



Unlabeled

Arielle Cottingham

Machete Moon

Sundress Publications • Knoxville, TN

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ISBN: 978-1-951979-41-6

Published by Sundress Publications

www.sundresspublications.com

Editor: Kathleen Gullion

Editorial Assistant: Kanika Lawton

Interns: Kaylee Young-Eun Jeong, Crysta Montiel, Neha Peri, and Hailey Small

Colophon: This book is set in Petrona.

Cover Art: Hannah Cottingham

Cover Design: Coral Sue Black

Book Design: Kathleen Gullion

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Ode to Hoops

I feel my blackest wearing you
gold nalgas highlighting cheekbones
the bigger the hoop, the blacker the ass

primas curved bottom lips into glossed pouts
broken manacles now mimicked in earlobes
I feel my blackest wearing you

swing wild to sweet güira, iron curls slicking
the slander off us with tambora sweat
“the bigger the hoop, the bigger the hoe”

but even mom kept a conservative pair of you, small enough for round
-table conference rooms papered in jos. a. bank sale rack ties
so I feel my blackest wearing you

swapping for fake eyelashes and flatirons at the wedding, every wedding
glinting in photos salvaged from garages for pandemic nostalgia
the blacker the hair, the bigger la brilla

I clip you in, big enough to sweep my collarbones
remove only for hugs, fights, or sleep
I feel my blackest wearing you
the bigger the hoop, the looser the shackle

Haibun for White Proximity as a Cultural Health Risk

I read somewhere on the Internet that eating bitter foods lowers the risk of developing diabetes: grapefruit, arugula, black coffee. Dominicans love our sweet coffee. Afternoon cafecitos que golpean tus ojos back into your skull between the strength of the brew and the macheteful of sugar dissolved beyond recognition to every sense besides taste. A revolution only lasts as long as its weakest cash crop.

If only we could
see all the sugar killing
us from the inside

Southern Nostalgia

Flying down any of the highways tattooed
across Texas, bluebonnets untuck
themselves into patriotic bloom
alongside cops dotting, say, I-10,
like sidewinders. One hisses, flashing
first- and second-place ribbons
in my rearview. The prophet Elijah
of the Old Testament resurrects himself
into my back seat, fills up the car
with all the despair of Mt. Horeb,
whispers *They are trying to kill me.**
The cop approaches the window
like a famine. My 6-times-great-grandfather
Elijah of the Civil War zombies himself
into my passenger seat,
snips a button from his gray coat,
sews it to my tongue,
pours Confederate gunpowder down
my windpipe until my lungs fill up,
and I exhale:

*Naw, officer—I don't know why you pulled me
over this evenin'.*

The 2nd prophet and 2nd Texas Regimental
Infantryman fling gravedirt
across my cheekbones, and the cop
will remember this when he pinches
the freckles on his own daughter's face.

He leans down into the window, and I kiss
his neck openmouthed,
drag the button on my tongue
across his jugular, behind his ear,
praying he forgets
Southern nostalgia is not to be trusted.
He reaches for his holster and pulls out
a pen and ticket pad.
The prophet Elijah claps his hands
and he is John the Baptist
singing a change gon' come.
The cop writes the ticket,
warns me about my dark(er) side,
returns to his car. Awaits his next casualty.
Survivor's guilt sparks
the gunpowder in my left lung.
Imposter syndrome ignites in my right.
The embers meet somewhere in the middle,
and what a lovely urn my throat makes.
The soldier Elijah claps his hands
and he is my father John the doctor,
who hates illegal immigration,
loves my immigrant mother,
leaves a 2nd degree burn.
He wraps me
in the privilege of the Big House,
tells me racism is over. I argue,
but the button our ancestor
sewed to my tongue

has inflamed my throat.
I have written so much already about not
being black enough.
A sunburned neck is still my heritage, too.
He does not hear me.
He does not hear me.
Mom's side of the family always said

I looked so much like him.
And how bad could it be for me, really,
if here I am,
returning to cruising I-10 or wherever,
throat still clear and free,
the legacy sewn to my tongue louder
than any of the blackest things about me?

**1 Kings 19:10*

Tramlines

Let us pray.

I'm sitting on the 19 tram in Melbourne, or
Galveston Beach, or
any airport in the world,
and a stranger asks

Wow your hair is so curly—do you ever straighten it?

