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# POEMS



**Editor's Note**

Because I make a living by teaching, I see September—not January—as the start of a new year. It's a time of pause, reflection, and refinement. I hate the loss of heat here in the Midwest, but I love the sense of possibility that the new year confers, even as autumn marks the culmination of so much growth, the movement through harvest into conservation and rest. The world begins its slow turn toward sleep, and I roll up my sleeves and get to work, summer not exactly behind me, but nearly out of view.

With that spirit, I offer you these poems and translations by an exciting array of makers. Here, we have poems that mark endings as beginnings and beginnings as endings, whose speakers pursue new ways forward relationally and new ways to live. We have poems of memory and postmemory; of love and relationships, the vulnerability that their flourishing requires and the assumptions that chip away at their foundations. We have poems that meditate on the language we use to locate one another, and ourselves; on the meaning we make of our lives, and the meaning our lives make of us.

Our issue closes with “My Name Back to Me,” a special folio of work by the legendary poet and playwright Ntozake Shange, who passed away in 2018. The work has been excerpted from *Sing a Black Girl's Song: The Unpublished Work of Ntozake Shange*, alongside an introduction by editor Imani Perry. The volume will be out later this month from Legacy Lit, and it is our honor and privilege to offer some of Shange's work to you.

If you, like me, find yourself looking behind and ahead during these final weeks of summer, I hope these poems will help carry you into the next season, closing doors within, and opening others.



## **Kara Krewer**

### **Tartarean Sun**

Under which she pruned  
the peach trees and a tiny gateway  
opened in her spine. That pain  
distilled there like a drop  
of molten glass. And was the first of many  
chambers to form.

There was her bedroom,  
where she bloomed  
in the white fog of sleep  
and so loved the burgundy curtains  
which kept out the sun.

That one day I would learn  
there was a god of thresholds,  
and I'd come to loathe his purpose.  
But not then. The bedroom filled  
with dust, which, small as I was,  
still left me no space to cross.

## Cathy Park Hong

### From “Spring and All”

*mak* is the touch  
of the potter, the thumbprint  
on clay  
the unfinished warp of wood  
and braille  
of grain

and knob  
of rope that hangs  
the squid that is dried  
    for days  
then eaten

with wine  
fermented from  
    dredges  
of rice—

the Joseon potter  
adjoins two hemispheres to make  
a white  
lopsided moon

exalt in these  
imperfections

    the act  
of creation felt in  
the thing

—not the smooth  
not the screen—

    and this grief  
    that has no release—  
grows inward  
rooting into  
    my spine, and  
    from my head sprouts a flower  
of gossamer blood

threads,

bash it—  
bash it in.

and the stones weep water,  
and the stars sink  
underwater.

---

a puddle  
of tadpoles tickle  
her cupped  
sunlit palms

twenty squirming commas  
each with a beating heart

—amphibians are living  
sponges  
for pollutants—

she releases them  
into the pond.

I tell my glum students  
who are trapped  
on Zoom  
I'll set up a Google doc

where we'll share  
favorite poems  
that remind  
us of touch

and poems appear  
like a scattering of ants  
then  
trail off

why bother

jerking off's  
numbing  
vibrator needs  
charging  
can't tickle yourself  
when you can  
predict your own  
move-  
ments

a poem can't replace  
his breath  
my ear

spanking that ass

volunteers at the NICU  
massaging preemies  
—tender newts—  
so they'll  
thrive

O cuts and thorns  
that leave a glove  
of hives,

my mother never learned  
how to hold  
a baby  
though she spoon-fed me  
till I was five

—she was a devoted mother  
the obit says  
when they don't know  
a thing about  
her—

## Camille Rankine

### Self-Portrait as Out-Fighter

a man I've never met tells me to open  
like a flower but a flower cut

too soon won't soften  
into bloom it stays

like a fist so like a fist  
I leave a mark

and all the heart I have  
inside this tidy vessel I'm disruption

the peace the room your shining  
story I unsettle I blemish I bloody

the ring with my memory  
of you we walk in circles

all these bodies underfoot  
my future like it was

yesterday we've lived this all before  
a past we're both bound to

in simpler times you'd call me  
savage a mistranslation

of survivor  
I dodge your grip I told you

didn't I tell you I can't forget  
to live a feeling

curled inside me like a fist a hit  
telegraphed generations back

and just like that  
red petals from your lips

## Henri Cole

### 107 Water Street

*“small town” is  
Largely a state of mind...  
—James Merrill, “The Changing Light at Sandover”*

All the sailboats in the harbor  
face North. I can see twenty-four  
from your study window.  
Overhead, large white birds fly around  
in the September glow.

The sky is baby blue without a single cloud.  
The house at 25 Main Street finally sold.  
Isn't that where Venture Smith lived?  
He was the son of a prince, who purchased  
his freedom. History cannot be un-lived.

Chez Perenyi, I visited David's ashes  
under a chestnut where edible mushrooms,  
*Phallus ravenelii*, now grow, and Libby,  
a rescue dog from Tennessee,  
nuzzled me and licked my lashes.

At the Farmers' Market, the cheesemonger  
couldn't stop talking. A young man at Nana's bakery  
gave me a brioche and smiled kindly.  
And Mrs. Purity, of Purity Farm (I love her peaches),  
stepped right out of a small Dutch painting.

All night I hear the clinking halyard lines.  
Before dawn, I buy a coffee at Tom's Newsstand,  
then sit with your big *Petit Larousse*, La Fontaine,  
and my ardor. September is a time to feel the light,  
write, scratch out, write, nap, walk, begin again.

I am too afraid of jellyfish to swim  
with Jonathan out to the breakwater;  
instead, I sit with Penny at her long  
dining table and eat beef bourguignon.  
You make me feel I almost belong.

## **Derrick Austin**

### **Hours**

Because the day was unseasonably hot,  
we left every window open and almost every door.  
Not wanting to touch each other  
felt like a punishment.

We wore each other's clothes outside.  
The strays, the steeples, the city's pale walls.  
We ate shaved ice with hibiscus syrup  
in the revival house. When Streisand burst into song,

you laughed boyishly, or cried.  
Where we dipped injera  
into stew, classical music played from old speakers.  
"Liebesfreud" was the only piece I knew

(my favorite heroine performed it on TV  
when I was young), and as I typed the name into your phone,  
those faint lines gathered around your smiling eyes  
and you saw me.

I won't see fall or winter from your apartment,  
where you talk in your sleep  
and sketch with red charcoal.  
I will have already flown home.

By sunset, the air was acrid with exhaust.  
That night you dropped your key  
by the gate. Snails clung to stalks  
still dark with flowers, blue at their edges.

## **André Leon Talley**

lordly lantern

tall neon doyen

dear to

orated tenderly on art or a trend

learned (Eden Tyndale Lear Eeyore Yoda Erato Leander Leda Troy Dante  
Donatella Leontyne)

ornately

real

annealed oleander

lonely eye



**酬张少府 王維**

晚年唯好靜，  
萬事不關心。  
自顧無長策，  
空知返舊林。  
松風吹解帶，  
山月照彈琴。  
君問窮通理，  
漁歌入浦深。

## Thanking Master Zhang with a Poem

*Translated from the Chinese*

I tend to love quiet now in my evening years,  
not caring much about much in the world.  
Making no long-term plans, I just keep to myself.  
Emptied of knowledge, I have returned to the woods.  
A breeze blows through the pines, loosening my robe.  
The mountain moon is my lamplight for playing the qin.  
You ask for the secret of transcending all worldly matter:  
just listen to the fisherman's song coming down the river.

مرة قنصتُ غزالاً. والغزال ضرورة شعرية لا غير.  
الأغنام البيضاء أو السوداء هي الحقيقة.  
المهم؛ نصبت للغزال شركاً، فسقط فيه. وبى رغبه  
لا توصف لتذوق لحم الغزال المالح. لا أحب لحوم  
الضأن في المولات. لكنني أحب يدك القمحية وهي  
تعلق على كتفي النياشين. أحب شفتك وهي تقول لي:  
أنت طلع النخلة.  
أنا طلع النخلة؟ أنا الحديدية التي تجرحها، والبدر  
المخيف الذي ينحرها. لم أعد قادراً على لمّ شتاتي. لم  
أعد أفرق بين غزالان المول وضأن القصيدة.  
عبث طرد الغزالة، وعبث طلع النخلة.

إذا مت فافتحوا إيميلي. الباسورد على ورقة فوق  
الطاولة. هناك ستجدون وصيتي، وستمسكون بالغزال  
من قرنيه.

## January 2

*Translated from the Arabic*

I shot a gazelle once. Here, a gazelle is a poetic necessity, nothing more.

The truth is made of white and black sheep.

Anyway, I set a trap for the gazelle and it fell into it. I had an indescribable longing

to savor some salty gazelle meat.

I don't like the lamb they sell in stores. But I do like your brown hand as it pins medals on my shoulder. I like your lips when they say: you're the pollen of the palm tree.

