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## Saltwater: A novel in verse

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**Saltwater: A novel in verse**

by

**Ebonesiah Morrow**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, IA

2018

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## PREFACE

### *SALTWATER: A NOVEL IN VERSE*

*Saltwater* is an experimental novel that blurs the boundaries between fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. Through a compilation of episodes, lyrical meditations, vignettes, and poems, the novel tells the story of Iman Hope, an Afro-Caribbean girl who strives to find her own voice and autonomy hidden under low self-esteem and anxiety.

Iman is the daughter of Sunshine, a fierce yet vulnerable Trinidadian who teaches anxious Iman the power of faith and perseverance, and Michael Hope—a charismatic longshoreman who longs to be a family man but feels emasculated by a debilitating eye disease, cone dystrophy, and drug addiction.

The story unfolds in Tacoma, Washington the city where both Iman’s maternal and paternal grandparents migrated to and now reside in search of opportunities that have long been limited for Blacks of the African diaspora. Pulled between two parents who share toxic love, Iman learns to take responsibility early, even if it isn’t her own. As an escape, Iman turns to the music taught to her by Grandfather and, eventually, language on the page.

While observing her parents' unhealthy love, Iman explores the importance of both language and action, discovering their complex and intertwined relationship as she matures into a young Black woman. After the passing of her grandfather and the official separation of her parents, Iman begins to make unhealthy choices of her own in the name of love and family, eventually finding herself after she rekindles her love for language and storytelling in college.

By the end of the novel, Iman manifests a firm belief that words and actions are equally important and powerful. The narrative is told by a mature, yet evolving Iman, incorporating multiple point of view which create a polyphonic opera that bears influences from both the Trinidadian and African American oral tradition and song. To accomplish this choral effect, I have utilized dialect in *Saltwater* to emphasize the varieties of music and influences of multivocality that exist in Iman's life.

I consider myself a poet who loves to tell stories. My work has been influenced by contemporary, experimental writers including Junot Diaz, Edwidge Danticat, and Anne Carson. However, two authors have had a direct influence on *Saltwater*. First, Sandra Cisneros, in her book, *The House on Mango Street*, uses vignettes in a collage-style that tell the story of Esperanza, A Mexican-American girl who chooses to leave her community and become a writer in hopes of coming back and paying it forward. Second, Claudia Rankine's book, *Citizen*, is a hybrid cross between poetry and lyric essay that illustrates and explores Black experiences in America.

The first two sections of my thesis submitted here represent an evolving draft of my novel-in-progress, *Saltwater*. Parts I and II focus on Iman during her preschool and grade school years. The third section, included here as Part III, is written in the voice of a mature Iman, reflecting back. These pieces—included in the form of a fragmented essay, “Shades of Black: A Lyric Essay, One Dozen”—will eventually become interludes and longer lyrical meditations in the final version of the novel, *Saltwater*, demonstrating Iman’s expanding perspective as she ages and evolves intellectually.

*Saltwater* is a story of individualism and community, home and migration, melody and harmony, anxiety and depression, Alzheimer’s and cone dystrophy, unconditional love and abuse, black lives and blackness, self-hate and self-love, giving and taking, and leaving to pay it forward.

SALTWATER

keeps afloat my story her story his story, so we have history

Its' current transports culture from one land to another

It pours from anxious pits and palms like hurricane rain

In Trinidad,

rusting discarded oil barrels into lost music.

It corrodes inequality and trade-ships at the Port of Tacoma.

It trickles down cheeks like chromatic scales,

crusting the skin to armor

It raws wounds, keeping them open

or heals them.

It's sex and hard work residue.

It drowns you

It is an untold semi-autobiographical *künstlerroman*.

Bathe in it—

# PART I

## HAIR I

My grandparents' old house on 45th and Sheridan is where self-love hatched, though it took several years later for it to grow.

