAPBOOK WINNER

#### SYNOPSIS

Johnson recounts what it means to live after assault and navigate once-safe spaces now haunted by pain. The speaker talks to old friends, wakes from troubling dreams, has physically intimate moments, even watches television. Yet none of these moments are free from the haunting presence of trauma. With shifting yet repetitive form, sharp imagery, and mesmerizing vulnerability, Opportunity Cost seeks not to be healed, but to be heard.

#### AUTHOR

Abby Johnson is a poet and a Hoosier who is proud of the local art scene that fostered her. She received her MFA in Creative Writing through Butler University. During her time there, she served as Poetry Co-Editor for *Booth: A Journal.* She has poems published in *Turnpike Magazine, Josephine Quarterly, The Indianapolis Review,* and most recently in the Winter/Spring 2020 issue of *Sycamore Review.* 

# **OPPORTUNITY COST**

2021 CHAPBOOK WINNER

#### EDITORIAL NOTES

At just 20 pages of poems, Abby's chap is one of our shortest, 18 poems but she manages to focus so tightly on her urgent concerns in the wake of the original trauma—the book *feels* 10 pages heavier than it actually is.

DETAILS

20 Pages

- Mixed style
- 2 poems previously published
- selected by Kazim Ali

Abby and I worked on ways to punch up the order and the structure of the book together. One of the first big adjustments was to create a beginning that grips you and lays out the concerns all at once—her titular poem "Opportunity Cost" was perfect for that. Another was to tweak and manage the mosaic of the rest of the book. It does not have a tight linear flow, and I think Abby was spot-on when she sussed out that too much linearality would rob the work of some of its power. The book is about the haunting of trauma, how it escapes reason and rationality-to put it in a this-then-that structure would undermine the ghostly presence it was striving to represent and make real.

I also want to point out the textural variety of the book. Though Abby is a relatively new poet to the world of publishing, with only a few poems published so far, her sense of structure and formalism on the level of poems is guite mature. I believe much of the success of the book in producing lasting feeling and engagement lies in the way she manages to create her own sense of complete pattern with each new poem. The consistency within the varieties is a sign of a mature poetic mind.

# **OPPORTUNITY COST**

2021 CHAPBOOK WINNER

#### YOUR RESPONSE

#### QUESTIONS

- What was your favorite poem of the collection?
- What's your favorite line?
- Your favorite image?
- How does the work's themes and concerns engage with your own life?
- Does this structure feel compelling to you? Why?

# **Opportunity Cost**

poems by Abby Johnson

# Praise for Opportunity Cost

"Opportunity Cost is a skillfully built sequence about grappling with the aftermath of assault. Ordinarily innocuous parts of language, like punctuation and the act of editing ones words, become powerful tools with which the poet explores the torturous ways we negotiate pain caused by those close to us. It is a unique book on an often difficult to navigate topic. I am grateful for it, grateful to the poet who crafted it."

Kazim Ali, Guest Judge, author of The Voice of Sheila Chandra

"This book is awake to its own pain. This book is determined to put it on the record. For me, this book is true solace, stark truth—therefore necessary for all of us to read."

Alessandra Lynch, author of Pretty Tripwire

"Opportunity Cost is a stunning collection of poems that orbit a luminous and relentless rage, but also cling tight to a relationship with survival, with pleasure, with everything on the other side. And it is that, that reaching towards an understanding of an after that allows these poems to sing well beyond the page."

#### Hanif Abdurraqib, author of A Fortune for Your Disaster

"The poems in Abby Johnson's *Opportunity Cost* show us how assault changes the way a person experiences the world. Everything becomes a reminder, a threat: the movers who steal underwear off her dresser, the rain which touches the speaker without her consent, even—or perhaps, especially—language. In the poem "He," the assailant infects every single word. In the series, "To My Assailant's Wife," the speaker struggles between what to reveal and what to erase. Who can the speaker trust with her story? Can she trust you?"

Paige Lewis, author of Space Struck

# **Opportunity Cost**

poems by Abby Johnson

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#### **Opportunity Cost:**

When one person makes a choice and a potential world vanishes

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#### **Opportunity Cost**

If: he assaults me

then: strip to shame: shower twice a day

If: taste the word: whisper it: slut

then: whimper prayer: let this: be pure

If: pucker at sting of lemon: cut open: another

then: wail when it storms: no one listens

If: panic is a body

then: it marries: me

If: he does not assault me

then: my name spoken: my own voice

If: desire is clear water: sand at the bottom

then: mirror: image

If: breathing slowly like a child

then: alone with a man: comfort

If: unimaginable if: I want it

then: I want it

You are so pretty you must deserve to be treated well.