Me, a palm tree? I'm the steel that wounds it, and the terrifying moon that sacrifices it. I can't bear my exile any longer. I no longer distinguish between store-bought gazelles and the lamb of the poem.

Casting out the gazelle is futile, the pollen of the palm tree is futile.

If I die, log into my inbox. The password is written on a scrap of paper on the table.

There, you'll find my will, and you'll grab the gazelle by its horns.

أنتظر نهاية آب ومقتل أيلول.  
 أيها الخريف الذي يتلكأ، أنا هنا بانتظارك. طبخت لك  
 عصيدة، وأشعلت ناراً. تعال، واكنس بريحك الشمس  
 الصفيقة. ارفع يدها عن كتفي.  
 الصيف يجثم ثقيلًا فوق صدري. لكن يدي البيضاء  
 تحلف بالخريف، وتعدّ له السرج. آه يا حصان الخريف  
 الأبلق. يا من يدرس فكرتي وينفذها: سلاسل حجرية  
 تصعد سفح التلة، وغيوم مشتتة تصعد سفح السماء.  
 ولا شيء غير هذا، لا شيء. بالطبع، يمكن زيادة هدة  
 رعد كي تتخلخل عظامي وعظام الدنيا.  
 أما أنتم فقد ظننتم خطأ أن الخيل تسكن في تلال  
 الربيع. لا، تلال الخريف هي مسكن الخيل. تَسْتَمُّ  
 مهتاجة رائحة المطر، فتتسع مناخرها، وتقفز فوق  
 السلاسل الحجرية صاعدة نحو القمة، كي تقضم  
 أطراف الغيمة.

## August 15

*Translated from the Arabic*

I await the end of August and the murder of September.

I am here, tardy Autumn, waiting for you. I've prepared you a wheat porridge and lit a fire. Come with your wind and sweep away the shameless sun. Lift its hand from my shoulders.

Summer lies heavily on my chest. But my white hand swears by Autumn, and readies the saddle for its wretched horses. Autumn considers my idea then implements it: rows of stones ringing the hillside, and scattered clouds climbing the slope of the sky. Nothing more than this, nothing more.

Of course, you could add a burst of lightning to shatter my bones and the bones of the world.

You were all mistaken. You thought that horses live on the hills of Spring.

Autumn's hills are the horses' residence. The scent of rain excites them, their nostrils flare, then they leap over stone walls toward the summit, to graze on the edges of clouds.

2013-8-16

أغنيك يا طائر البلشون المهاجر.  
أغني بياضك، ومشيتك المتمهلة في الأرض البور.  
وأغنيك أنت أيضا يا هدهد الإقامة.  
أغني تويجك وأنت تلقط الحب في الأرض المحروثة.  
أنا هكذا أغنيتي مبيلة  
تضع قدما في الأرض البور  
وأخرى في الأرض المحروثة.  
مرة أصلي صلاة المقيم  
وأخرى صلاة المسافرين.

## **August 16**

*Translated from the Arabic*

I sing of you, migrating heron.

I sing of your whiteness and your sauntering gait in fallow land.

And I sing of you, resident hoopoe.

I sing of your little crown as you gather seeds from a plowed field.

This is how I am, my song is confused,

it plants one foot in fallow land

and another in plowed fields.

Sometimes I recite the resident's prayer,

other times the prayer of the traveler.



## **J. Estanislao Lopez**

### **Poem with Human Intelligence**

This century is younger than me.  
It dresses itself  
in an overlong coat of Enlightenment thinking  
despite the disappearing winter.  
It twirls the light-up fidget spinner  
won from the carnival of oil economies.  
In this century, chatbots write poems  
where starlings wander from their murmuration  
into the denim-thick clouds of a storm.  
When the chatbots inevitably learn  
to kill their darlings,  
we'll ask if we are their darlings,  
we'll dive further inward if not or if so.  
In films, the intelligent computer always arrives  
at a misunderstanding of the human soul  
because it lacks our ability  
to lie to ourselves.  
To feign hope and love through disillusion.

**Tim Seibles**

**Something Like We Did II**

*Light years in time, ahead of our time.*

—George Clinton, “*Mothership Connection (Star Child)*”

They did not  
expect to, nor did they  
find us

beautiful  
despite how much  
we loved to see  
ourselves

despite the way  
we dressed  
our bodies—

as though both trying  
to hide and begging  
to be seen. The way

our hands moved  
when we spoke  
startled them

and our mouths:  
the animal sounds we called  
*laughing* struck them

as a kind of  
punctuation  
in a world

whose machinery  
never stopped  
eating

our lives  
though we  
had made it

though we  
worked hard  
to maintain it.

This is why  
they would not  
harm us: our aggressive

stupidity  
that we could not  
see was visible

to them like a halo  
of cellophane capping  
our heads—which

appeared to grow  
a restless vegetation  
that we attended

more than our  
actual lives, which  
seemed to be

what we wanted  
to avoid: our fragility  
the imminence

of History and worry  
about what we called  
*the future*—

though it had  
already come

while we  
averted our eyes

and often forgot  
the constellations

between which  
the Earth swerved

### Something Like We Did III

*We were trying to open up to the world that we didn't even know exists.*

—Anthony Braxton, interview with Gerry Hemingway on September 1, 2013,  
in Willisau, Switzerland

The way you  
would squint  
at an aphid  
on your wrist

they watched me—  
the way someone  
watches a baby bird  
fallen to the ground

careful, like children  
finding a fish alive  
in the grass.

The one who  
spoke had clearly  
practiced, but

the odd stops  
and blue notes  
shaped the inflections

so, for a moment  
English was played  
like a marimba:

something about  
*speed without*  
*motion—travel*

*like memory—*  
as if space itself  
were obsolete.

Like testing a fabric,  
the silent one tugged  
my lip. I opened

both hands:  
palms flat, fingers  
straight: they

watched as if  
my answer  
would appear

## Something Like We Did IV

*Space is the place.*

—*Sun Ra*

Wind in the leaves  
of the live oak next door

and the June bugs  
click-click

hard bodies  
hitting the screen.

Couldn't tell how much  
time had passed.

Light from traffic  
on the ceiling.

Late that sound  
in the sky soft.

Thinking out loud  
then inside my head:

they were still there—  
the way they walked

that bright flicker  
in their chests.

Sometimes I have believed

I don't belong  
*here*— I mean

it's not just  
the American insanities

but everywhere: the sense  
of having been left

on Earth  
with no explanation—

a mouse dropped in a maze



## Szkola nieprzyzwyczajenia

Firanka—na zwierzęta nastroju  
pajęczyna z okazji świata.

Uczepiony jej  
pająk  
mojego pokoju

„soir—espoir”  
a to—już się rozwidnia.

Wieczorem  
dotknąć kroju krzesła—  
brzdąknąć na byle linii siennika—  
posmakować suchy okruch sufitu—

to wpadają stadami  
wszystko co się skojarzy  
jak ćmy—  
czego by nie pomyśleć.  
Tyle ich! Tyle ich!  
Aż krążymy i my—  
i wołamy (ja, piec, sienniki):  
„Aniołki—aniołki  
siadajcie na ścianie  
tu tu!!!”

Siadają.

Śpiewają gameę:  
do  
my  
sły  
rze  
czy  
wi  
što  
sci

rze  
czy  
wi  
sto  
ści  
do  
my  
sły  
——Uczepiony jej pająk mojego pokoju  
a to——już się rozwidnia.

Puste oka mrugają firankę.  
Teraz tylko——przeznaczenie  
welon Ananke——  
albo bogini zmęczenia  
byleś tylko nie zesłała  
do rzeczy przyzwyczajenia.

## School of Unhabituation

*Translated from the Polish*

The curtain—against the animals of moods  
a cobweb because of the world.

The spider  
    of my room  
                    is hitched to it

“soir—espoir”  
and besides—it’s getting light

At night  
    to touch a chair’s shape—  
    to strum any line of a straw mattress—  
    to taste a dry crumb of ceiling—

they drop in flocks  
everything that connects  
like moths—  
whatever you think up.  
So many! So many!  
Until we too spin and—  
cry out (I, the stove, the mattresses):

“Angels—angels  
come sit on the wall  
    right here!!!”

They sit.

They sing a scale:

hy  
    po  
        the  
            ses  
                of  
                    rea  
                        li  
                            ty

rea  
li  
ty  
of  
hy  
po  
the  
ses

—The spider of my room is hitched to it  
and besides—it's getting light.

Empty eyes blink the curtain.  
Now there's just—predestination  
the veil of Ananke—  
or the goddess of exhaustion  
send me whatever just not  
things trapped in habituation.