It was where Mommy and I stayed in that room, at the end of the hall, next to Granny and Grandfather's room, where my mother would place me, before her journey to work, after she walked me down the hall, around the kitchen, into the diner, past the washroom, repeating three times before finally placing me between my grandfather and granny as they slept and as I still wept for her to stay,

kitty-corner from the bathroom where I'd plaster my face against the shower door to see if I could actually see through the frosted glass, though my older cousin Fatima thought I wanted to see her, so she yelled *perv*, as I hollered, *why can't I see you?*

To the right, down the hall, the living room where my second cousins, third cousins, great uncles slept in rows, sharp, like cut green grass, laying low until they received their green cards,

where Fatima would tie her hijab on my head the wrong way, after doing the same to hers, so we could pretend to have straight hair that flowed in after we flung it out like waves, as we watched Princess Ariel,

where I thought Fatima would hate me forever, after my Aunty Summayah gave me her *Aladdin* movie instead of throwing it in the trash, where I watched the movie for a week, admiring the dark complexion of Princess Jasmine while still wanting to lighten my own—



“All’yuh wearin di hijab wrong. No nuns in this house.”

“It’s our hair, Aunty Sammayah.”

Aunty Sammayah turned to Fatima. “You ain’t want to put yuh hijab on to make salaah, but you will put it on for hair, eh?” she scolded. “Time to make Wudu.”

“Want to come pray Maghrib with us?” sighed Fatima.

“Yep!”

Unlike her older cousin, Iman loved to pray. She prayed to God with her mother and to Allah with Aunty Sammayah. She had faith in positive power as a young girl. However, she will not accept religion until her early twenties when she takes shahada and accepts Islam.

Iman ripped the hijab off her head.

“Look what you did to your braids. Your mom’s gonna be so mad,” said Fatima, taking her time to unpin hers, gently sliding it off her hair, braided neatly into a perfect honey comb.

In the bathroom, Iman waited impatiently behind Fatima as she began to wash her hands. The girls usually washed up for prayer together, but they decided to take turns this time. Aunty Sammayah was already in a cranky mood. They didn’t want to get water all over the bathroom.

“Alright, your turn. I’ll tell you what to do,” muffled Fatima through the towel, as she dried her face and patted her hair. Iman took her position readily in front of the sink.

“Wash each hand up to your wrists three times, starting with your right hand.”

Iman began.

“Your other right hand. Start over”

Iman stepped away from the sink and stepped forward again.

“Oh my gosh. You don’t have to literally start over. You’re gonna make us late. Wash your hands. Now wash out your mouth three times.”

Iman tried to slurp the drool from the third spit back into her mouth but failed. She quickly wiped it with her left hand, hoping Fatima wouldn’t see.

“That’s so gross. You don’t have to put that much water in your mouth and you don’t have to spit that hard. Don’t start over, just wash off your hand. Okay, now sniff water in your nose. Don’t breathe in too hard. Just get the inside wet.”

Iman took water into her hands, but before it got to her nostrils, she cringed and blew out.

“Oh my gosh, Mani chill. If you can’t breathe it in, then just wash out your nostrils with your finger. If you feel a booger, leave it in there. That’s disgusting.”

Iman washed her nose with her index finger, careful not to stick her finger in too far, hoping not to discover a booger. She washed her right forearm three times, and then her left. She moved both wet hands from her forehead up and over her braids, leaving beads of water that dripped between the parts of her hair. She washed her right foot three times, then her left. When she was finished, Fatima placed the silk hijab gently over Iman’s hair, pinning it under her chin.

When the girls entered Aunt Sammayah’s room, she was finishing the Adhaan. Fatima took her place on the right side of her mother, Iman, on the right side of Fatima.

“Get closer to Fatima, Mani. Put yuh foot close to she foot,” instructed Aunty Sammayah as she lay another prayer mat in front of her niece. “You don’t want Shaitan to come between us in prayer. Don’t give him room.”

Iman scooted her foot until it touched Fatima’s, her shoulder pressed against her cousin’s arm, their right hands held their left just beneath their chests.

“AllahuAkbar!” declared Aunty Sammayah.

“AllahuAkbar!” responded the girls.

