

## Letter From the Editor

Hello, Friends! Here we are with another super-great, super-duper-special issue of *Crape & Penn*, and I couldn't be more proud. I was hesitant in making this issue because I didn't want it to flop, but I don't think it did, and I don't think it could have. This issue won't be popular with everyone, and that's okay. It's a wonderful issue, and I think more mags should create exclusively ~~black~~ black issues because sometimes it's not enough just to "encourage" black creators to submit. As editors, we are responsible for ensuring that marginalized voices are ~~heard~~ heard, and I felt that this was the best way to do that. So, I did it. We did it. And it's an awesome, perfect thing.

All the best,



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# CREATIVE NONFICTION

Vera Armstead  
**A Doll (Not) Like Me**

Her eyes stared back at me. Always open. Always displaying something I didn't have. Skin my color, but that was the only similarity. Eyes a lighter brown, nose slightly wider. Hair flecked with highlights.

My look-alike American Girl Doll watched over me as I slept, perched in the corner of my room atop a chest of drawers for years. My look-alike that didn't look like me at all.

"Why are you getting this one?" my older sister asked while we were in the store. She pointed to the doll's light brown curls. She gestured to Addy, the slave doll with thickly textured hair. "This one matches you more."

Why was the only doll that modeled my hair type a doll that was a slave? There were plenty of white dolls that had their own uplifting backgrounds. But the only Black one was a slave. Why would I want a toy as a reminder of the terrifying history of my people?

So, I picked a doll that was specially designed for mixed girls. I wish there was a better option.

Vera Armstead  
**Candles to Remind Me**

My last year in college was when my mom started regularly sending me care packages. And when I say care packages, I mean it.

One day I got a package in the mail, lumpy and heavy in a parcel you can get from the dollar store. She didn't tell me she was sending it; it was a surprise.

I opened it to find bunion cushions. Stick on ones from CVS. And then a reusable rubber one. It made me laugh to think that my mother had to send her 20-year-old daughter materials to soothe her bunion. People always told me that I had an old soul; that I was mature for my age. Maybe my body was mature for its age too.

Then there was a plastic bag full of candied pecans, my favorites. She would send me the most random things to make me smile. At the bottom, there was a candle enclosed in a glass frame with a wooden lid. Appleberry pumpkin. Even though we couldn't light candles in our dorms, I would take a sniff of the candle gifted to me by the woman who reminded me of home.

Homecoming was great.

College was a fun, confusing time full of lessons about life, love, sex and taxes. About me. Who I am, what I am not and how beautiful of a social butterfly I evolved into. I made a lot of good memories but, alas, college is over.

People change.

The question is not whether they have, but if I accept it. So that's what Homecoming was about. I sprinkled my post-grad growth everywhere. It makes me feel like the hard work on myself matters. I matter because I laid out my happiness for everyone to see who would subtract from it. If I acknowledge this correctly, that I subtract my happiness and reality seeps out, Zel broke my heart this weekend.

I should be devastated, right? Like crying, writing passion projects and short filming this situation, yes? Where are the tears to sleep? Long, sappy paragraphs? Questioning beauty? But I've changed. These are the actions of Baby Amb but my current reaction is not to question that she's outta here, but accept it and continue.

Continue on, knowing Zel is the fertilizer of my soil, but not the growth. Celibacy is my flower and I need not cut these stems for him - or anyone for that matter. I should scream and yell, right? But wait, didn't I say Performative Amb is over? Love is an act itself, so that explains the lack of pressure to act upon my raging heart to Zel and bad parenting. So, if Performative Amb is done, so are her jittery love rituals.

I'd be stupid to bring my happiness down or around uncommitted men. Or backpedal being the business that pays me, investing in morally bankrupt procedures like being angry someone



who doesn't love me shows me they don't, or sucking the bones out of dick reluctant to slither inside me. The three letter word nearly killed me before and now it's time I let Z-e-l wither away without the s-e-x.

Erase any manipulative idea that I can't feel what I have. I am a sad baby. Cherry wine got bitter, like poisonous, brittle fractions of hearts, telling me this is how it is. Could I get a life that doesn't have men ruining days or weekends? I was told things would change when I got tired of it, that lessons seen through aren't repeated nor taken back from God or myself. Lessons just...stick.

So don't move. Let it pinch, burn. Feel Zel lying, remember those disgusting, vulnerable moments of grace and sympathy for men without it? Let those illicit feelings smother. Internalize the feeling of being done. Turn the page. Because let's think here, was Zel life long or was he someone to swaddle my heart for safety? Did Zel do my dirty work? He may have answered cries for help, but isn't this tiring? Let this be a lesson that men aren't remotely fascinated by me right now. Lust breeds curiosity. Love is a breath of fresh air. And I need to come up.

Going down on Zel, what did I gain? What is a mouth full of cum equivalent to? Succulent milk baths, roses on the counter? Was this a moment to realize heartbreak is more than how deep someone can be inside me? This is about sacrificing a critical identity of mine. It's not about the sex. It is the sex.

Harsh weights of this tender intimate act shake my weak fragility, making it obvious that vulnerability is legendary. Vulnerability is a prime reminder that I'm human, and sex, love and Zel are my living sacrifices on how I gave myself to others. Sacrifice is a remarkable reminder of God's grace. Mine is just as important. I know Grace.

Grace is incognito. She hides behind, beneath, and beyond situations, and I must dig for her underneath the pile of shit that lands on me. Here, Grace is asking me to realize mourning is complex, anger is valid, but grace is profound. I twist and turn out of situations that are too heavy for me, not realizing grace is a glass ceiling, protection

and clarity to the dreadful inclination of what I heard, saw felt. I sacrificed how flimsy forgiveness is and how lousy Zel and the situation are just to give myself Grace. She opened my eyes and I acknowledged lots and lots during homecoming.