## Zielony: więc jest

Jesteś... nie jesteś...  
wierzyć w ciebie czy wątpić  
z czego byś nie był—  
albo gdybyś nawet  
z niczego był  
——zielonyś——  
od księżycowej glazury  
pejzażu zimowy  
  
po prostu fajans  
trochę zamieszkały  
i zimny——  
z ornamentami drzew i mgły  
na brzegu

A gdy nic nie wiem o tobie  
ani o robaku mikropustki  
który cię gryzie  
ani o nazwaniu cię śniegiem  
krańcem miasteczka  
spodem  
miesięcznej nocy

możesz mi zagrać  
najpiękniejszą część niepokoju

## Green: Therefore It Is

*Translated from the Polish*

You are ... you are not ...  
to believe in you or doubt  
whatever you're made of—  
or even if  
    you're made of nothing  
            — you're green—  
            from moony glaze  
            oh winter landscape

just pottery  
a little lived-in  
and cold—  
with ornaments of trees and haze  
along the rim

And though I know nothing about you  
or the worm of microvoid  
    that gnaws you  
or about calling you the snow  
            or the town's edge  
            or the bottom  
            of the lunar night

you may play the loveliest  
part of anxiety to me

## **Aaron Smith**

### **Because You're Queer**

You know the straight man in your building  
who walks to the door where you  
and two neighbors are talking  
is deliberately not talking to you  
after he joins the conversation—instead  
only talks to the two neighbors who are married but cool  
with you and you think how lucky you are  
that these good people are good  
with you and your fag-  
ness and because you know things about queer shame  
you can't believe you still want the approval  
of straight people and then you're a little mad at them  
for making you feel that way  
though you know it's not their fault.  
The straight guy is just back from Europe  
he tells the husband and the wife asks  
when he got back and because you're a person,  
too, you ask if he was there for work  
though you know he wasn't  
because you know he's a carpenter  
and not one good enough to be invited to Europe.  
When he looks at you  
you see his annoyance that he has to speak to you  
but maybe realizes because the couple likes you  
he has to pretend he's okay with you  
so he softens to an insincere softness: he was there for fun,  
he says, he and a friend go once a year  
while his wife visits her family in Colombia.  
He basically has two months of vacation  
because his son, too, is away  
at military school he tells your neighbors  
and you nod with them enthusiastically  
because it's cool that he got into that school  
and one day everyone will thank him for his service  
though you've seen how he talks to his girlfriend in the hallway.  
Still you say something stupid about how you're a professor  
and know that school is a good school  
as if only professors know what a good school is  
and the truth is you've never heard of it  
but for some reason you need him to like you—

maybe so he won't, at some point, drunkenly knock on your door  
like he did the elderly neighbors  
who accidentally blocked his car in with their car  
and he needed to get to goddamn work.  
You don't need his approval  
but you ask for it because you do need it  
or want it and wonder  
how many more times you'll walk back  
into that middle-school locker room  
where the popular boys stand behind you and snicker  
as you take off your shirt with your back to them  
not wanting anyone to see your chest  
not wanting anyone,  
even yourself, to look at your body.



## Zidovudine

I thought *zidovudine* was a cool word  
until I learned it was AZT ( $C_{10}H_{13}N_5O_4$ ),  
a drug so many took while dying.

When I was young, Gay Poetry was AIDS  
Poetry and AIDS meant death. Who knew  
a community could be so lonely? My friends  
and I joke how Shame is more interesting  
than Pride. I guess if you don't laugh, you'll blah  
blah blah. Lately, I get bored with my brain,  
don't feel like finishing sentences. Beyoncé  
released a new song today. I don't like it. I don't  
hate it, but I wanted to love it and I'm not sure  
if I'll play it in the car. She says over and over,  
*you won't break my soul, you won't break my—*

## **Keetje Kuipers**

### **Selfishness**

I used to sob in front of the dog—before he died,  
before I had children or married my wife—his belly

helplessly pressed to the rug that smelled of his sweat  
from years of waiting. I know he hated it, that it made

him uncomfortable, embarrassed even, if a dog  
can feel the squeamishness of sympathy, like people I've

known who turned away from the sharp edges of my  
breaking. Like them, he preferred me powerful, my hand

on his head or just beside the collar that told strangers  
what I called him. Once at the city park he peed

on a person's leg—this creature who had always known  
who to bark at and who to give his silence—leaning

into their body, gently, under a sky of weak clouds like  
stuffing pulled from a couch. He must have known

something about them that I didn't. I cherished the idea  
of his knowing, even as I cried, even if he didn't know.

**Ben Purkert**

**Elegy for My Friend Who Was, among Other Things,  
an Orchestra Conductor**

A week apart, our birthdays  
formed a bridge. They always fell  
  
at the best time: snow over flowers  
like thoughts scattered suddenly  
  
over the phone. You want to know  
his name? He was the beautiful friend,  
  
the loudmouth, the one whose voice  
shook the walls until the house  
  
began laughing. He could've picked  
anyone to love, and the world  
  
would've agreed. In the end, flowers  
thinned silence into their stems.  
  
And the night sky? The rising moon?  
Like a blank slip of paper, and yet  
  
signed. I still can't bring myself  
to tell you his name, to lay it here  
  
in the cold wet earth of this poem.  
But I can sound it out. Two bells  
  
ringing—not exactly in sync,  
but together all the same.

## **Nicholas Goodly**

### **Crossing the Bridge**

There is a moment  
on the bridge,  
piles of clothes  
along the margin.

The pile  
is behind you,  
the moment is  
you looking  
in the rearview.

Somewhere,  
a clean white  
minivan,  
a family  
gathering  
fallen luggage.

You are  
the margins.

The moment  
is looking  
back at you.

The bridge  
is between  
you and  
the moment  
you look in  
the rearview.

It is only  
the bridge,  
it is in the shape  
of you, the bridge.

The bridge is you,  
you a part of it,  
somewhere.

The bridge  
is nothing,  
only  
the shape  
of  
it

now.  
It is behind you.

## **My Crush Walked into the Library with a Woman on His Arm and I Almost Lost My 4-Year Chip Over It**

I know how hysterical it sounds.  
I can't convince you of the chase,  
the sore run in the dark, you can't know

how deep a thought will take you. I bet  
Judas Iscariot was a generous lover,  
would screw you within an inch of your life.

I'd invite this into my home,  
a madness I could dance to.  
We all want the same thing. A man

says Sylvia Plath was a handful.  
I am her scorpion twin. If this is not  
about desire, what is it? I am scared

to put my finger on it. You have it too,  
not the reason you married him,  
but the reason you won't leave.

## **Grady Chambers**

### **Starlite Boulevard**

After we separated, I walked in the mornings  
through that new part of the city, its streets named

for precious stones. I could never remember if Jade  
came before Ruby, whether Garnet Street

preceded Opal. The winter was like that: turning into the wrong room  
in my new apartment, reaching into the trash

for the thrown-away letter,  
coming back with broken glass.

In time, though, closing my eyes  
as I neared the intersections, trying to recall,

I did: after Jade came Jasper.  
After Jasper, Starlite Boulevard.

Early in the morning, stepping onto the northbound train  
at the underground station, I shuffled sleepily

through the crowded cars. Strangers' shoulders  
touched my shoulder. The southbound passed

like a parallel life. I read the Gospels through the long dark  
tunnels, putting the book down past 2nd Street

where the tracks gradually emerged  
into the morning air.

And that was my favorite part: the immediate  
daylight. The massive stanchions of the blue bridge

above the wide river.

And the freight trains, their true size

made small by distance, crossing over.

## Martín Espada

### **The Monster in the Lake**

A city boy, I always wanted to go fishing. The DiFilippo brothers brought me to a secret lake where we cast our lines into the dark, the barbed lures spinning. I snagged a monster in the lake. I fought the monster and my reel jammed. One of the DiFilippo brothers said: *That's not a fish*. We waded into the water and dragged a rusty box spring onshore, festooned with the lures of failed fishermen. We plucked them off the coils and dragged it back. Whenever we went fishing, we would have more treasures to collect.

Late that night, I felt the monster swimming beneath my feet. I walked down to the basement and saw my father hunched over a table in his white T-shirt and boxers. He flinched as if I'd caught him whispering on the phone to a woman who was not my mother. *What are you doing?* I asked. I saw the pages of a Spanish dictionary and a legal pad where he had copied down the meaning of the words in longhand. *I'm learning Spanish*, he confessed.

My father the rabble-rouser with the bullhorn, my father the Puerto Rican who spoke for other Puerto Ricans in the papers, my father who left his island at age eleven and kissed the runway when he flew home at age thirty-eight, my father who had the Spanish slapped from his mouth like a dangling cigarette by teachers and coaches in the city where I grew up, could feel his Puerto Rican tongue shriveling, coated with gravel, drained of words.

I left him in the basement, riddled with the hooks no one else could see.



## Rachel Mennies

### The Door

*After the painting "That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do (The Door)"  
by Ivan Albright, Art Institute of Chicago, completed 1941*

The train wires quivering in the wind, I cannot see  
their origin, what they supply, for whom—  
but when I'm on the subway car alone, I think of the twin  
blue soaps on the sink's cracked shelf—how you love

that they match, how I know that you love this.  
Married, the script crusts in the hamper, launders  
in the air. In the Art Institute together I watch other couples  
and guess the age of their love

from how they look at the art. There was the morning,  
a decade ago, in the Warhol—you touched my shoulder  
through my coat, enough to pool desire

where I most wanted you to touch me.  
Today I watch you hold both my black coat and yours  
and it's difficult to tell the two apart.