Iman focused on the patterns of the rug as her Aunty recited Al Fatihah aloud. Iman silently recited along in her head. She couldn’t yet understand the language. But she knew and would always remember the music. She loved the sound of the scriptural poetry. And she didn’t understand why Al Fatihah wasn’t both a prayer and a song.

Once, when she asked Aunty Sammayah why, she learned that music was haram, forbidden, in Islam.

“AllahuAkbar.”

“AllahuAkbar.”

They bowed.

Iman didn’t understand the recitation, but like the melody, she knew the movement. The verses were the music, the movements were the dance. And her timing was perfect. She didn’t move until a second after her aunty, making sure that Aunt Sammayah always led. Their bodies were in sync, in song, moving like a musical canon.

“Assalaamu alaikum Wa Rahmatullah,” said Aunty Sammayah, turning to the girls. She turned her head and repeated the greeting to the left.

“Assalaamu alaikum Wa Rahmatullah,” repeated the girls, turning their heads to the right and then to the left. Maghrib compete. They folded up their mats quickly, while Aunt Sammayah continued to supplicate in silence.

In Fatima’s room, the girls quickly changed their hijabs back to hair.

Iman sat criss-cross on the bed. Fatima unpinned the head scarf from under her chin and pinned it to the back, behind her neck. She flipped the hijab out. Iman watched as Fatima’s new hair floated back in, landing just above her lower back. Iman thought of Princess Jasmine.

“Can you put mine on, now?”

“Hold your horses, geez.”

The girls played house. Fatima was the stylish hairdresser, and Iman was her favorite client, a stylish teacher.

Iman never could be teacher when she and Fatima played school. The younger cousin was always the student. That was the rules. This was her chance to even the power dynamics, though she chose to be teacher because she could never be hairdresser. The younger cousin was always the client. That was the rules.

Iman taught her imaginary class as Fatima neatly wrapped the hair of My Size Barbie into a neat bun.

“Okay, class. Get your coats from the cubby. It’s cold outside. Mom and Dad, or just Mom or just Dad, or maybe Aunty, or a family member is outside to pick you up.

See you tomorrow.” Iman immediately stood up from the teaching chair and dashed out of Fatima’s room, shutting the door behind her. Then she turned back around and knocked.

“You don’t have to knock to come in the shop,” moaned Fatima.

“Sorry I’m late, girl,” said Iman as she entered. “I was teaching my class.”

“Don’t worry about it, girl. I’m almost done with her hair.”

They loved to call each other “girl.” They learned it was a name for grown black women, grown black women in control. And at that age, they already knew that young black boys learned the opposite about their gender. That’s why so many black parents call their sons “lil man.”

Fatima moved the Barbie, and Iman sat down in the chair in front of her stylist.

“What would you like? Want me to curl it?”

“Yes, please. Let’s watch *Aladdin* too.”

Fatima took the unplugged curling iron and began to twist the hijab around it, until it reached the top of Iman’s neck. She held it there.

“Bend your head,” she said.

With her neck bent, Iman strained her eyes up to view Jasmine venting to her pet tiger, Rajah, on the television.

“Fatima, I wish I was Jasmine. She’s so pretty.”

“I know. Princess Belle is pretty too.”

“Ya, but she white.”

“But she looks Mexican or from Puerto Rico. I wish I was Puerto Rican. They have the best hair.”

“What’s Jasmine?”

“Arabic.”

“Does that mean she’s mixed?”

I don’t know. It means she’s Arabic.”

“She could be black too.”

“She’s Arabic.”

Aunty Sammayah entered the room and ejected the VHS. “Iman, it either I throwin this movie away, or you takin it when you go. I ain’t like to waste people money, but they only have the Muslims doing wrong.”

“Mommy, no! I know that’s not what they do!”

“That’s not what we do! We!” corrected Aunt Sammayah.

“Please, Mommy. I know, I know it’s not. And Mani does too. I’ll only watch it with her!”

“Not stayin in this house. Allah will give you yuh reward. Iman, yuh mother on her way to pick you up. Don’t forget the plate of food for she when you goin, Girlfriend.”

“K.”