I realized I didn't cry over Zel this time. My said sadness is humanness. I accepted it, hashed out my anger and moved on. I still confuse infatuation and love with each other. I'm learning the deepness of sex and the pricelessness of vulnerability, but still can't rely on anyone for neither protection nor comfort. Neglect stings like the pinch of wonky seat belts during trips cross country, serving as a siren to my safety since human trafficking is at an all-time high. Men are not teddy bears or emotional support dogs for me to sabotage my growth over. Growth is not linear, it's backs and forths, ups, downs, wins, losses. The unknown is not scary, it is just the unknown. Being uncomfy is a love affair with negativity cuddling me, holding me hostage and the new me is getting tired of being stood up. I'm not in love, I'm just a Libra. What's great about these small tidbit factoids? Sacrifice granted me these. And I wouldn't know grace without God, growth or acknowledging who I am without it.

After surviving strange men, poorly lit bus stops, a 12-hour bus drive across the Bible Belt, the Atlanta MARTA and airport, I celebrated being alive by telling Zel I knew he lied to avoid sex, the intimacy of it at least. I put my emotional vulnerabilities he helped build on our little table of love we shared. Dismal heartbreak led the way as I dragged the lump in my throat from crying as emotional labor. It was refreshing but disappointing that the same person who watered my garden wilted the fruits I hid from everyone else.

"I didn't lie, I didn't sleep at my house."

If I acknowledge this correctly, that I'm a drama queen committed to single men, I broke my own heart this weekend.

I apologized immediately, but I knew my anger didn't sacrifice sadness for nothing. Instead, I stood by the decision to not be in love alone anymore. I was still embarrassed. Zel and I's hoopla of a friendship could've sustained an indefinite injury. I could've lost my

best friend for good, but he granted me grace, assuring me that I was the closest woman in his life aside family. I stopped feeling putrid after he accepted my forgiveness. After all, I protected myself the best way I knew fit and it felt like the no-show for scheduled dick appointments was the best situational condom around.

We already don't talk much, but the silence after this argument was much louder than usual. I checked his Twitter to find ease in our tested existence.

"anybody wanna fall in love? no? Bet." He asked Twitter. He rather me irate not glum because my sadness is titanic. Anger means I'm burning bright and I've always been stunning in yellow. He even called the girl who hated me in college an "amazing woman", but anger is complex and grace is still profound, so I charged it to the game as a shower of social clout. Sagittarius men sprinkle their social glitter everywhere so I went to Instagram.

In Zel's ashy, pale, chubby palm laid a gold coin. It lodged an arrow right through me, calming my embarrassment, erasing my guilt and validating my emotional sacrifice to know I sprinkled my growth in places still pure.

Did I tell you Zel is a man made of God's magic? In His clever, artful moments, God uses Zel's hickory skin as leather paper, spilling Life's juicy stories.

"My Grace is enough for you," The coin read, a cross in its center. "CELEBRATE RECOVERY."

Zel didn't open his mouth yet God was loud.

Still, with grace.

Kimberly Fain

**Bougie Black Latte Drinking Revolutionary**

Instead of pounding out my anger by rioting in the streets, be glad I'm a Black Bougie Latte Drinking Revolutionary. I only teach great minds about resistance. Grave sins have been committed against our people. That's what I tell my black students. Everyday, my wide-eyed young people ask me about the latest cop- killing stories in the news. Botham Jean. Atatiana Jefferson. JaQuavion Slaton. Sitting inquisitively in their seats, they want to know what I think. Like a conscientious professor, I press my fingers on both sides of the black podium. Then, I hold up our text: African American Literature Anthology: Slavery, Liberation and Resistance. On the cover, each symbol of the Kente cloth has a West African, specifically Ghanaian meaning.

You see my name spelled out on the front. Look in your table of contents I say. I put a lot of painstaking labor into this. Do you want to know what the famous journalist Ida B. Wells said about lynching? She was an anti-lynching activist. In "Lynching of Innocent Men: Lynched on Account of Relationship," Wells writes that if the mob couldn't find their target, the mob set out to find their relatives. Drink that generational pain into your bloodstreams.

Truthfully, they're still trying to figure out what to think or say about the incessant historical mob violence in this country. And others want to just press me further. They want to hear what the professor has to say. They show little interest in what their classmates think. Grave sins have been committed against my people I say again. I stay caffeinated just to keep my eyes open and cope daily with this inhuman bullshit.

Many of them have never seen anyone move through the world like me. Sipping coffee every class, I'm watching them and reading them closely. I have my left eyebrow up. And my right eyebrow tilts down. Short hair like the black girl on Empire who killed Andre's white wife by pushing her over a stone pillar balcony. Ironically, the shorthaired black girl is the real-life wife of Andre Lyon. Clearly, when I'm not reading the great books, I watch too much trash television. Yet,

somehow, I know some of you feel me. You watch that trash shit, too. You just don't want anybody to know it.

But, on this day, I'm wearing my blue Calvin Klein suit jacket, a dark pair of Calvin's jeans with the gold-threaded symbol embroidered on the back pockets. And my pair of light grey tweed Converse adds a skater edge to my bougie blackness. My straight-lined nose spreads wide for every smiling pic I take. I attribute my high cheekbones and coffee brown skin to my African ancestry. Some people say I look Dominican. A dark-skinned black Latina. I'll take that. My black professor friend from Louisiana says I look like I'm from the islands. He laughs and starts speaking French creole. Sounds good, too.

They used to say my Dad looked like Sidney Poitier. Sidney was born in the Bahamas. He was a revolutionary in the field of acting. His activism with toffee-colored actor/singer Harry Belafonte was, in fact, revolutionary. Sorry, I digress. But, Sidney and Harry were quite the handsome duo back in the day. Still, my husband says that my Dad looks like an older Idris Elba. Idris is a Nigerian Brit. No doubt my father took that well, too!

But, my response is always the same. I'm African American. I'm black like you. I look just like you. And most of them agree. You're regular black like me one student says. Regular black I laugh. I'm not sure what that means. I have big brown eyes like my Mom. They said my Mom looked like Diana Ross when she was young. If that's regular black, I'll take that one, too. In truth, we all looked the same, yet different at the same time. Every skin shade, every hair texture and every facial feature is represented in this room. Their black families are from Africa, the islands, and sometimes Latin and South America. As humans, we have a tendency to see ourselves in others. Quite frankly, if I look like home to them, I smile. It means we're connecting and relating our varied blackness to one another.