This book from my therapist talks about *bids*  
for long loves, an issuance on the wire—in which  
I leap from the origin in faith that you're holding the line.  
To begin seduction is a *bid*, to request more blue soap a *bid*,

to clean your mirror's scumming face, knowing  
you'll smile in its shine. To offer a price, or else  
decide a sentence. To walk ahead of you in the museum,  
your scout, and say, *come look at this one, the Albright, the moody colors,*

*the ringed hand almost out of view—I know you'll love it.*  
Albright hoarded the painting's artifacts for four weeks  
and painted them daily for ten years. Perhaps there was a room

in his house where these objects lived and died, the room  
where—in time—he didn't need them anymore: painting  
his creation entirely from memory, one square inch per day.

## New Meds, Ten-Week Follow-up

The dog's gloriously firm shit in the street!  
How full of health he must be—how eagerly  
he eats while the coffee brews.

The smell of the coffee itself, singed sugar and wood!  
Grandfather-hand smell, with gasoline.  
Mother-after-dinner smell, with lavender.

To think I once cared if the sources of my joy were biochemical or miraculous!  
To think how I wait for joy like a dog does for her owner to return home.  
The labor of parsing the brain's presentations

like splitting a strand of the beloved's hair,  
its perimeter this morning starbright and pulsing.  
It thinks *next year, I will fill the planters with neon vines!*

It thinks *next year, they will grow to the ground, and then to the sky!*  
It thinks *next year!*

**Cień**

Tobie zostawiam miejsca, w których już mnie nie ma.  
Takie miejsce nad Odrą i jedno na Skałkach,  
poza tym łóżka, kilka strychów i materac.  
A zwłaszcza materac. Będzie mi dużo łatwiej,

z myślą, że wypełnisz je sobą, że się plenisz  
w miejscach pozostawionych oraz w pozostałych,  
słowem— że wszędzie indziej. I że stojąc w cieniu  
może patrzysz tak na mnie, jak wchodzę do bramy

i trzask, i już mnie nie ma. Zapisuje tobie,  
to, co się rozpadło, spłonęło, co zmieniło  
swoją postać i stan swój, co zezarte w grobie  
przez grubego robaka teraz jest już gliną,

trawą, drzewem, rumiankiem. Bądź tam, proszę, władać  
tym tak jak zechcesz, wejdź w moje ubranie, buty  
moje załóż, stół wynieś, wypij z sąsiadami.  
Moje litery przeciwko twoim minutom.

## Shadow

*Translated from the Polish*

To you, I leave the places where I'm absent.  
That one along the Oder, another at the Reservoir,  
apart from those some beds and attics, a mattress.  
Especially the mattress. It'll be much easier

to think of you as filling them, growing and going  
rampant in places vacated and those that still remain,  
to say it plain—everywhere else. From the shadows  
perhaps you're watching me pass through the gate

and snap, I'm gone, no longer. I bequeath to you  
what falls apart, burns down, what shifts in shape,  
what changes its own state, what's been consumed  
in the grave by a fat worm and is already clay

and grass and wood and chamomile. Please live there  
and use it how you want, climb into my clothes and put  
yourself in my shoes, set up a table, drink with the neighbors.  
It's my word, these letters against you and your minutes.

## **Harryette Mullen**

### **Arroyo Seco**

Origami-folded toads  
lost in parched lands

where mountain snows might  
whet the thirst of desert flowers

water now no longer runs  
or walks      skips or trickles

where once streams and rivers flowed  
arteries dried up    vacant

as mysterious grooves carved into  
grainy surface of a distant planet

## **The Only Ones**

Seekers occupy  
the roof, gather remnants of  
whipped clouds. As twilight

deepens, pallid moon's  
bathing in an ocean of  
indigo. Are we

the only ones still  
sharing this intimacy  
of reflection when

life strikes a plangent  
chord in the hollow heart of  
a wounded guitar?

Alone on rooftops,  
attentive sentries in realms  
of solitude, we

follow tomorrow,  
standing ready to welcome  
the improbable.

## How Do You Know the Sky Is Falling?

Ever the nostalgic futurist  
your kettle boiling over  
spewing bubbles and steam

Prognosticator tallying naught and aught  
sorry you lost your hat so soon  
exposing cool head to scorching sun

It's whether or not  
you don't need man  
fingering prevailing wind bothering clouds

Your cover blown no time to sit tight  
might as well stand on your hands  
turn cartwheels on the road to progress  
imaginary line from here to yonder

## Screenplay

Birds chirping. Loud orchestral music. Music stops.  
Foreign speech. Water boiling. Orchestral music resumes.  
Music slows, then stops. Foreign speech. Orchestra playing.

Subway in motion, clattering on track. Eerie music.  
Children playing. Ominous music. High heels hitting sidewalk.  
Staccato heels clicking. Car honking. Keys jangling. Door closing.

Jittery music. Water bubbling.  
Electronic beeping. Delicate cracking.  
Suspenseful music. Footsteps.

Full orchestra playing. Dissonant cello.  
Orchestra stops. Hearty applause.  
Subway train clattering. Tense music.

Water bubbling. Insistent beeping.  
Light tapping. Water running. Brittle cracking.  
Water dripping. Hurried footsteps. Droplets falling.

Children talking distantly. Fence rattling. Bird cawing.  
Cars honking. Clicking. Gusting wind.  
Fence rattling. Car honking. Child distantly shouting.

Bird chirping. Vehicle passing. Car honking.  
Traffic noise.  
Silence.



**Sueño/Suaño**

Na mio llingua  
estremamos  
el sueño del suaño.  
El primeru átanos al suelu,  
ponnos piedres nos bolsos  
pa que nun nos mueyen  
les nubes cargaes.  
El segundu llévanos a  
trescombar  
los cumales inalcanzables  
con reblagos alegres.  
Hai un momento,  
cuando'l día, mansu, declina,  
en que'l suaño garra  
de la mano  
al sueño  
y nesi eclipse d'estraña  
guapura crepuscular  
despunta un arrebatu de llucidez  
y pasamos a dormir  
y trancamos la puerta  
y trancamos les puertes.

## **Sueño/Suaño**

*Translated from the Asturian*

In my language  
we distinguish  
sueño from suaño.  
The first tethers us to the ground,  
stuffs stones in our pockets  
so we don't get soaked  
by heavy clouds.  
The second leads us  
to summit  
impossible peaks  
skipping with joy.  
There is a moment  
when the day, gentle, wanes,  
in which suaño takes  
sueño by the hand  
and in this eclipse of strange  
crepuscular splendor  
a burst of lucidity breaks through  
and we come home to sleep  
and we bolt the door  
and we bolt the doors.

“चीड़ों पर चाँदनी” से

सुबह कमरे की खिड़की से बाहर झाँकते ही क्षण-भर के लिये दिल की धड़कन रुक जाती थी। मैं पलंग से उतर कर काँपते हाथों से सोते हुए भाई-बहनों को जगाने लगता था।

...

क्या यह शिमला है—हमारा अपना शहर—या हम भूल से कहीं और चले आये हैं? हम नहीं जानते कि पिछली रात जब हम बेखबर सो रहे थे, बर्फ़ चुपचाप गिरती रही थी।

## From “Moonlight on Pine Trees”

*Translated from the Hindi*

In the mornings the heart  
would still for a moment the second  
one looked out the window.  
I would leave the bed and rouse my sleeping  
siblings with shivering hands.

Is this Shimla—our town—or are we  
somewhere else by mistake?

We don't know that last night  
as we slept unaware  
the snow kept falling  
without a word.

## **Brandon Shimoda**

### **Hinotama**

There is a simpler, more pristine life  
inside the ball of light  
bouncing above the barbed wire fence

A small incision made  
in space

through which an entirely new fashion  
of human being

is spying  
on the people incarcerated,  
we are supposed to call them,

that is the signal  
of their expendability

motivating the whirling blades the wave-like crests  
as the striving of a human

to separate  
the calcified tumor  
that makes the ball

a planet fallen  
to ice

a simpler, more pristine life  
pressing against the startled faces  
rooting, together,

to describe the ephemeral achievement  
of collective entrapment

the loss that is constant, rapid

## **Hinotama**

The ball of light rose piteously  
in the west

and lingered in space

Children  
stood together after dinner

and watched the ball of light pronounce  
long syllables

The children were meant to remember it  
reconnect with it  
grow old with it,

grow dreams over  
the imprint they made  
of what they left behind

a bitter yet beautiful  
endangerment of life

## **Hinotama**

The balls of light did not illuminate

The balls of light were illuminated

on the edge of dividing

an abacus trying

to keep itself

on the grief,

I will go

to the valley of depressed curiosity

to where the man was shot

to where the man died

to where the shots multiplied

to where the bullet the bomb

released insatiable hells

to bring the image of murder

to a point

let it slip?