I think of my driver's license.
I'm 18 with a puka shell necklace,
straight hair.

I tell her

No.

I tell her

*I like my curls. My mother
blessed me with them.
Let us give thanks.*

She gets awkward, stuttery,
like she almost knows
she crossed a straight line,
asking if I ever tried to look whiter.

Let us pray.

I show any friend the driver's license.
They say

Wow, that doesn't look like you at all.

I tell them

*My dad always liked it
when I straightened my hair.*

They get awkward, stuttery,
like they don't want to go through
the white daddy issues door
I've cracked open.

*In the name of the Father,
Peace be with you.*

I'm 18 and Ronnie with the holy blow
dryer has pulled all the curls out
of my hair for the week.
My dad says

You look so pretty with straight hair.

I tell him nothing,
because he hopes it'll make me
feel better or stop sulking.

*Fix your face.
You look so pretty with straight hair.
You look so pretty straight.
Forgive me Father,*

*for it has been nine years, eight months, and sixteen days since my last confession;
in the name of the Father,
let us pray.*

I'm 18 at a school track meet,
and a freckled lightning bolt from God
is too gorgeous for me to notice any of the boys.

Peace be with you.

I'm 18 and Catholic,
wishing I was straight,
wishing my hair was straight
so my parents could love me more.

*You look so pretty when you're straight
Pretty straight
Pretty
Straight*

I only ever bring men home.
My mother convinces me
to straighten my hair
one more time.

Peace be with you,

With your straightened hair

and also with you.

and your straight marriage
I thought I wanted to be just like you, mom,

Let us pray.

all straight edge
straight hair
straight woman
straight prayer
but I can't

Let us pray

can't

Let us pray

can't not have these consecrated curls,
these holy river bends,
these meanderings in
and out

of straight

In the name of the Fath—no.

I'm sitting on the 19 tram.
It goes straight up Sydney Road.
No one's asked about my hair today.

Let us give thanks.

*In the name of the Lapsed Daughter,
Δmxn.*

Bodyprayer

dipshoulder to swingchest
cyclonewaist into hips
let momentum lift toe
whiplashknee back around
to twisttornado of ancient
souls backupspine rollneck
like it aches to crack rolleyesback
totheglittering whites this is what

holy feelslike all bendandliftand
smoothandsex what do the angels
of music know of our bodies
when we can pray like this

praise be to the bodyrolls that grow
wings out of souls praise
be to the knees that pop
hips back up into celestial
being praise be
to the balls of the feet
that grant us hangtime
amongst the clouds praise
be to the ancestors' immortal souls
for they are gods

not of music but of rhythm come
down to sacrifice our bodies upon this
altar of worn wood and dried sweat come
let us adore all
the elegant ways an elbow can bend
holy is the breakdown
when the wind howls a melody

made of locksteps and thundaclaps
catchafire and cool
down the burningsouth with the ancestors'
whispers on our carbon-exhaled scriptures
for we are the windchildren with twisters
in our hips
unleashing whirlwinds on breakbeats
bittersweetheart

-beats remind us that we may be mere
mortals, but the gods of rhythm granted us the gift
of movement to make mortality seem mere illusion

come — letuspray

Hunger

I know the blood is coming
 from the gray cloud gargoyle
crawling into my chest cavity
from the way I envy fictional women their first
dates with charmingly scripted lovers-
to-be from the cravings for skin without
 the sex perhaps adulthood is craving
 skin without the sex
I like to forget how lonely I am
 to distract myself with making art
 and friends but something
about that sliver of moon pulling
the blood from me reminds the small
of my back how a lover's hand feels
 when the only pleasure it seeks
 is my company

On Loving a Brown Body, at Least for One Night

There is something familiar
and deeply exquisite in
the way my island brown
crescendos against
your mainland brown in this
bastardized communion of
flesh, more god than divine image.
And this is not to say that
the personal is always
political—or
however the saying goes—but
there is a certa in relish in
tangling fingers through
curls that crave aceite de coco
as much as my own.
And is not a prayer like this
a most defiant of independence days?
Is there not a kind of gleeful beauty in
ringing in Carnaval de Febrero with
un Grito de Dolores? Is there not
a certain reclaiming
of long-colonized soil
when our bodies ripen upon it?
And this harvest may never reach past
the next sunrise on the skyline,
and we may return
to richly platonic
admiration of each other,
our art, and

general
human-
-ness, but
let us revel in
shared histories of
waters crossed, be they
Big River or gaping Gulf,
in our shared lengua
Europeans left stained down
our ancestors' throats,
in a child of Cacike Anacaona and
a child of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin meeting
countless lifetimes after conquistadores thought
they had beaten us down if only
for one seditious
night.