But sometimes, black is not enough for some of them. A few of them say they're mixed somewhere along the family line. I know I say. Most of us are mixed somewhere. Slavery was a mother f\*\*\*\* on the DNA. But, I leave out the f\*\*\*\* and just say mother because it doesn't fit my

Bougie Black Latte Drinking image. We know other cultures may have contributed to our individual existence. But, this is my African American literature class. We're here to talk about blackness. We're talking about black resistance. And understanding and asserting our pride in our blackness is a form of black resistance.

Surprisingly, many of them don't know our black history. Are primary and secondary educators teaching anymore? I can ask that because I was a middle school and junior high teacher back in the day. What are they afraid of? Black people who think? They don't know the struggle. They don't know the generational grind. I tell them to get off The Gram. Stop plotting and planning your next kickback. Perhaps, you already know, but if you don't, that's what they call a small house party in this part of the South. I see your pictures I tell them. Y'all don't miss an event. But, I also tell them party hard after they've listened and learned. But, still, stay out trouble, too. Pay attention to the signs of trouble. The ancestors put in the heavy lifting. The ancestors marched in the streets so you don't have to riot in the streets.

Same questions come. I thought I was getting to them, but they're asking the same questions again. When will you be done reading our papers? After I go to the coffee shop and sip my latte. You've seen The Gram. You know what I do. If I'm not drinking at the coffee shop, I hit up those literary readings. Listen to the poets speak. Listen to the novelists speak. They're Bougie. They talk about slavery. They talk about revolutionaries. They talk about resistance. I go to book readings and receptions. I pose with the award-winning writers. Gregory Pardlo. Jericho Brown. Colson Whitehead. Hoping somehow osmosis will make their literary genius rub off on me. Sadly, I wasn't in a picture with Ta-nehesi Coates or Zadie Smith. Ta-nehesi is super tall, and Zadie is super beautiful. But, still know, I get my books signed. I post the pics. I scroll through the pictures to see about the likes. I sip lattes by the window or outside by the palm trees. I switch back and forth between reading a book and reading my Twitter. Have you been paying attention? I write about resistance. I teach about resistance. I read about resistance. I watch documentaries about resistance.

Tell Them We Are Rising is enlightening. It's a documentary about HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges & Universities). From 1866 to 1872, 20,000 people were lynched for educating blacks. After pausing the video on that note, tears swell my eyes. Standing in front of the class, I say to them, you see why I do what I do. You see why I get mad when you say you don't want to read a 5-page excerpt on Frederick Douglass. I'm intense about this shit. Like those Reconstruction era teachers, educating you all is worth dying for. But I want you to live. I mean really live. They nod their heads.

Thurgood Marshall. Angela Davis. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I will never be. They are the great revolutionaries who sacrificed their time, freedom, and or their life for the cause of blackness. But, then, real talk, teaching and learning while black is revolutionary. So I think to myself, maybe teaching about black resistance to these young black minds has a greater generational purpose. Probably Thurgood, Angela, and Martin had a bougie black professor that spoke of resistance with coffee in one hand a book in the other. Like Tupac Shakur said "Every time I speak, I want the truth to come out . . . even if I get in trouble . . . I'm not saying I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change the world. And that's our job. To spark somebody watching us."

Back in the day, somebody said my hair wasn't good. One afternoon, Diane burned all the bad out of it until it was straight. But it still wasn't quite right. Then a little white boy on the school bus reached over me and asked three girls for a strand of their nice blonde hair for him to have and to hold, from that day forward. I offered up my press 'n' curl then later cradled it in my cold hands safely away from their disgust. Greasy and nappy. Black girls didn't have the kind of hair a boy would want to collect. Girls in my complex wore weave ponytails that swung in the breeze because our real hair couldn't hold the wind. We pretended that horsehair, that Indian hair, that plastic and polyester hair was the only way we could turn a head. What really mattered was our tits. Who had the biggest? My sister then Mikhaila then Jennifer and then I stopped listening because it wasn't ever me. I was flat-chested and Crazy Legs said I dressed like his grandmamma. Nobody was trying to fuck me. Daddy said I didn't need anybody looking my way no way even though I needed someone to see that I existed. Daddy saw sexual violence. And so, I only needed to worry about my education because that's what really mattered. I was okay because I was a smarty-arty nigga, not a fast-tailed little girl. Nobody was going to put a baby in me because I was always going to be their baby. Just a child of God serving the Most High. *Come as you are.* Though, I couldn't wear the same style of dress to church that the pastors' wives wore because the fabric held my ass differently, pulled across my chest, made men covetous of every part of me even though they couldn't see any part of me. That's what Jean said, and after Sunday service, Jean reminded me that obscenity resided in my body. I disgraced the Name I Love to Hear simply speaking to a married man looking the way I did. There was foulness where just that morning my mama said there was beauty. (Had I forgotten there was no goodness in me?) I'd been told for years that I was too sensitive, so I silenced my protest. It was not my place to speak up, but Jean could because her family founded that Church of Christ and there was that difference between us—the white of it—that no one ever wanted to mention. I



had a place to maintain, after all. I deserved it. I was not allowed to speak up, to shout, to hit back—even though my life depended on it! There was a better way, and the white woman who tried to be my mother when my mama was 1,400 miles away tried to teach it to me. Susan made my body small, smoothed the rough edges until I was good enough and her son became old enough for me. There was nothing better than that. I would never find someone else. That meant that I was worthless any other way. There was a broken lever inside me that never moved the pieces to their proper places. I could not perform the way I needed to receive what little they had to offer. So, I was a bitch, unwilling to indulge fictions masked as Southern charm and intellect.

For the way I spoke and the power each consonant held, unwavering underneath the onslaught of their words, not giving in and instead getting over. For getting what they thought someone else deserved by the nature of their pedigree. And by then, I was killing myself with all their lies. My mind was choking on them during the day and while I slept until I couldn't tell reality from nightmare. My grip finally loosened, letting them spill out of me because why should I care? I was greasy with nappy hair and tits in T-shirt dresses that clung to me and burst the buttons on my blouses. My voice rang **L O U D** and *looong* while I ran away with a boy who was not that woman's son. And I let joy run all up and through me while I wore my bad hair, which wasn't really bad, like a crown. And I freed my body, a gift from my mother and grandmother and all the thick-thighed women before her. There was no shame in the desire that stitched me together and stretched its hand outward to join with someone. And all that was owed to me would come in its due time, and until then I would love on myself. That's the truth.