## Hinotama

The ball of light that bounced above the concentration camp  
held in its patience  
the memory of the unusual flower

the Japanese man was reaching for  
when he was shot

was born to breathe, to breathe to give life  
to breathe to give life to  
friendship

blood root apparition

The Japanese man had sensitivity  
and must have thought in that desolation  
that he had been struck by a heart

in the air before him, around him

a light, tonic mist the feeling of wind  
watching over him  
Spring



## **Angie Macri**

### **Soundbox**

The owl takes the cello down its throat  
so the strings and wood are left,  
song digested in its cells. The energy released  
fuels its eyes, its perfect horns  
like the slice of moon, bow drawn by arms  
no one can see. The arrow  
is also concealed, but the angle  
of the bow shows the weapon points  
at the earth, the goddess in her aim.  
Body, neck, where fingers used to be, the owl  
asks the same questions for centuries  
or rather people hear it that way,  
what is in their own mind, who will  
come for me, who sees, who knows.

## **Richard Blanco**

### **Once upon a Time: Surfside, Miami**

Once and once again I am as I remember myself. Thirty years later, I can still savor the sway of these palms fanning this same wind into syllables whispering *good morning* in my eyes, saving these todays when I can no longer hear how to live out this passion for breaking myself into poems like this, like these waves that once upon a time are again my loyal loves still kissing my feet as I stroll this shore and glance back at my footprints again washed away. The salty salve of these breezes I breathe, living once again with all my joyous regrets for all I've done right or wrong, for all I am now, that is enough, yet not enough, for who I wanted to be once, still searching this sea, still facing this same silent horizon, I ask again: *Who am I? What should I do?* The answer, as always: *Everything.*



# MY NAME BACK TO ME: NTOZAKE SHANGE

From the book *Sing a Black Girl's Song: The Unpublished Work of Ntozake Shange* by Ntozake Shange. Copyright © 2023 by the Ntozake Shange Revocable Trust. Reprinted by permission of Legacy Lit, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., New York, NY. All rights reserved.



American playwright and poet Ntozake Shange, April 17, 1989. Photo by Sara Krulwich/  
New York Times Co./Archive Photos via Getty Images.

## Imani Perry

### Introduction

In the spring of 2022, I traveled to New York with my two of my friends, Tarana Burke and Yaba Blay, and Tarana's adult child, Kaia Burke, to see Ntozake Shange's classic play: *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, on Broadway, directed by Camille Brown. For our generation and that of our mothers, *for colored girls* is what could be called an urtext, an anchoring work of art that captures twentieth-century Black women's lives. Filing into the theater, we each privately recalled the other times we had seen *for colored girls*, or performed it ourselves. We quietly anticipated Shange's potent passages, repeated them along with the actors, lines like, "I found god in myself and I loved her fiercely" and "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff..." We cried and laughed and chatted happily afterward, as we had before. The show was a palimpsest, reaching back to 1976, and reaching forward in time to the vexing yet beautiful web of Black women's lives.

Ntozake Shange is singular. Tender, tough, and so very brilliant, Shange ruptured and re-created literary forms, using innovative spelling and grammar to capture the sound and sensibility of Black women's speechways. She insisted on the lushness of Black women's interior lives while never shying away from the brutality of the world in relation to them. A consummate artist, she brought her powerful verse to life with music and dance and innovated the choreopoem as a theatrical form. Transforming the conventions of the Greek chorus, Shange's plays spoke to collective Black female experience. She offered ample space for individual testimony within community.

Shange was prolific. Shange was the second Black woman to have a play on Broadway (1976), only after Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Most of her work remains in print today, including *for colored girls*, novels such as *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*, and *Betsey Brown*, numerous books of poetry, and children's books. *Sing a Black Girl's Song*, published this month by Legacy Lit, now arrives as a distinct addition to Shange's impressive cannon. This curated collection of Shange's previously unpublished writing spans roughly forty years. It includes poems from her early years as well as from the last two decades of her life. There are also several plays, including her 2003 *Lavender Lizards and Lilac Landmines: Layla's Dream*, which was produced while she was a scholar in residence at the University of Florida. Shange's personal story also emerges in this new book through several never-before-seen essays about her childhood, her experiences in therapy, and her life as an artist and activist.

Shange was born in 1948 in Trenton, New Jersey, as Paulette Linda Williams to surgeon Paul T. Williams and educator and social worker Eloise O. Williams. *Sing a Black Girl's Song* opens with Shange's tender

recollections of her mother and their social milieu—a sophisticated and erudite Black world, filled with art and aspiration. When she was eight years old, the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri.

When Shange was thirteen years old, her family returned to New Jersey, and she later graduated from Trenton High School. The earliest piece in *Sing a Black Girl's Song* is a poem published in 1966 while she was a high school student. Even at that young age, she already had a pervasive literary voice. Shange matriculated at Barnard College of Columbia University, where her papers are now collected. During her college years, she briefly married and, after the marriage was dissolved, struggled with depression. The poems written in the early 1970s reveal a woman who was undergoing a transformation, wading through grief toward self-creation. In some writings, she still refers to herself as Paulette Williams, in others she has adopted Ntozake Shange—and often Zake, tozake, tozake, or tz for short—the first name meaning, “she who comes with her own things” in Zulu and the surname meaning “walks like a lion.”

She graduated from Barnard in 1970. In the midst of the Black Arts Movement into which she came of age, Shange composed poems consistent with the political urgency of that moment, but far more intimate than what many of her peers produced at the time. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black Arts Movement artists approached their work with an explicit political Black nationalist sensibility, frequently creating pieces that focused on collective Black liberation rather than the interior individual experience. Their emphasis was on “we” rather than “I.” Shange shared much of that sensibility but she blended critiques of racism, imperialism, slavery, Jim Crow, and economic exploitation with particular attention to emotion and feeling. Love, heartbreak, injustice, desire, self-discovery, devastation, and political awakening all pulse across the pages. Shange also immersed herself in the Nuyorican Poets scene, an early 1970s community of Puerto Rican and other Latine artists. The impact of that experience is evident in her interest in Afro-Latine history and culture and her frequent use of Spanish words and phrases in her work.

Shange earned a master's degree in American Studies from UCLA in 1973. Her academic rigor is apparent in the writing. Diligent attention to historic detail, a passionate interest in the Black diaspora, and keen awareness of literary form reveal how much she was an intellectual artist in addition to one who could be profane, deeply spiritual, and joyfully vulgar. Her consistent celebration of vernacular Black culture as the root of great art instructed everyone in her midst to choose beauty over bullshit and substance over status. She understood herself as someone who was breaking English since it had been used to break Black people, and remaking it as an act of love to all oppressed people. Most of all, these writings reveal Shange as someone who was always writing herself to freedom. Readers will also encounter her extensive knowledge of jazz and dance, and the joy she took in being in

community with musicians and dancers, as well as fellow writers. Shange lived fully, a renaissance woman par excellence.

From 1976, when *for colored girls* was first staged, to her death in 2018, Shange was a much celebrated and awarded writer. She raised her daughter, Savannah Shange, now a professor of anthropology and critical ethnic studies, and remained politically and intellectually engaged, writing creatively as well as critically, and participating in theatrical productions of her work in various cities. Shange was a mainstay in artistic communities, treating young artists with warmth and encouragement. I witnessed this firsthand when Shange attended the annual Celebration of Black Writing at the Art Sanctuary in Philadelphia. Shange, though an elder who inspired awe, disarmed everyone with her friendliness. The archive shows this as well. She read the work of many other writers, including those much younger than she was, and she commented thoughtfully on them. Unsurprisingly, she has had a major influence on younger generations of writers. As playwright and inaugural resident of the Ntozake Shange Social Justice Theater Residency at Barnard, Erika Dickerson-Despenza wrote, Shange is a “literary mother” with a legacy that must be preserved.

*Sing a Black Girl's Song* is a testimony to Ntozake Shange's journey. That there is so much of her unpublished that is of superior quality is stunning. That much of it is autobiographical is breathtaking. She left behind the framework for gorgeous biography. And her self-reflection is, generally speaking, a model for how to do the work of living well. For the many readers who love her writing, it is unquestionably a bounty. It is worth noting, however, that this volume, though extensive, does not include every unpublished work. Rather, it is curated to give a substantive overview of Shange's unpublished work. Where possible, the years in which individual pieces were written are included. Where the exact date isn't available, context clues were used to place it so that readers can read through the book in both a thematic and chronological sequence. Because Shange often wrote by hand I have redacted sentences that include words that were illegible, noted with brackets, as well as incomplete type, noted with ellipses there. Spelling errors and typos were corrected where there was a danger that a reader might mistake the meaning if the error was left intact, but I have maintained many of the small mistakes that allow the reader to experience the rush of ideas and excitement Shange felt as she put words to page, and to acknowledge many of these were works in progress. I have included footnotes where she mentioned people and contexts that might not be readily understood to contemporary readers, and where knowing who she spoke of is important to gather meaning. Likewise, I have provided translations for words and phrases in Spanish, and with the specific dialects (Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Mexican) referenced in mind. Shange's Spanish was both vernacular and precise in terms of historic reference.