When Sunshine honked, Iman quickly collected her books and crayons from the floor. She went to retrieve her backpack from the hallway and found the movie inside.

“Bye, Fatima.” She felt her cousin’s sadness on her skin. “You can keep my My Size Barbie until tomorrow.”

Fatima did not respond.

In the car, Iman replayed Fatima's plea and Aunty Sammayah's resistance until she reached Granny and Grandfather's home. She loved *Aladdin*. She couldn't wait for her father to get it for her. But the movie belonged to Fatima. Unintentionally, Aunty Sammayah confirmed Fatima's belief that her little cousin always came first, always got her way.

Iman didn't stray too far from her mother in the hair-product aisle of Target. Only far enough to find black hair dye with an image of a white woman, headful of spiral curls. She brought it to her mother's attention. Sunshine dismissed it. "I look like a white woman to you, precious? You want my hair to fall out, or wha?"

Iman looked down at the image, before gently setting it back on the wrong shelf. She made her way to the children's hair products. For some reason, the different barrettes reminded Iman of a fresh bowl of breakfast cereal, Berry Crunch, each barrette shined, glazed.

Her eyes interrogated the rows of items until she spotted a girl that resembled her on a Just for Me hair relaxer box. As her mother searched for hair dye color #1, Jet Black, Iman studied the image, the young model's nose, lips, dark brown eyes, complexion. She gazed at her black, straight hair, swooped up into a long ponytail that spiraled down to her shoulders. Iman smiled.

“Don’t even think about it, Mani,” said Sunshine, now hovering behind her daughter, inspecting the hair relaxer gripped tightly in her hands. “You too young. That ting will ruin your hair.”

“But it didn’t mess her hair up,” challenged Iman, pointing to her peer on the box. She held the product to her chest.

“Do you know di gal? She probably bald now!” Sunshine assumed with a chuckle. “And what did Mommy tell you? You are a leader not a follower. Don’t worry bout she. I’m not straightening your hair. You don’t need it. Now which color beads you want to put in your hair?”

Iman tilted her head back, squinted her eyes, frowned, but before she could whine, her mother finalized her request.

“I said no, my Precious.”

Iman hesitated, before placing the relaxer back where it belonged. Her hands pondered around it before she finally released. She turned her attention to the beads. Her eyes brightened.

“These!” Iman said ecstatically, grabbing the assorted pack: baby blue, lime green, hot pink, orange, yellow, sweet apple red.

“Iman, you a hippie or wha? What about this black, brown, and white pack? It will match your clothes.”

Iman frowned.

“Okay, how about we get different one colored packs? We will switch them to match yuh clothes.”

Iman smiled.



Iman walked into Aunty Sammayah's house hesitantly to find Fatima sitting in a chair in front of the oven. Her afro rose and flopped over, covering both ears. A comb made of iron rested on the stove.

"My mom's gonna hot comb my hair," she said with a smile that resembled Abu's when he first spots the magic lamp.

*She's not mad at me no more*, Iman thought. "What's that?" she asked as she made her way to her cousin.

"You heat this comb on the stove, and comb through your hair to make it straight."

"Does it burn?"

"My mom says it doesn't. She finally said she would hot-comb it, as long as I don't take off my hijab at school."

"I'm gonna ask my mom if Aunty Sammayah can hot comb my hair too."

"You're such a copycat."

"You get the comb, towel, washcloth and grease?" asked Aunt Sammayah. She entered the kitchen as Fatima excused herself to the bathroom closet. "Assalaamu Alaikum, Girlfriend."

"Can you do that to my hair too," Iman asked.

"You better ask yuh mother first. I don't want to cause no problems."

"She said no."

“Well yuh betta listen to she. You know Jannah, heaven, is at the feet of mothers? Those who don’t listen to their mother, don’t enter paradise.”

“Can you ask her for me, Aunt Sammayah?”

“If yuh mother says no, it means no.”

“Yeah, Mani. If yuh muddah say no, it mean no,” repeated Fatima, terribly mimicking her mother’s accent.

“Hush yuh mout and sit down.”

Iman scooted a chair next to her cousin and sat, waiting eagerly to observe.