DW McKinney  
**On the Subject of Your Inheritance**

Dear daughter—

What do I have to say for myself?

I uttered prayers like indecipherable hymns while I labored with you. I muttered Psalms and paced the hospital room in circles, pausing when the walls cracked against my forehead and jolted my heavy-lidded eyes open. I learned more about power when I labored with you. That a man can force his hand inside me while my eyes water from the shame because he wears the title doctor, and I cannot complain because this doctor has degrees and he knows what he's doing. He knew it well, too, as he slid his hand out of me with a smile and said, "You can punch me now for what I've done." He laughed, bereft of concern.

You later announced your presence with an undulating cry to the ceiling. Your father placed you on my chest and I wrapped you in whispered incantations of love. Your body was like the air I struggled to breathe, light and thin and slightly beyond my grasp. This was my induction into the other side of motherhood. No fanfare or parade, only roiling pain and fear washed away in the presence of new life. When I cradled you in my arms, I stared into your eyelids covered in crisscrossing veins that mapped your lifeline and imagined the vastness of your future. I did this three times a day during our hospital stay. Brush, kiss, imagine.

I was filled with an unwavering hope for the future.

Dear daughter—

Where did my idea of motherhood come from?

Before you were born, I delighted in thoughts of your brown curls. I fantasized about the sound of your laugh and the first time you would smile at me. I cried thinking about the day you would bless me, peering into my face to chirp mama. There was always a place for morbid fascinations in these moments. Obsessions stood watch at my bedside and spun tales about how I would lose you, hurt you, or awake to discover that you had passed from this earth in your sleep, the lived minutes of your life like gossamer moth wings.

Greater still was history's voice reminding me of the repeated sting of racism's hand across my face and its eventual reach toward your own. I dwelled on these sorrowful ideas. They littered my mind until it became a landfill brimming with garbage that threatened to swallow me.

My relationship with our country has been one of stressful anticipation, waiting for all the good I have in this world to be stripped from me without surprise. It is a creeping thing. A monster lurking beneath a smooth, shining surface in expectation of rising up to strike its prey. It's taken a while but I've come to realize that the bedrock that upholds our nation is a piece of greywacke, distorted and malformed. What resonates deeply with one soul to create an iridescent well of happiness can also send tonal waves that shatter the soul of another.

I am formed from the collected shards.

Dear daughter—

What does it sound like to brim with the golden waters of hope?

I distinctly remember the thunderous crack of a burned pine tree when it fell. Your father and I were hiking with our friends through the ravages of a wildfire. When the first crack sounded, we sprinted over charred logs in search of safety. The

explosion of the pine's roots rising from the earth rattled my spine. That same thunder echoed in my soul after hatred was elected into our highest office.

Up came the twisted ropes of fear I had tried to suppress the moment I first held you in my arms. My mother's instinct warred within me as I stood poised outside your bedroom door that night. I wanted to let you sleep, to hold the moment in my mind before it broke open. I also wanted to burst into the deep black cloaking your room to scoop you up from your crib and whisper, "It's going to be okay."

We liken the ferociousness of mothers to wild creatures. Bears. Tigers. Dragons. In that moment, I saw the truth of it. I was a caged animal pacing our home. I stalked each room with vicious determination, fretting about when they would come for us. I believed it was only a matter of time before they added my name to the rolling list of bruised Black bodies. But greater still was the warring spirit inside me. I wanted my hurt to curl up with a resonance so great it sent them scampering before me.

And then I looked at you and remembered my hope.

Dear daughter, plow the bedrock. And use what's upturned as a stepping stone in your path.

With all my love,

Mama

# POETRY

Akhir Alexis  
**Never Too Old for a Lullaby**

Above me, the colour of solitude  
crafts the lid of the world,  
the unspeakable colour.  
Like water yearning for release,  
grasping at a weary embankment,  
it could not hold. The world came rushing,  
raining down on me, the recurring dream  
an invitation to be the architect for entablature to  
the congress of my memory: of edible houses,  
of life threatening apples, of odd numbered dwarfs,  
and giants sitting on clouds in the sky.

You sang them to me, whispered them,  
the older I got the louder the song. Loud  
zizzing, mosquito like. The browning of time,  
the ripening of memory, a messy string ridden mango  
dripping all through my psyche. I watch the home I  
paid for all these years, fade away by the sheer force  
of wheels. And they said those people will have new lullabies for me.  
They said I won't be left inwardly agape.  
I told them I have a few of my own, one called *Weeping Woman Lit a Cigarette*.

Akhim Alexis

**One Hour after Midnight with Gil Scott Heron**

A truism: we are still  
on the verge of a revolution,  
one that will be televised and  
livestreamed.

*So what? You want me to give  
you an incantation? An invitation  
to reign on some parade?*

*Well you're out of luck,  
No embrace can be bought here.*

My pain is not your  
pain Mr Heron, but your  
song mine, your poem theirs  
and my time yours. Pieces  
of you, not a man, but a messiah.

Why come after midnight?

*-call me Mr Heron one more time and I might  
just deny you that loan you seek.*

*-midnight because you expect things at midnight:*

*(One Hour after Midnight, continued, no stanza break)*

*a new day, an aligned clock, Armageddon.*

*So if I visit a little after midnight, I exceed your expectations.*

*-call me a messiah and call Moses a poet*

*-call Moses a poet, call poetry the past*

*-call poetry the past and watch it devour you*

*Commandments and all*



Akhir Alexis  
**The Birds Who Knew**

Birds know where you've been,  
and they know what it looked like before you got there.  
I'd like to believe when I wake up to the musings of those that fly,  
in their own way they report my future.  
So I've built a home for them on my veranda,  
a carefully constructed refuge,  
and welcomed them with seeds.