Before each section, I have written brief introductory notes for historical or social context that illuminate specific entry points to the work. Readers should be prepared that difficult themes and offensive language appear in some of the pieces. The decision to include this material was driven by Shange's courageous effort to reveal the anguish as well as the beauty of Black women's lives. She didn't shy away from the underside as it were, and to honor her it seemed essential to approach this work with a similar ethos.

By and large, I step back so that Shange might tell her story. In some ways, this collection has the shape of a self-authored bildungsroman. I approached this project as a posthumous editor, simply giving shape to what can be described as a eulogy of her *ownself*, taking us along with her from cradle to grave.

On October 27, 2018, a tweet came from the Ntozake Shange Twitter account. It read, "To our extended family and friends, it is with sorrow that we inform you that our loved one, Ntozake Shange, passed away peacefully in her sleep in the early morning of October 27, 2018. Memorial information/details will follow at a later date. The family of Ntozake Shange." The message sent shock waves through generations who had found sustenance in her art. Immediately a chorus of Shange quotations went up across social media, reminding us that her words live even as her body has departed. Memorials were held in New York and Washington, DC. Articles praised her influence. People of all stripes remembered their encounters with her and her brilliance. But the most mournful and celebratory elegies came from Black women. As playwright Lynn Nottage put it, "Our warrior poet/dramatist has passed away." She died fighting for us. But through her words, she lives. She lives in the actors who don the colors of the rainbow to embody her characters nearly fifty years after they were written, with themes that are no less powerful today than they were then. She lives every time we laugh, reading about how the precocious girl-child Indigo wants a fine china tea party for her fifteen dolls who have begun to menstruate. She lives every time someone cooks her mouthwatering recipe for "Zaki's Famous Feijoada Brazilian Hominy" or "Chicken Fried Steak" for a loved one. Shange famously wrote, *in for colored girls*, "Somebody, anybody, sing a black girl's song." Sitting with my friends, Tarana and Yaba, watching that classic work brought to the stage again so beautifully, something became abundantly clear: Shange's words resonate as much today as they did a half century ago. Witness here how she answers her own supplication, for herself and for Black girls everywhere. Sing, Zake, sing.

## Ntozake Shange

### From “MBJ”

LQ#2 - YELLOW GENERAL WASH

I am nearly 28  
The cosmic age of saturn's return  
Karmic retribution awaits like economic reparations my ancestors have  
earned  
The universe on the verge of payin me back  
I feel like everything starts over again  
Beginning with this image of blue sound  
Heartbeat profound  
I've printed the email out and its sitting now, peacefully on my lap  
A son ...

I've never been a woman  
Y'know that's a story unto itself  
But THIS being  
I've spent my whole life seeing a brown boy's days to come  
And before they reach 18 so many brown boy's live already done

Brown boy  
Feared  
Brown boy  
Step aside we don't want you here  
Brown boy  
Only respect those who respect you  
Brown boy  
Live your life knowing the mainstream world only respects a few  
Brown boys  
And this will never be tolerated as an excuse  
Brown boy  
Guilty until proven innocent  
Demonized  
You stand accused but you stand firm  
Like sacred ground brown...

Boy, am I supposed to teach you these things?

LQ#3 WHITE GENERAL WASH

How many brown boys left to be taught by the wilderness

Destiny hung

Hinged

A doorway to death

Your life is great white fetished hyped and hexed

Do I tell you these things right away brown boy

Only 5 months in the womb we've been hunted for so long my son

My son are you going to be hunted too?

LQ # 8 PINK SPECIAL

Somewhere between Mother nature and father time  
There's a spiraling myth about  
A father  
Forever chasing the rising son  
A modern Sisyphus stuck behind a boulder of sol  
The father is mythic and misfit  
A mystic  
A self-destructing missile  
Amidst a monolithic image of what he's supposed to be  
A father  
Chasing the rising son  
Like the horizon rushing to the seam of sky and sea

She would give birth in water if she could  
Our conservative insurance and threadbare wallets say she can't  
So we compromise  
Natural birthing class  
Easy to come by in the bay area  
Land of hemp granola and all things alternative  
It's almost our turn to share how we're  
FEELING with the rest of the group  
Sitting in a circle  
Generation X  
Our coach is at the chalkboard  
DRUG FREE VAGINAL BIRTH

(personally  
knock me the fuck out  
but maybe that's why I was born this sex  
I don't possess a woman's strength  
Her body's all stretched  
Our baby's body's growing in length  
Arms legs chest head)  
You wanna do this drug free go right ahead, be my guest  
Now I'm about to be a guest on the hot seat

**Bamuthi ...**  
**Namaste ...**

**By this time next week  
You'll be a FATHER  
How are you FEELING**

Maybe I should be paying attention to what this white lady's question  
But man I'm reelin back in a daydream of  
Mother nature and father time  
Crackin riddles about a cat undulating his spine as he strides towards  
The son in the east  
Thinks he recognizes self in the rising  
But he just cannot see  
He is blinded by light  
His life like time in a dream  
The place where relativity ends so long as we sleepo

And somewhere  
There are 8 pairs of future parental eyes  
Are all on me  
Waiting to see if I'm **FEELING**  
Anythingbut what I'm feeling is the struggle of the pursuant father in my  
daydream  
I'm **FEELING** the visions of mythic men we see in solar mirrors when we  
sleep  
I'm **feeling** damn good  
I'mo be a father next week and then all of a sudden I'm  
Feeling like I cant ....

You gotta move m'kai

LQ # 10 BLUE CENTER SPECIAL

I believe in him and I must  
There's this race to be run and my folks is losin  
Past is prologue  
Our epicenter is an ancestor's epilogue  
An epithet if we ain't eased that ancestor's burden yet  
He used his great grandfather's death as a scroll to scribe a scripture  
Whisked the man back to life with unborn whisper  
Son do you know who you are  
An ascendant descendant deciphered from stars  
Intone the indescribable like a shadow my son  
We are men  
Bury nothing but bones  
Cry rivers of tears  
Deeply we run  
A race to be won  
Guided like Harriet with visions of sugar plum skinned  
Hung thin strange fruit our roots reach deep  
We men are men  
Amen  
Amin  
Your din your duty  
Your destiny to move  
like the way you move me  
Your destiny to move like the way  
you  
move  
me ...  
Your destiny to move like the way  
you  
move  
me ...  
Your destiny to move like the way  
you  
move  
me ...

LQ # 18 BLUE AND WHITE GENERAL WASH

Cycles to break  
No more lying  
Much less flying  
Call your grandma  
Practice faith.

Don't confuse your art with your life  
Embody what you write

Stop contradicting.

Slipped in the groove of institution and reparations

Funk and function equally separating to reveal me in the break

Psychically cycling  
I got patterns to shake

Music to make  
Culture to love  
Guilt to feel  
Prayers to say  
Cycles to break  
Don't instill fear in the boy  
Pray with full body  
Practice faithfulness  
and faith  
cycles to break

there's more than one way to live ...  
more than one way to believe black is beautiful  
more than one way to raise kids  
more than one way to love  
more than one struggle  
more than one answer  
more than one way to break

It's ethereal  
Lyrical miracle  
Almost Biblical  
The cyclical  
Hear it different

It's ethereal Lyrical miracle  
Almost Biblical  
Hear it different  
cyclical  
Steerable  
Un-nearble hearable  
Liminal Spherical  
Physical quizzical  
Is it  
Is it  
Is it is it is it real?

When does it end?



## From “lost in language & sound / a choreoessay”

(as lights come up ... three actors are seated center stage writing in journals ... stage right, musicians are busy tuning up and making notes ... stage left, two dancers stretch and warm up )

VOICEOVER #1

O.K. Ms. Shange ... yr level is set ... are you ready?

ALL

yes

VOICEOVER #1

great ... alright ... standby .... in 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1

VOICEOVER #2

good evening, listeners ..... thank you for tuning in to lend your ears to WXLRL .... we have a very special guest in the studio this evening ... poet, playwright, novelist, performance artiste & friend, Ms. Ntozake Shange .... thank you, Ms. Shange, for stopping by to share with us this evening...

ACTOR #3

thank you for having me ... and please, stop with the Ms.Shange.

VOICEOVER #2

(laughs)

O.K....Zake .... well that’s a great place to start ... why don’t you share your name. ... Ntozake Shange ... with our listeners. i understand that was not yr birth name ... how did you come to be Ntozake Shange?

ACTOR #2

unshackling myself from my slave name, i was blessed to be renamed by two South African exiles in the early 70’s...

VOICEOVER #2

wow ... O.K.... well, so much has been said in describing you ... how would Zake introduce Ntozake Shange?