“Is it gonna burn?” asked Iman.

“No, not if yuh cousin stay still and bend she head when I tell she to.”

“And if I don’t, you gonna burn me, Mommy?”

“Not on purpose. Stay still.”

With the regular comb, Aunt Sammayah used her daughter’s symmetrical nose as a point to part her hair straight down the middle. She then parted horizontally, making four perfect sets of coils. Starting with one section, she combed out Fatima’s hair from the bottom up, careful not to comb too high too soon. She then braided it into one huge plait then moved on to the next sections.

Iman watched curiously, head tilted sideways, dark brown eyes owl-wide. As the comb fingered through her cousin’s hair, Iman noticed that it expanded down, and then coiled back up as soon as her aunty’s fingers released it.

“Why do our hair do that, Aunt Sammayah?”

“What, Girlfriend?” asked Aunt Sammayah, braiding the final plait.

“Puff like that. It don’t stay down, see?” She hopped from her chair and tugged down.

“Ouch! What the Heck!”

“Sorry! See, Aunty Sammayah! It’s long, but it’s short. But it is long. It’s like ... like it’s being soaked up by a sponge, yeah, like the air is a sponge, or ... or her hair is a sponge!”

“Oh my gosh, will you shut up?” groaned Fatima.

“I don’t know, Girlfriend,” said Aunty Sammayah, laughing. “That just how i’tis.”

Preparation was over. It was time.

Starting with the back-left section, Aunty Sammayah unplaited Fatima’s tight coils. She parted a tiny section, and then wrapped the remaining hair into a small bun.

She lightly moistened the section with Dax Hair Grease.

“Bend yuh head. Stay still.”

“Here it gooooes,” sang Fatima with a smirk. She gazed down until her chin centered her collarbone.

Aunty Sammayah retrieved the hot comb from the stove. On it, she blew, *phhhh*, *phhhhhh*, *phhhhhh* and gently combed through the micro-section, careful not to touch her daughter’s scalp.

“Ouch, Mommy!”

“Sorry! It just the steam. Relax yuhself.”

Iman ground her knees together as she watched. She clenched her jaw as the steam rose from the hot comb, clashing with the hair grease into a sizzle. But her jaw quickly dropped, responding to the sudden transformation. With one slow comb, Fatima's short coils were long strands that fell to her chest.

“Wooooooooow!”

“Let me see!” screamed Fatima.

“Just hold yuh head still. Yuh have a whole head-full to go”

Iman sat, watched, and envied for two hours. For the first time, her older cousin was doing something that she couldn't. For the first time, Iman felt restricted, cheated from fun, cheated from beauty—something that Fatima probably felt every day.

Years later, Iman would wonder: if Fatima had a choice like she did, would it have been different, would she love Allah, too.

Iman quickly hurried behind Fatima to the bathroom. From the entrance, she observed her cousin's reflection in the mirror. Fatima's face radiated esteem, radiated *I am beautiful*.

“She's so pretty,” said Iman, revealing her thoughts.

“Thanks, Mani!” She pulled her hair back and flicked it out. The girls admired Fatima's hair in silence. Its' still shine reminded Iman of a moving waterfall.

“Let's play house,” suggested Fatima.

“Can I be the hairdresser?”

“No, Mani.”

“Can you put on my hair?”

“I guess.”



Iman was changing her baby's diaper when Michael called.

"Girlfriend! It yuh father!" hollered Aunty Sammayah from the living room.

Iman dropped her baby's dress and jettied to the phone.

"Hi, Daddy!"

"Hi, Baby Girl. Whatchu doin?"

"Playing house with Fatima. Daddy ..."

"What's up, Knucklehead?"

"Can I make my hair strai—"

"Your mama better not put a relaxer in your damn head."

"She said no."

"Yuh damn right! You be proud of your nappiness, Baby Girl!"

"Pleeeeeeease, Daddy."

"No, Mani. Be proud of your nappiness."

"Can Aunty Sammayah hot comb it?"

"Be proud of your nappiness."

When Sunshine arrived, the girls were already at the table.