It seems cruel to tell you this now.

## Afterward

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing bucket, finger by finger, deliberately. So, I burn the dress.

### I See My Assailant's Mother Everywhere

buying radishes in the grocery store, renting a car, pushing a stroller with a newborn baby girl in it, ordering a doppio over ice with heavy

whipping cream. She lived with grief, as though with child. The spirit removed from her bloated body by flash flood. The car was found first and then

the simple, soft bob of brown hair, and then the body resting against the river rocks. I shouldn't tell this story, but I know

grief achieves equilibrium like particles of water, or death, moving down until most and least mean

nothing. Like water sweeping down the road toward where there is no water, I am flooded by the diffusion of pain, haunted by visions, unearned grief,

and a stolen sorrow which sounds like *O*, *god of water, grant him rest for this one regret.* She went to the river knowing nothing of where his hands had been.

### To My Assailant's Pregnant Sister

My hornet-nest torso buzzed and guivered when you hugged me. Your belly pulsed humanoid and brief, a swift kick and then nothing. If your child is a boy like your brother, he will have hands insistent to touch. You cried into my shoulder. The boy in your belly pushed one ear to the wall of his shaky house to hear my hornets. Heredity tells me he will look like my assailant, but redder and rawer. I am afraid you will love the resemblance I am afraid I will hold him and look into an innocent face Before you pull away the small boy stretches his handprint into your skin, touching me at the waist. I flinch You don't notice. You say you can't wait for me to meet him

### **A Mouth Opening**

against yours is a wound that will not heal, the minister said. Watch this video of a hawk with a field mouse in its beak. You don't want to be eaten, do you?

#### Well, do you?

And then the girls in school came to class with rings from their fathers, the pledge of prey, each silver band reflecting moonstone white like an exposed bone.

Like an exposed bone, he showed it to me: the scar above his knuckle. *My mother gave it to me*, he said. *I called her a bitch and, when she ducked, my hand slipped into the drywall and I left a mark.* 

And I left. A mark of some lesser message: not, he wanted to hit her and missed. He wanted to touch her and reached. He reached for me and I did not duck. The cloth center of the bandaid stained like a rag. I am stained like a rag. *I am* telling you this to keep you safe, he said. Every vulture loves the body it circles and picks to keep the bones clean. You want to be loved someday, don't you?

### Don't you

know what they do to the bandage once it's unbound? You might as well let me keep touching you. The hawk cradles the field mouse in its maw until the mouth clamps shut.

The mouth clamps shut against mine. Hard and rough, I pull it closer. I want it to want me. I am afraid of dying. He keeps saying, *you will never have this again,* until I am only a mouth opening.

His fingers happened to me. His raneid breath in my ear happened to me. I hope it's different for you. Hate that it's different for you.

### **Blueberry Picking**

Through the greenhouse roof, it sprinkles and I think all precipitation is the weather touching me without my consent. Earlier at brunch, before blueberry picking, my childhood friends say *thank god none of us have ever been raped*. Have you ever stood on a roof and looked down? It does not feel as much like flying as you imagine. I have stains all down the lap of my dress and across my lips. The owner says we are the last customers of the season, that when the doors close behind us, they will stay closed until spring. I tell my friends we should come back next summer, but I can still taste the insecticide and we have four bags bursting with overripe berries. The rain keeps tapping my shoulders, and I wish I were looking down from the roof of a skyscraper.

### He

after Nicole Sealey

The hero: a preacher's heir and hedonist, schemes. He heard her shriek, became heartless. He switched his sheets. The heathen.

The hero's psyche, overheating heart. He seethes. He inherits heaven, cheats and wheedles. Apprehended by ache, he searches. He finishes. His lightheart sheer with heaven. He finishes.

He, blithe. Her, cherubic. Then, cheek to sheet, he pushed, he sheared then breached. Or heaved then finished. Whichever.

### The Assailant's Mother On My Television Sends Me a Message

After Robin Coste Lewis

"I just can't surrender to this notion that he was evil."

Just surrender. I notion he can't. This was evil.

Evil just can't surrender. This he was.

This was just. Surrender to that notion.

That notion was evil. This he can't surrender.

Can't this evil surrender.

To this evil he was notion.

To this evil, was I just?

I was evil.

I can't surrender.

Evil just can't surrender I.

To he, I was.

To I, he was I.

Surrender this notion to he.

Surrender I.