Cup Runneth Over

Blood
black and ropy
pours into the toilet
leaves red skid marks across the bottom of the bowl
even after flushing twice
I'm not a mother
again

Boihood

First, gather flannels
oversized sweaters
from Dad's or Plato's
Closet. Haunt fitting
rooms until you find
your waist and inseam.
Your wardrobe need not
be slave to hips that
others would conjure
your babies upon.

Second, cast off the
dead protein demons
under a barber
skilled in exorcism.
Your scalp need not bear
the weight of men's eyes
or preferences.

Third, wear your fucking mask.

Walk tall down the street
having conjured a

boy.

If Not Anger Then What

*Do you know how long
the cops have been called?*

My love, before there were phones

—Krista Franklin, “Marie Says Bow Down”

In the event of an emergency, check for blood
and glitter trails from the bathrooms to the back
doors. Emergency exits exist for many
emergencies. Fire escapes are their own
metaphor. Stay with me. The DJ forgot
to turn the tables off; the disco ball still turns.
The blue wave engulfs the bar.
The inundation line is pressing forward.
Follow the glitter. Your blood is already out
the back door. Let the fire out. Let the fresh air
feed it. Look, it has cooked a yellow brick
in glitter. Pave the future as you launch it
back into the wild blue crest.

Letter to a Former Self

Someday, someone will mention
in polite conversation
that all gender is just a
performance, and all the world's
a stage; their pretension won't
dissuade you from turning it
over and over in beds
of ever stranger lovers
until the day one swallows
phallic glitter, beard tickling
your proscenium-soft legs;

gender isn't a performance
but a series of bootlegs.

On Hurricane Season

Oh prodigal child of Texas, oh lapsed traveler to Tasmania, is not your family also from an island? Did you not just run off to a colder one? Is this how you show gratitude for an immigrant's sacrifice? By becoming an immigrant yourself?

So it's the day after Rita hit and weeks after the Atlantic gave birth to her meaner sister Katrina and years before Harvey was a twinkle in the Gulf Stream's eye and last night we evacuated to our favorite Uncle Bill's house somewhere further inland than the house we'll return to when everything is over and we played in the hurricane's breath as Rita bore down like a steamroller on the South and I helped the boys duct tape black trash bags to PVC pipe we found in Uncle Bill's truck and they rode skateboards down the street with plastic plumbers' sails like the pirates who hid in Galveston Bay from storms and Spaniards and I had heard too many stories about broken arms and collarbones to brave getting on a sandpapered deck but god the feeling of playing in hurricane winds was something I may never feel again now that I've heard too many stories about what hurricanes do to human bodies but when we wake in the morning, Rita has spun herself off into oblivion and taken the power with her so no one's fridge works and it's Texas, so everyone's fridge is a meat locker and the whole neighborhood drags out gas grills and wood smokers and egg-shaped kettle pits and some people even burn the wood from wind-felled trees in their yards and it's Texas, so everyone has ribs, sausages, pork chops, chicken legs, venison steaks, burger patties, boudin, every kind and cut of meat imaginable and the whole street smells like a cookout and people who've only ever given each other neighborly waves suddenly know what each other's voices sound like and the kids are all trading meats so they can taste everything and the dogs think this must be Christmas and everyone is smiling with bits of meat stuck between their teeth as they cook all the dead things they no longer have the power to preserve and somehow I grew up to be a vegetarian artist who ran off to live on the furthest bit of land possible from that street on an island at the edge of the world and maybe I didn't leave Texas for any of those reasons or maybe I left for all of those reasons or maybe I keep coming back for some of them but I can't deny that it's nice being far from an ocean that coughs up death every other year and

I'm happy to not be another dead thing waiting to be cooked when the power goes out but god I miss the cookouts and god I wish I had been brave enough to step on a skateboard and sail down the street with Rita breathing down our backs and perhaps I show gratitude best when I am far from everything I once was, the ungrateful immigrant that I am and continue to be

A Letter Home

If you must stay and risk living
through the next Nueces massacre,
if you must go on believing
in peace and safety afforded
by privilege, or that neighbors
who vote red as American
blood, that somehow they
would wield their inevitable
firearms in brotherly defense
of our blatant joy in mixing
skin, and if you must American
Dream of never leaving this place,
please, at least avoid the windows
when the proud boys start unmasking.