One day it rained, and those birds,  
my sempiternal guests, never returned.  
Then it dawned on me, I never had the power to determine their home,  
They sought no refuge in me, I sought refuge in them,  
afraid that their songs which narrated my future would cease if they left,  
abandoning me, exposing me to risk.  
But one question remains with me,  
of all our days together,  
-why would they leave during the rain?

Echoes of freedom are trapped hermit style  
pressing and pushing their way to the frontal lobe,  
begging for release and redemption from the norms and values of familial obligation.  
Asking for agency and a semblance of control  
to show what self-proclamation is like,  
so it can  
figure itself out and fix itself in/to  
an aura that cannot be duplicated. Forged against its will  
so your name is not just a mere stamp of parenthood but a  
testimony to individuality and complexity that must be featured in  
theatres near you,  
and spoken through mouths in high and low places,  
to validate these voices that withhold true purpose.  
Voices that shout farewell to foe, fact and form.  
Voices that allow a mastery of mechanical and obstruction free mental meandering  
in hopes that becoming is a means to an end.

Akhirn Alexis  
Tree of Life

Ask me about the fruit that hangs heavily,  
bending my arms, begging for release, gasping, screaming to be plucked,  
swaying with an agenda against the scourge of sane sanctifiers  
who burden me with scarred produce//dripping red juices in the sweltering sun,  
another one placed, another one plucked as the purest pickers taint ripe produce  
peeling its skin, wounding the wounded,  
maintaining order with dis/order,  
life tethered to my branches, staring up towards the sky.  
Let me tell you about the stolen future which the fruit harbours in its seed,  
only if you knew the thousands of wakes I have hosted.

Niamoja Alyce  
**Hymnal Hemoglobin on Hate St.**

I read the concrete  
under the puddle of blood  
like scripture.  
My reflection  
only obscured the text.  
Were the i's dotted?  
were the t's crossed  
or were they crucifixes?  
A rouge, violent,  
American beauty  
oxidized brown in the sunlight.  
They appropriated  
the colors of my veins  
for their perversion of freedom  
and here I am their prideful antithesis,  
their reluctant pacifist antagonist,  
their pathologized prodigal  
disowned defective discolored female son  
begot by Mary, her birth name Stolen.  
The God of my people  
was propagated  
by bleached false prophets  
and yet He remains divine.  
The colors of my veins  
were not stolen from my body  
and yet they remind.  
The blood on the sidewalk  
did not come from my own body  
and yet it will always be mine.

Hunter Blackwell  
**How to Cut Your Hair**

First, you must get permission  
from a coworker who has only every  
talked to you once about your hair  
and had the nerve to stick her fingers  
in the untamable mane but you hadn't known  
her long enough to tell her that her fingers  
did not belong. If you do not get her permission,  
she will look at you with the utmost disgust  
on her face mixed with disappointment  
and tell you "you didn't ask me first,"  
even though it's your own head of hair.

Second, you must prepare for the onslaught  
of "you're going to regret that hair."  
Sometimes, it will be slick--sliding so fast  
over someone's mouth you think  
you hadn't heard it until the moment passes  
and it haunts you in bed later in the night.  
You would've never guessed that there would  
be so many opinions about hair that demanded  
to be shared out loud about something that  
does not grow from their own head.

Third, you will think, 'Do I really regret  
cutting my hair or am I sick of people telling  
me I will?' You will run across a photo of your long hair.  
You will think no I don't regret cutting it.  
You will remember the split ends, the twist outs,  
all the detangling, the knots, the questions of why  
your hair isn't growing, wondering if you had done  
something wrong. You will remember all the problems  
of your long hair and you will not regret it.

*(How to Cut Your Hair, continued, stanza break)*

Fourth, you must be prepared for how much  
like your mother you're going to look like.  
You'll have to tell yourself you should've told the lady  
to leave you more length on top. You'll lie in bed,  
thanking the high heavens that you're not  
actually your mother and that unlike her  
the hair will grow back out.  
But for the next six months  
you will see your mother's face.  
You may regret that.

Lastly, you will sit in the salon chair  
heart racing as the first chunk goes,  
realize that you cannot turn back now, square  
your shoulders--panic--then breathe.  
You'll even say, "Fuck it. It's just hair. And it grows back."

Venus Davis  
**To my enemy, the Sagittarius**

Think of me when you are fucking an artist,  
and she is painting your parasite  
As you tell her where to shade her trust

When your honeyed words pile up in stacks,  
And your bed is now the couch at midnight,  
think of me when you are fucking an artist

When your gears are shifting towards climax  
And she watercolors you the greenlight,  
As you tell her where to shade her trust

Think back to my panic, my anxiety attack,  
When you kept caressing what didn't feel right  
Think of me when you are fucking an artist

And you coerce her hand to paint abstract  
But she is too scared to say no outright  
As you tell her where to shade her trust

You can't untouch me. You can't take it back  
like when you forced a kiss and I suppressed a bite  
Think of me when you are fucking an artist  
As you tell her where to shade her trust

Venus Davis  
**To my unrequited love, Pisces**

I think that something as soft  
as the drizzle of rain could make you weep  
Because you see all that is wondrous  
in what any god can hum through the weather

And it's captivating how you understand that  
This world is not forever  
That your place on this planet is only temporary  
But you envelop the thought in a tender hug,  
Run your fingers through your hair,  
And lay down for the night with a smile on your face

I am not like you  
I am dark, brooding, and desperate  
A cynical person that might leave  
footprints on your clean kind mind

I am lucky to even lie next to the thought of you  
To even kiss the concept of your lips  
And to feel the sweet melody that plays when you touch me  
There are many cliches to be said about the colliding of bodies  
Or the meshing of souls

I wonder now, why no one ever comments on what it is like  
To be loved by someone who is gentle and takes their time?  
Slowly reading each signal and melting into each moment  
Harboring the energy of a kaleidoscope when you finally  
Let your guard down and melt with them

Turning and moving and mixing into  
different colors and patterns



Venus Davis  
To my older brother, the Leo

When you prop your arms up to get out of bed  
and look up at what peaks through the blinds,  
pinching the plastic between your fingertips and  
squinting at the circular image that hovers mid sky,

hues of yellow and orange entangled to create a ray  
of commanding confidence blinding bitter bodies and

raising boisterous boys just like you.