He was evil. I surrender

# Afterward

He is

He is licking

He is licking, like he

He is licking, like he reached

He is licking, like he reached the greasy

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing bucket,

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing bucket, finger

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing bucket, finger by finger,

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing bucket, finger by finger, deliberately.

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing bucket, finger by finger, deliberately. So, I burn

He is licking, like he reached the greasy cardboard bottom of the wing bucket, finger by finger, deliberately. So, I burn the dress.

Tell me what you see in him. <del>I usually float</del> above my body when someone mentionshis name, but I want to hear what you have to say. I imagine you will say something like:

He is kind.

He stopped touching me fifteen minutes after I told him to.-

He is thoughtful.

He pointed out every thing he loved about the girls walking in front of us.

He has a good sense of humor.

When he left I laughed with relief.

**Opportunity** Cost

### It Happened Once in a Dream

Every night under forest.

(I dream) (I push) I am buried through fertile dirt,

beholden to I sprout through dirt

wet with mud and I crouch, afraid

calm, suddenly I recognize

into the woods. but fear I will

As I run, I stretch and now, I see my

(the man) (into)

(water) (and when)

(I hear) (his howls)

(I do) (not reach)

(out my) (own hand) who put me there. crackling night air,

that sustains roots, the woods appear

a heavy cry and run, deeper

not hear footsteps open air alone.

arm into white light looks sinister.

15

### **Inventory of Lost Things**

- She says, I want to see if I'm normal, show me yours. I flash my popsicle purple tongue. I meant let's both take off our swimsuits, just to see. I say I don't want to. She says we'll turn off the lights. We do, and see nothing, and never tell.
- II. The teacher said, see this gum, I put it in my mouth already. Do you want to put it in your mouth? This is you. This is you: Disgusting.
- III. His hand on my inner thigh again, it moves up, he makes his fingers disappear.
  A chaperone sees it happen.
  I hurry to my hotel room, find her waiting for me, one dim light on.
  She prophesies: *He hurts girls like you. You should know better than to let him.*
- IV. After doing laundry at my mother's house, she says: I left your peach silk underwear on the dresser when some men moved in my new mattress and now they're gone. Like a party trick, a sleight of hand. I have lost more artifacts than I can pray to. And more go missing, slipping into pockets, carried off. Still, my body, obstinate, leaves traces of itself, a sheen of shame, a glistening.

I have never met you, <del>but I dream of you</del> on your wedding day, glimmering and wrapped in white tulle like morning light. I stand at the back of the sanetuary, a filthy mass of damp dirt, roughly shaped, into a facsimile of the bride, but I still hope your day is perfect.

# **Opportunity Cost**

*"the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when someone makes a choice."* 

want	panic
the unimaginable	wail in a storm
comfort alone with a man	sting like lemon
to breath slowly like a child	whimpered prayer
clear water	slut
my name spoken	shame shower
no assault	assault

You have no reason to believe me, but I can show you the message where he admits to what he did. He sent his apologies through instagram direct message while I was asleep. I can send you screenshots. I checked your instagram for a year for any hint, but I don't think you know and I don't want you to know who I am.

# On the Day My Assailant Gets Engaged

my boyfriend calls me lovely and my breath escapes like a bad spirit from the body of a pig. My arms go flaccid as a worm corpse. I twist the sheet around my wedding finger and preen.

# Acknowledgements

"I See My Assailant's Mother Everywhere:" was first published in *Sycamore Review* (Volume 30 Issue 2).

"To My Assailant's Pregnant Sister" was first published in *Sycamore Review* (Volume 30 Issue 2).

"He" is after Nicole Sealey's poem titled "And."

"The Assailant's Mother on my Television Sends Me a Message" is after Robin Coste Lewis' poem titled "verga:." The quoted line is delivered by Meryl Streep's character on the show *Big Little Lies*. **Abby Johnson** is a poet and a Hoosier who is proud of the local art scene that fostered her. She received her MFA in Creative Writing through Butler University. During her time there, she served as Poetry Co-Editor for *Booth: A Journal*. She has poems published in *Turnpike Magazine, Josephine Quarterly, The Indianapolis Review*, and most recently in the Winter/Spring 2020 issue of *Sycamore Review*.

# Opportunity Cost aches like an old bruise.

Johnson recounts what it means to live after assault and navigate once-safe spaces now haunted by pain. The speaker talks to old friends, wakes from troubling dreams, has physically intimate moments, even watches television. Yet none of these moments are free from the haunting presence of trauma.

With shifting yet repetitive form, sharp imagery, and mesmerizing vulnerability, *Opportunity Cost* seeks not to be healed, but to be heard.



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