And the Tide Goes Out

history is an ocean
and hurricanes are what happen when history repeats itself

I was born in Zone A of Houston's hurricane evacuation areas,
Harveyed at the intersection of trailer parks and citizenship literacy tests,
Third Coast South/third culture kid combines Confederate lineage with Caribbean cane
sugar slaves' resilience

history is an ocean of hurricanes repeating itself

lady of the house in Berlin needs her house cleaned—
hired Consuelo til corona called her away,
hired me to scrub her floors,
hired Florcita to watch the baby til corona called her away,
hired me to watch the baby now, too.

yo estoy en un huracán, no puedo evacuar
and the tide goes out

my skin always kept me out the field/always kept me in the house
lady of the house never lets her husband see me/tells me I work so hard/I hear the echo of my
cousin's new mother-in-law telling her
“We used to have a Dominican maid! Do you know Maria Josefa?”

y el huracán da la vuelta
and the tide comes in

a college degree still put me in lady of the house's nursery,
€13/hr shackling my wrists to the baby's crib,
but at least in this hurricane they're actually paying us

Dad doesn't remember his Black nanny's name
lady of the house's baby won't remember mine, either

and the tide goes out
and the hurricanes rise
and the plantation driftwoods down Ku'Damm intact

lady of the house hands me a mop and a red polka dot rag to cover my dreadful locks, deadlocks
bilboes around my ankles while I repeat "You is kind, You is smart, You is important"
to the white baby hoisted onto my shoulders, out of harm's way

and the tide comes in

Acknowledgments

“Tramlines” and “Cup Runneth Over” originally appeared in the chapbook *Black and Ropy*, published by Pitt Street Poetry in 2017.

“On Loving a Brown Body, at Least for One Night” originally appeared in Black Earth Institute’s *About Place Journal* (October 2018).

“Southern Nostalgia” originally appeared in *BOOTH* (January 2019) and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

“On Hurricane Season” originally appeared in *Stellium Literary Journal* (January 2021).

“And the Tide Goes Out” originally appeared as an audio poem in *BOOTH* (October 2021).

“Haibun for White Proximity as Cultural Health Risk” originally appeared in *SAND Journal* #24 (Spring/Summer 2022).

I extend my respects to the Karankawa, Coahuiltecan, Woirurrung, Boonwurrung, Gadigal, Mouheneener, Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi, and Orang Asli, on whose land these poems were written and performed.

Thank you: Sam Ferrante, Omer Ahmed, and Ryan McMasters, for editing and encouraging these poems to become what they always wanted to be. Sharifa Tartoussi, Crista Siglin, and Allia Sadeghipour, for reminding me to care for myself as well as you would. Jasminne Mendez, for the power of your words and the grace with which you share them. Bill Moran, for your friendship and boundless enthusiasm for word nerdery. Hannah, for sass and the courage to stay. John, for passwords and the courage to speak. Mom and Dad, for teaching. Rhys, for being.

About the Author



Texas-born, Afro-Latine poet, editor, performance artist, and educator Arielle Cottingham has toured four continents in five years, giving performances and teaching workshops across Europe, North America, Australia, and Asia. Their work explores the fluidity of intersectional identities and has appeared in multiple literary journals both online and in print. Notable performance spaces have included 48H Neukölln, the Alley Theatre, the Museum of Old & New Art, Glastonbury, and the Sydney Opera House, where they won the title of Australian National Poetry Slam Champion in 2016. Their work has been published in literary journals including *Stellium Literary Journal*, *BOOTH*, *Pressure Gauge Press*, and *About Place Journal*, and their chapbook, *Black and Ropy*, was published by Pitt Street Poetry in 2017. They are currently pining for falafel at their desk in Berlin.

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