Mighty men, just like you, wonder why they are not as glorious,  
as powerful as the sun.

Though, you, do not carry that burden, that wonder.  
Why would you, when two suns exist?

You and the planet that orbits the earth.

Though, that planet would orbit you too if it could figure out a way  
to.

Dawnya Green  
**blaxploitation**  
*After "Blaxploitation" by Noname*

the bubbly melodies fill your head, a calm voice delivers the truth  
you've been longing to hear.

"you're a hypocrite, what are your true beliefs? If you say you are, be it.  
Don't try to hide your wrongs. Your dollars aren't hidden. Ignorance  
can be a temporary thing, and it has been for you. You know what to  
do, you just have to be bold enough to do it. The chicken ain't that  
good."

I needed to know. I did know. I wanted to deny to satisfy a craving.  
One that is all too familiar.

the cause that my dollars funded is also very familiar.

Tiny comments, big omissions of hatred, overall stigma, I could go on  
for silent hours about how I've felt throughout it all, but wait, I'm  
eating my chicken now. I'll be done in a minute.

"The chicken didn't do it!" Yes it did, yes it does. It was created by  
them. Almost like Kids Bop, by kids for kids. created by them, FOR  
them.

You're gay, you aren't one of them... so why do you eat it? Are you  
that indoctrinated into the system that you're fueling what very much  
is tearing you down?

I am, that's true. I can't blame what I've been taught because I have  
also learned the truth.

I stay awake at night and ponder. What do I ponder, you ask? How my  
actions fall in the scheme of the world, that's what I think.

*(blaxploitation, continued, stanza break)*

It wouldn't make sense to fuel into something that is against me, unless  
I was self-hating. Is it self-hating to eat fries?

For a while, maybe I was.

Don't fall into it, supporting such crude things. It hurts. It's even  
harder to exist. I know that, I see it, I am it.

being forced into boxes, how sad. break that box. it's only cardboard.

love has always powered through.

through the occupations, the enslavement, then through the violent ripping away of culture for it to be revived in a series of pages and pictures.

this work itself is a work of love. Love for that which was lost. Grief!

The tangible expression of this feeling of admiration for what is no longer, what was no longer, what is now? Is it? Or is this expression of grief a rebirth, a reinvention created from the memories of those older than us?

perhaps it's always existed. It lived in all of us, before all of us, after all of us. how close and seemingly far everything is. do miles and kilometers truly translate into the mindscape? I believe not, for the shared experiences and pain of generations of those that existed originally and were created will forever translate. Whether you choose to acknowledge or not, this will be an ever-present fact.

we will always find ways to re-express and redefine our experiences. through a variety of mediums. The message is clear. We are one, and with this, we prosper as all.

Water is life.  
Life is water.  
lifewater.

we drink water, we are water.  
we drink ourselves.  
spring, tap, bottle, sink.  
categories that aren't as free-flowing as their counterpart.

iced or hot.

Like coffee. Which is water and beans.  
Water and heat is gas.  
Water and cold is ice.

Water can wash. Water can rinse. Water cools, but can be heated.

Oh so versatile, but oh so needed.

From rainwater to groundwater.

We're losing water when we sweat. But then we drink it again.  
Regained.

Where does the water all go when things don't work anymore? When  
you can't replenish.

Water flows. That's its job. We're all on the way. We're all in the way.  
We flow too. Some better than others.

We need water. You need it as I do. How do we save something so  
needed?

*(water, continued, stanza break)*

Water is me as water is you.

I am me as I am you.

We flow. We storm. We rain. We hail. We snow.

We are needed, for we are eager. Eager to share about how water has helped us

No one understands how vital water is. Until you don't have it. This is why we must share our water. Share our life. Before it is all gone.

Trevann Hamilton  
**Black And ~~But~~ Beautiful**

You are taught  
the same sun that makes you glow  
all kinds of beautiful  
Was not your friend  
Not because it could give you melanoma  
But because it may make you darker  
And apparently, that's worse

You learn  
Being told you are pretty for a black girl  
Means you are pretty despite being so dark

You are shown  
Blackness and beauty run parallel to each other  
You can be one or the other  
Never both

You are hurt  
By all the ways you have to  
Straighten your nose and your hair  
Just to appease them

You pity  
Those that have internalized whiteness's opinion of blackness  
And chose to spew their hatred at you  
They did not know better

You rejoice  
That your nose umbrellas your full lips  
And that you were chosen  
To glow in the sun

*(Black And ~~But~~ Beautiful, continued, stanza break)*

You accept  
That your brown skin is rich  
With history and stories  
And you were always  
Beautiful because of and not in spite of



He said  
“I’ll hold out my hand  
And my heart will be in it...  
Love me tonight  
Tomorrow was made for some”

Mr. Hathaway encapsulates the nostalgia  
Of being a little black girl  
Settled at home  
Nudging cousins, squeezing my way into small spaces left on the couch

Water lingered at the lines of her eyes  
She blinked at the woman across from her  
And gave a sad smile that says  
“I know, baby. We’ll get through it”  
The other woman’s head dipped with that  
Pain my people know all too well

Donny had it right when he said  
“Before you go, make this moment sweet again”  
Because tomorrow truly is only made for some  
All living people involuntarily abide by this rule  
But for us it comes with added pressure  
Additional heartache and injustice  
Depression that we’re not even allowed to claim  
Anger built up over generations

*(art gallery, continued, stanza break)*

Our light blinds those who cannot  
Walk in truth and harmony  
The genesis of us  
The Now of us  
They throw dirt at our feet as we dance  
Don't strip us of our natural rights  
We won't have it  
Even if we shall die in the fight

On the wall,  
"between me and the rest of the land there are bars  
something brown, carmine, and blue."  
What will it take for them to admit this?  
We know they see it  
They created it

But tragedy is not our entire story  
This gallery is not only an exclamation  
Of the fight we've yet to finish  
It is also a haven  
A reminder of our roots and interconnectedness  
I looked to the picture propped by cinder blocks  
A hand, holding a symbol of the African diaspora