(dancers begin to move, playing with a length of silk ... winding themselves/each other up in the cloth ... cocooning themselves ...

unraveling... interacting with actor #2 at intervals during monologue... )

ACTOR #2

I cd say I am the ultimate conclusion of the allure of silk, the shimmer and the breeze of silks. After all, my skin is silken, my grandmother's hands sheer as silk/ my mother's cherry-blond hair hard to picture without the capricious play of light changing her thick mane of a coif moment to moment from golden to cerise, ash blond to emboldened chestnut. These are but a few of the qualities of silk that are my blood. my blood memory, my dreams./ Yet without the extraordinary vision of Ferdinand and Isabela,<sup>1</sup> Cristobal Colon<sup>2</sup> wd not have been charged with the mission to find an alternate route to India, thence China, where silk was born. Colon, Columbus, the adventure wd not have set foot on Santo Domingo in search of the riches of silks and gold, then synonymous in the Old World, never suspecting sugar, tobacco, rice, and cotton wd be as gold to silk; that Africans, wrapped in a tight ivory cocoon of bondage we call slavery, wd inhabit these 'Indies,'/ an indigo damask demographic, fertile, furtive, hybrid,/glistening as silk/ does when the moon changes phase, as we do under a tropical sun./ Silken and foreign to these shores and to the thought, these are the origins of my genealogical essence, my blood trail in the New World, another Silk Road./ Though my earliest recollection of all that is silk, all that swish soft fondling fabric conveys, are perfumed and gliding over my eyebrows in the depths of my mother Ellie's closet. What shrouded my young head, braids and all, was the miracle of the night, of conga drums,/ claves and castanets, formal dinners, chandeliers of translucent swirls of light dancing above the heads of very important guests whose crepe, velvet, chiffon, and silk I'd bask in under the dining table./ So like an ocean of unexpected sensation were the skirt hems tickling my shoulders, sometimes I'd forget to gaze at the ankles in silk stockings that lent ordinary brown and bronze calves the magic of rose quartz,/ moonstones,/ tourmaline sculpture,/ a secret as as the next brush stroke of Sonia Delauney<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, on whose behalf Christopher Columbus traveled to the Americas.

<sup>2</sup> The Spanish name for Christopher Columbus.

<sup>3</sup> Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979) was a Jewish Ukrainian and French visual artist, one of the founders of Orphic Cubism, an early twentieth-century art movement that focused on producing images with bright colors and lyrical geometric abstraction.

or Raoul Dufy<sup>4</sup> turning silk painting to a landscape abstractly worn by Parisian women adept at becoming art that cd walk./ While we were in the New World far from St. Germain-de-Pres or Tours, ignorant of the aroma and thick layers of medieval Venice, we drew La Habana to us, as if the satin-bodiced and feathered brocatelle of the mulatas at the Tropicana<sup>5</sup> were more than our senses cd bear, enough to sate our sense of beauty and illicit treasures./ Were not the seeds of white mulberry trees upon which the silkworm dined contraband, smuggled, hidden dangerous cargo transported by the foolish or foolhardy headstrong bent on wealth and stature? But we needn't concern ourselves with distant and ancient menace. The flickering of home-style black-and-white movies after the flan, after the cigars and cognac, bringing lampas-skinned brown beauties/ swinging from trees, swinging their hips was intimidating enough. Surely, there was no one more beautiful than a woman in silk smiling down at me from a gargantuan Cuban cypress tree,/ while I hid at the foot of the stairs waiting for the exception./ A velvet cape with the same pearled pattern was strewn over her left shoulder as she mysteriously moved down the winding staircase. I was speechless, not because I'd been found out, but because I was sure I was not to see my mother in such a state of ethereal sensuality in my lifetime. I almost believed the glow on her face was a reflection of the moon/flirting unabashed in front of my father./ My father who was as smooth as silk, though not named "Silk" like so many others of us. His muscular frame interacted with the world as something precious to behold, beyond the possibility of an ordinary anything./ This couple slipping into a black Missouri night to hear the raw silk voice of Tina Turner,/ the velvet intonations of Gloria Lynne or the heightened boucle of Maria Callas were mine. I came from this phenomenon, as Toomer said "rare as November cotton flower."<sup>6</sup>

#### ACTOR #1

although i rarely read reviews of my work/ two comments were repeated to me by "friends" for some reason/ & now that i am writing abt my own work/ I am finally finding some use for the appraisals of strangers. One new york critic had accused me of being

<sup>4</sup>Raoul Dufy (1877-1953) was a French "Fauvist" painter who used layered rich color and bold lines.

<sup>5</sup>The Tropicana is a famous nightclub in Havana that opened in 1939.

<sup>6</sup>This is a quotation from Jean Toomer's 1923 *Cane*, a modernist, hybrid-genre Harlem Renaissance masterpiece depicting his life in Georgia.

too self-conscious of being a writer/ the other from the midwest had asserted that I waz so involved with the deconstruction of the english language/ that my writing approached verbal gymnastics like unto a reverse minstrel show. in reality, there is an element of truth in both ideas/ but the lady who thought i waz self-conscious of being a writer/ apparently waz never a blk child who knew that blk children didn't wear tiger skins n chase lions around trees n then eat pancakes/ she waznt a blk child who spoke an english that had evolved naturally/ only to hear a white man's version of blk speech that waz entirely made up & based on no linguistic system besides the language of racism. the man who thought i wrote with intentions of outdoing the white man in the acrobatic distortions of english was absolutely correct. i cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that I waz taught to hate myself in/ the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as s/he learns to speak of the world and the "self". yes/ being an African-american writer is something to be self-conscious abt/ & yes/ in order to think n communicate/ i haveta fix my tool to my needs/ i have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image.

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ACTOR #1

you almost got it/ you really did  
'born of the blood of struggle' we all here/ even if we don't  
know it/ what if poetry isn't enuf?  
watchu gonna do then?  
Paint?  
Dance?  
Put your backfield in motion & wait for james brown to fall  
on his knees  
like it's too much for him/ what?  
Too much for james?  
Yeah/ didn't you ever see the sweat from his brow/ a libation  
of passion  
make a semi-circle fronta his body/ a half-moon of exertion  
washin'away any hope he had of/ 'standin'it/ can't stand it  
& he falls to his knees and three jamesian niggahs in a  
stroll  
so sharp it hurts/

ACTOR #2

to bring him a cape that shines like the  
northern  
star/ shinin'I say like you imagined the grease in the part of  
yr hair  
or yr legs/ or yr mother's face after rehearsal/ after she had you/  
james falls to his knees cuz he cain't take it'/ he's pleadin'

BAND

'please/ please/ please/ don't go'

ACTOR #3

we look to see who brought james brown to the floor/  
so weak/ we think/ so overwrought/ with the power of love  
that's why poetry is enuf/ eisa/ it brings us to our knees  
& when we look up from our puddles of sweat/  
the world's still right there & the children still have bruises  
tiny white satin caskets & their mothers weep like mary  
shda  
there is nothing more sacred than a glimpse of the universe  
it brought james brown to his knees lil anthony too/ even  
jackie wilson  
arrogant pretty muthafuckah he was/ dropped/ no knee  
pads in the face  
of the might we have to contend with/ & sometimes young  
boys bleed  
to death face down or asphalt cuz fallin' to they knees was  
not cool/  
was not the way to go/ it ain't/ fallin' to our knees is a public  
admission  
a great big ol' scarlet letter that we cain't/don't wanna escape any  
feelin'/ any sensation of bein' alive can came right down on  
us/

ACTOR #1

& yes my tears & sweat  
may decorate the ground like a veve in haiti or a sand  
drawing in melbourne/ but in the  
swooning/ in the delirium/ of a felt life

ACTOR #2

can ya stand up, chile?

ACTOR #1

the point is not to fall down & get up dustin' our bottoms/  
I always hated when folks said that to me/ the point  
virginia—eisa/ is you fall on your knees & let the joy of  
survivin'  
bring you to yr feet/ yr bottom's not dirty/ didn't even graze  
the earth/  
no it's the stuff of livin'fully that makes the spirit of the poem

let you show yr face again & again & again

ACTOR #3

I usedta hide myself in jewelry or huge dark glasses  
big hats long billowin' skirts/'anything to protect me/ from  
the gazes  
somebody see i'd lived a lil bit/ felt somethin' too terrible  
for casual conversation  
& all this was obvious from lookin' in my eyes/ that's why I  
usedta read poem after poem  
with my eyes shut/ quite a treat/ cept the memories take  
over & leave  
my tequila bodyguard in a corner somewhere out the way of  
the pain  
in my eyes that simply came through my body/ they say  
my hands sculpt the air with words/ my face becomes the  
visage of a  
character's voice/ I don't know

ACTOR #2

I left my craft to chance & fear someone wd see I care too much  
take me for a chump  
laugh & go home-style

this is not what happened  
is poetry enuf to man a picket line/ to answer phones at the  
rape crisis center/ to shield women entering abortion clinics  
from demons with  
crosses & illiterate signs defiling the horizon at dawn/ to  
keep our children  
from believing that they can buy hope with a pair of  
sneakers or another nasty  
filter for a cheap glass pipe/ no/ no/ a million times no

ACTOR #1

but  
poetry can bring those bleeding women & children outta  
time  
up close enuf for us to see/ feel ourselves there/ then the separations  
what makes me/ me & you/ drops away & the truth that we  
constantly  
avoid/ shut our eyes/ hold our breath hopin' we won't be  
found out/  
surfaces darlin'/ & we are all everyone of those dark &  
hurtin' places/  
those dry bloodied memories are no less ours than  
themselvsmourni'/ yes  
the mournin' we may be honorable enuf to endure with our  
eyes open/  
the coroner cannot simply bring her hand gently down our  
eyelids/ leavin'  
us to silence.