"Cause we're alone now  
And I'm singing this song to you"  
Lyrics that evoked a throat that could hardly  
Allow the passage of air  
And eyes that transformed to dams  
Because I did feel as if I was alone  
With the ones I love  
And they sang that song to me  
That song of genuine soul  
We will prevail

Destinee Horton  
**Unrequited**

Dive in  
Don't just let the waters  
Crawl up your waist  
As you  
Creep earthward  
Toe testing is not allowed  
Go back  
Get a running start  
Splash head first

Not only should  
Every last inch of you  
Be completely,  
Undoubtedly, entirely,  
Unforgivingly submerged  
But you should  
Drown for me

I want  
Your lungs to scream for air as  
My rib cage expands  
Then your lungs reach capacity  
Struggle  
Slosh

*(Unrequited, continued, stanza break)*

Kick  
Until those beautiful nostrils of yours  
Give up  
When the constituents of my spine arch  
Give in  
Step into the darkness  
I want every  
Single  
Cavity  
To invite the cold  
Do it for me  
Won't you?

Destinee Horton  
**Perception of the Almighty**

The claims of  
A white beard  
And a white face,  
All due to  
Insecurities, fear, and  
Lack of imagination  
Who is to say you're not a  
Series of events  
A flutter of wings  
Maybe a place in time  
Or a space in light  
There are those who  
Cling to certainty in their faith  
I  
However  
Will cling to mystery  
And pray that when that  
Last breath  
Floats from my lips  
You are not what we  
Pictured you as  
But what I  
Felt you were  
In moments of real humanity

I.

when it began, it felt  
unstoppable. like  
waves crashing  
on rocks—

it was as unpredictable

as riptides,  
as dangerous  
as cliff dives.

II.

I was unmoving  
like igneous rock, but you  
eroded me  
softened me,  
weathered me,  
made me understand  
that love doesn't have to  
change you  
but can evolve you instead.

III.

I am grateful  
for our love  
and all that  
it brings me,  
it heals me  
like summer at that lake  
when life gets too busy  
and you've waited  
all winter  
for your skin to be  
reacquainted  
by the sun and the water.

IV.

the happy that reminds you  
of your neighborhood pool  
and your mom  
with her cooler  
full of snacks  
and her hands  
rubbing suntan on your back,  
is the same happy that  
I feel with you  
my love.

V.

and although our love  
is no longer new  
but familiar now,  
we float on—  
like two adults settled into  
their double tubes,  
cruising down a lazy river,  
our love is calm—  
it is seasoned  
and undisturbed,  
like water parks  
after hours.

Often, I found myself around  
Those who mocked urban dialect,  
Belittled rhythm and blues,  
Questioned the plight of the oppressed,  
And fetishized my skin tone.

I've sat in classrooms  
Following the hands on the clock  
And listening how my ancestors rest in tombs  
And questioned why I don't talk.

No, you can't touch my hair.  
(They touched anyway)  
Yes, my mother packed slices of watermelon.  
(Mom, why did you do that?)  
No, I won't write about the black despair.  
(I'm not writing about my absentee father)  
Yes, I wish I wasn't here.  
(I hate y'all.)

I hate it here in suburbia

Lamar Neal  
**Where the Colored Boys Go?**

Growing up, I dreamt about being Super Mario  
Until my teachers tried to push me down pipelines.  
They said I could barely read so how could I be a hero?  
My ADHD made me a criminal every time.  
I sat in the back of class, afraid to talk  
Because then it would warrant unwanted attention.  
My friends, they outlined in chalk  
And threw their souls in special education.  
Who the hell could I convince

That I wasn't stupid like as it apparently seemed?  
If someone gave me the chance it would've been my promise  
To show the world that I could do more than daydream.  
It's a miracle that I made it out with enough self-esteem  
To know that I may have been delayed, but I could still grow.  
I survived but these college campuses don't ease me.  
I look around and wonder where did all the colored boys go?

Down a pipeline, it seems.



Lamar Neal  
**Beautiful Black Man**

Beautiful black man  
Does anyone ever truly give a damn?  
You were flying when your life began  
Not just when they post you on Instagram.

I am a beautiful black man  
Unadulterated in my black skin.  
I don't need anyone to understand  
Or to cue the sad violins.

They built pipelines and prisons for us.  
Brother, don't let them catch you.  
All these dances they can trust  
As long as you are singing the blues.  
I know you see all of the stars  
Shining bright in your name.  
I see galaxies growing from the scars  
Reminding you not to be ashamed.

Beautiful black man  
Let me see you glow.  
Beautiful black man  
Bury yourself in gold.  
Beautiful black man  
Secure the bag.  
Beautiful black man  
Make wings from rags.

Soar far away from here.  
Don't let them make you an example of our fears.

Rickey Rivers Jr.  
**Wrote This after Cutting My Hair**

Sweeping up the spongy blackness,  
a few strands cling to fingers in the wash.  
I condition.

I'm conditioned to this behavior,  
cutting, growing, repeat; a new person outside.

I think of how many memories the drain has, must be vast.

Nice smell, clean smell; the past is in the trash.

Rickey Rivers Jr.  
**Wrote This after Cutting My Hair Too**

The freedom of a haircut,  
own doing, own accord.  
Not because “It’ll fall out anyway.”

No. No thinking of dark thoughts.

Enjoy the new look.

Sweep up the past and throw it away.

You’re okay now.  
You’re okay.

Rickey Rivers Jr.  
**Jazzy**

Spontaneous vibe  
Effervescent eyes  
Moving, grooving,  
Shadows on the wall tell the story.  
Baby, we're grooving.  
Oh, don't you hear the cities?  
Lights reflect us.  
We are dancing smooth and alive.  
Ah yes, we live.

Rickey Rivers Jr.  
**Passing down Poetry**

As a youngster I never wrote poetry.

I wrote stories.

My father wrote poetry.

When he passed  
the passing infected me.

And now here I am  
writing poetry.

My father begat me,  
and brought me poetry.

Many of them  
are also stories.

This one isn't fiction.