ACTOR #2

can ya stand up, chile'?

ACTOR #3

Hands stretched out touch again  
not so you can get up & conquer the world/  
you did that when you cdn't raise your head & yr body  
trembled so/  
you sacred yr mama/ that was when the poem took over &  
gave you back  
what you discovered you didn't have to give up/  
all that fullness of breath/ houdini in an emotional maze/  
free at last  
but nobody can see how you did it/ how'd she get out/  
nobody'll know less you tell em/

ACTOR #2

do you really wanna write/  
from twenty thousand leagues under a stranger's wailin'?  
Can you move gracefully randomly thru the landmines that  
are yr own angola/ hey you bosnia/ falujah?  
Are you ashamed sometimes there's no feelin' you  
can recognize in yr left leg? Does the bleeding you'll do  
anyway  
offend you or can you make a scared drawing like ana

medieta that will  
heal us all? Do I believe in magic?

ALL

(in frenzied action .... Freeze ... look up in thought)

ZAKE

I still/ sweat when I write



## Contributors

**Derrick Austin\*** is the author of *Tenderness* (2021) and *Trouble the Water* (2016), both from BOA Editions.

**Miron Białoszewski\*** (1922–1983) was an acclaimed poet, playwright, and prose writer. A volume of his work in translation is forthcoming from New York Review Books.

**Richard Blanco\*** is a National Humanities Medal awardee and author of *Homeland of My Body: New & Selected Poems* (Beacon Press, 2023).

**Clare Cavanagh** is a scholar, critic, and translator. She is Frances Hooper Professor of Arts and Humanities at Northwestern University.

**Grady Chambers\*** is the author of *North American Stadiums* (Milkweed Editions, 2018).

**Henri Cole's** most recent book is *Gravity and Center: Selected Sonnets, 1994–2022* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023). He teaches at Claremont McKenna College.

**Susan Wan Dolling\*** is a Chinese American writer and translator. Her latest book, tentatively titled *My China in Tang Poetry: Stories and Translations*, is forthcoming from Earnshaw Books.

**Martin Espada's** latest book of poems is *Floater* (W.W. Norton, 2021), winner of the National Book Award and the Massachusetts Book Award.

**Nicholas Goodly\*** is an artist from Atlanta, Georgia, and the author of *Black Swim* (Copper Canyon Press, 2022).

**Cathy Park Hong** is an American poet, writer, and professor who has published three volumes of poetry.

**Will Howard's\*** writing and translations have appeared in *Brevity*, *DIAGRAM*, *The Offing*, *Passages North*, and elsewhere. He lives in Madrid.

**Kara Krewer\*** is a PhD student at the University of Georgia. She is the author of the chapbook *Born-Again Anything* (Texas Review Press, 2019).

**Keetje Kuipers\*** is author of three books, editor of *Poetry Northwest*, and a board member of the National Book Critics Circle.

**J. Estanislao Lopez** is the author of *We Borrowed Gentleness* (Alice James Books, 2022). He lives and teaches in Houston.

**Angie Macri** is an Arkansas Arts Council Fellow, lives in Hot Springs, and teaches at Hendrix College.

**Rachel Mennies\*** is the author, most recently, of *The Naomi Letters* (BOA Editions, 2021). She lives in Chicago.

**Zakaria Mohammed\*** was born in Nablus, Palestine. He is a freelance journalist, editor, and poet. He is the author of nine volumes of poetry, including *Kushtban* (Dar Al-Nasher Press, 2014). In 1994, after twenty-five years in exile, he returned to his homeland and now lives in Ramallah.

**Harryette Mullen's** latest books are *Open Leaves* (Black Sunflowers, 2023) and *Urban Tumbleweed* (Graywolf Press, 2013).

**Imani Perry\*** is an American interdisciplinary scholar of race, law, literature, and African American culture. She is currently the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University and a columnist for *The Atlantic*.

**Ben Purkert's\*** debut novel is *The Men Can't Be Saved* (The Overlook Press, 2023).

**Camille Rankine\*** is the author of *Incorrect Merciful Impulses* (Copper Canyon Press, 2016) and is an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University.

**Mira Rosenthal's** most recent collection is *Territorial* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2022).

**Tomasz Różycki\*** is the author of over a dozen books of poetry and prose.

**Michał Rusinek\*** is the director of the Wisława Szymborska Foundation. He teaches at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

**Viplav Saini\*** is from Delhi, India, and has previously published in *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Southern Review*. He teaches economics at New York University.

**Tré Seals** is a Washington, DC, designer and founder of Vocal Type Co.

**Tim Seibles** is the former Poet Laureate of Virginia and a National Book Award finalist. He currently resides in Norfolk, Virginia. His most recent collection is *Voodoo Libretto: New & Selected Poems* (Etruscan Press, 2022).

**Ntozake Shange\*** (1948–2018) was the author of thirty-six published works and is increasingly recognized as one of America's greatest writers. For fifty years, she embodied the struggle of women of color for equality and the recognition of their contributions to human culture. Shange's literary legacy, preserved in the Shange Institute at Barnard College, comprises thirteen plays, seven novels, six children's books, and nineteen poetry collections, the majority of which are published and in print. She has been posthumously inducted into both the New York State Writers and the Off-Broadway Alliance Halls of Fame, cementing her legacy as one of the most cherished Black feminist writers of our time.

**Brandon Shimoda's\*** recent books are *Hydra Medusa* (Nightboat Books, 2023) and *The Grave on the Wall* (City Lights, 2019).

**Aaron Smith\*** is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Stop Lying* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023).

**Pablo Texón\*** is a poet, fiction writer, essayist, translator, songwriter, and member of the Academia de la Llingua Asturiana.

**Lena Tuffaha\*** is an Arab American poet, essayist, and translator. She is the author of three books of poetry, including *Kaan and Her Sisters* (Trio House Press, 2023), *Something About Living* (University of Akron Press, 2023), and *Water & Salt* (Red Hen Press, 2017).

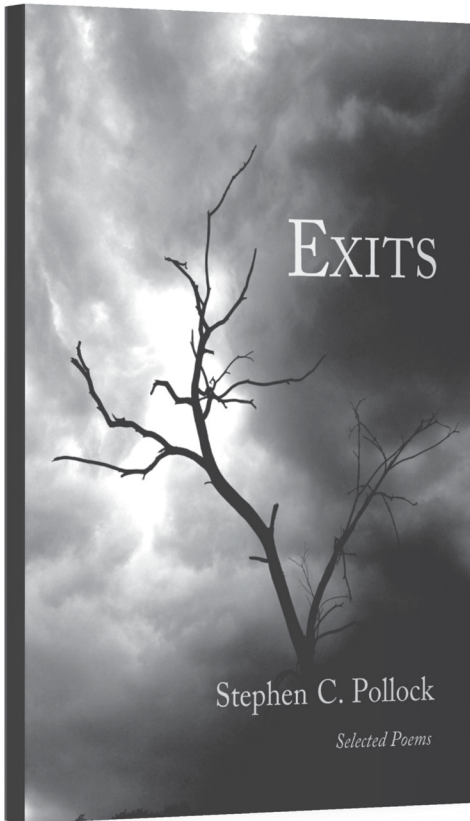
**Nirmal Verma\*** (1929–2005) was an essayist, novelist, translator, and activist. Born in Shimla, India, he was a pioneer of the Nai Kahani (New Story) literary movement in Hindi literature.

**Wang Wei** (701–761) was a Chinese musician, painter, poet, and politician of the middle Tang dynasty. He is regarded as one of the most famous men of arts and letters of his era.

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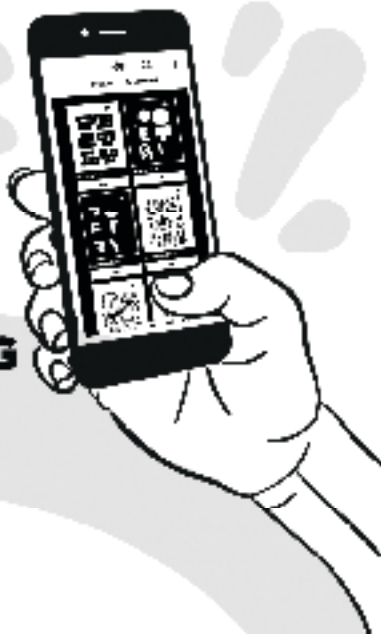
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