Justine Taylor  
**Can Anybody Hear Me?**

suffocating,  
in a society that prioritizes silencing me,  
i'm wrestling for air,  
with the weight of its fate on my back  
it's a fact that black women suffer too  
you expect our hands to ignite change  
but continue to deny us our truth,  
countless times we've expressed our abuse with proof,  
and all you have to offer is  
"fool, the black man is the most undervalued,  
don't let your anger get the best of you"  
but that is just another excuse  
to uphold a culture of rape,  
sexualizing female youth  
then handing them the blame,  
throwing at them shame  
it's a dangerous pace to free our community, troops  
black women exude power, support and defend the black male body  
but are told it's not our right to claim we've been victims through and through,  
that we should cower in a reality supportive of male power,  
to speak up only if it negatively affects men too  
i'm here to tell you  
black bodies alike are living in a hell,  
while some may be in physical jails,  
we are all shackled in a fire just the same,  
there's strength in numbers  
but black men still want to maintain,  
aspects of a society that lets them refrain from accountability,  
you keep screaming you want freedom,  
yelling your demands at a white demon  
but don't you know he's already programmed us to his tune,  
an exterior win won't help our progression,  
if we don't fix the problems within  
who really knows  
when the war on women began

*(Can Anybody Hear Me?, continued, no stanza break)*

it isn't this country alone  
will they ever lend us a hand other than our own  
can anybody hear me?  
- justine taylor

## SHORT FICTION



The patches of soft grass tickled the undersides of our bare feet. I glanced up at Nyla, my closest friend, who offered me a warm smile. She handed me a single seed that she collected on our travels earlier. Why she collected only one is beyond me, though the gesture was appreciated nonetheless. The wind gently danced among her silken skirt like water ebbing towards a clear sea shore. I loved the way she twirled around and parlayed with the breeze early in the morning.

She woke me up bright and early, letting the little ones sleep in, and begged me to go on a walk with her. It became commonplace for us to walk along the edges of the forest, not too far from the nearest village. Sometimes we'd stay silent and enjoy each other's company. Sometimes we'd chat about the little ones and the other members of our group. It mattered not what we said, or where we went, as long as I was with her and she was with me. Often, we'd lace our fingers together and let our arms sway with the branches and leaves above us.

Morning walks were our special time, the forest our sacred space, for she was my branch and I was her leaf.

The ritual we were about to perform was nothing new to her, yet completely foreign to me. She bent down towards me and dug a small hole between us. Gesturing towards the fertile soil, she instructed me to set the seed down to be planted. As the adopted son of an herbalist, I questioned her method of growing plants without water. Nevertheless, I trusted Nyla despite whatever my surrogate father taught me. Oh, if he'd seen her now he'd faint at the idea. "That's a waste of a seed," he'd probably say, and proceed to water it for her. As much as I loved him, I hushed his voice in the back of my head and let her proceed.

She took my hand and placed it over the buried seed. Without removing her hands from mine, she serenaded the soil with the sound of her angelic voice. She sounded like what honey tastes like: sweet, smooth, and natural. I felt the ground beneath me shiver at her melody. It was electrifying to hear and feel underneath my palm.

Together, we traced symbols and ancient letters into the dirt surrounding the seed while she sang her soul into the earth.

Nyla glanced back up at me, and I swear she sang her soul into me as well.

I stared back in awe. The two of us were mages with different specializations. I was a connoisseur in forbidden death magic, and she was a goddess among men in earth magic. For a while, I assumed the entirety of earth magic was growing plants and flowers at will. Sometimes I would watch her in her garden, serenading bushes of thyme and basil, lavender and rose, anything that could use her voice as fertilizer. This ritual, however, was unlike anything I've ever seen her do.

The ground gently rumbled beneath us, almost matching her tone. Was she conducting the earth like a symphony? Or was the earth simply playing along? I dare not ask. I dare not disrupt her. Instead, I closed my eyes and let her carry my soul into gentle solitude. Before I knew it, her song had finished and I sat with her hands blanketed above mine. She called my name softly, as if not to alarm my weary spirit. I looked up at her, still feeling the ebbing of earth, and she smiled again.

She said I was not broken. And for once, I agreed.

She lifted my palm to reveal a bright green sapling underneath. She did that, I thought to myself. I am not capable of creation like she is. The only creation I know is creating trouble. She brushed her fingers against the sapling's tiny leaves, watching it slowly grow towards us, and feeling its roots grow away from us. She insisted I helped her grow this, and I protested. Her smile fell, and she insisted I stand with her to see the fruits of our labor. I could not say no.

She said my name again. I let out a soft sigh and nodded. Nyla took my hands and began a sweet little tune. Her voice was a soft hum, distant buzz, a vocal bumblebee hard at work. I hummed back, lowly praying I wasn't intruding on her ritual. Gently, she squeezed my hands and giggled a little at my choppy voice. Before we knew it, the sapling had grown to our knees, and then our chests, and then under our noses. It was some kind of thin tree, brown like our skin, and

strong like our friendship. Oh, how lucky I must be! Through my weariness, I smiled back at her. She needed to know how much I appreciate her.

The tree grew way above our heads and into the warmth of the sun kissing down on us. I glanced up at its many branches and hundreds of leaves, providing shade and a moment of coolness from the heat. The leaves closest to us began to dry out and fall off with the coursing of the wind. Frightened, I looked over at Nyla, who grasped my hand reassuringly.

She said I have nothing to fear.

I said I have everything to fear.

She said the tree was a symbol of us, our hearts and souls, poured into a single seed and blended together like a hearty stew. She said the dying leaves were our pain and anguish and everything else we kept from the world. More leaves turned and curled, breaking away with each gust of wind. I wondered if there would be any healthy leaves left, and the tree began desperately sprouting new ones to replace the old.

Nyla released my hands and kissed the trunk of the tree. The browning had slowed. I leaned in to kiss the tree as well. The browning had stopped. The tree had grown several new branches and dangled healthy green leaves above our heads. She batted her eyelashes at me, letting her sweet smile take control of me.

There is more than one kind of love, she told me. And I agreed.

She said my name. I said hers back.

She called me her dearest friend. She said she would never let me go.

In life, I will not rest until she finds her happiness.

In death.

I will not rest.

Until she finds her peace.