"What you cook, Mayah?"

"Di gal aint get in di door, and she already requestin food."

Sunshine's laugh filled the spaces in the room. "I smell di ting from way outside. Di ting smellin like pelau."

"Just eat di damn ting right here. I tired you takin mi plates. I gon mark it up, Sister Sammayah, in permanent marka. You only theifin me dishes."

The sisters' accents ran freely.

"Hey precious," she said, standing over her daughter. She rested Iman's head to her belly. "How was yuh—wow. Look at di amount of hair on she head."

Sunshine interrupted her own question as she noticed Fatima's hair. "She hair lookin like Mommy's, huh Sammayah? A real Dougla."

"What's a Dougla?" said the girls almost simultaneously.

"A Trini-Indian," said Sunshine.

"Yep. They mix up. Black and Indian," Aunty Sammayah chimed in.

"Granny's Indian?" steamed Fatima.

"She a Dougla. Your great grandmotha mix wit all kinda ting. But she mostly a Dougla."

"What about Great Grandfather?" strained Iman.

"He just a black Trini. Yuh eat already, Ms. Mani?" Sunshine made her way to the kitchen.

"Yeah, but can I have a bite of yours? It tastes better."

"That's so dumb," Fatima said, rolling her eyes.

"It's true. Take a bite from yuh mother's plate. You'll see," said Sunshine as she splashed a pile of rice on her plate. She used her fork to tidy up the edges. Though a

clean freak, Sunshine's motor skills were like her daughter's, or her daughter's were like her's—developing.

Smiling, Aunty Sammayah rested her plate on the table and sat. "I always used to take a bite from yuh faddah's plate. Something about the way he used to mix di sauce in his rice." She took a bite.

"Did your father call, Iman?"

"Yeah. He said he's gonna pick me up tomorrow. And we are gonna spend the night at Grandma and Grandpa's and go fishing in the pond and look for monsters when it's dark."

Sunshine shook her head. "Di man crazy. And you crazy too."

Iman grinned.

"Come take a bite before I put peppa."

"I want that too."

Iman opened her mouth for a fork full of rice chicken and spice.

"You even have to feed her?" pried Fatima. "Gosh, such a baby."

They laughed.

As Sunshine and Summayah ate, Iman wanted to ask her mother if Aunt Sammayah could press her hair. But Aunty Summayah's warning of fate made her keep her mouth shut, at least until she reached home.

"Yuh want me to wash di dishes before we go, Mayah?" Sunshine asked. She rested her plate in the sink.

"Just leave them. I have to put the dry ones away first."

Iman sat on the floor to put on her boots.

“Okay, see youayah, See you Douglah.”

Fatimah’s face brightened.

“See you. Assalaamu Alaikum, Girlfriend.”

“Salaama laikum, Auntayah Sammayah.”

Back at Granny and Grandfather’s house, Iman stalked her reflection. She turned her body to the right and cut her eyes back to the mirror. She turned her body to the left, she turned back straight.

She ripped a barrette from the end of a twist and pulled down. 1 ... 2 ... 3 she counted slowly to thirty, the sound of chopped & screwed from the dirty south and released. Her twist shot up. She pulled again, it sprang. She pulled.

“Iman, what di ass i’tis yuh doin?” Sunshine entered the bathroom. She noticed her daughter had been in the bathroom for nearly fifteen minutes. “I know you did not mess up yuh hair doin stupidness! I should give you one cut ass!”

Iman knew her mother would never spank her. But she could tell that her mother was disappointed, angry.

“Come sit in front me in the living room. Bring your red chair.”

Iman started to tear up. She was tender-headed.

Holding the chair, she slugged her way to the living room. Granny and Grandfather were seated on the couch. Granny balanced her attention between the local news and the pile of unfolded clothes to her left. Grandfather sat humming, head

bowed, eyes closed, rubbing his knees in a musical trance, prearranging a song. Iman placed the chair between her mother's legs and took a seat.

"What's wrong, Saga Gal?" Grandfather opened his eyes to the thump of the chair landing on the floor.

"She go playin fast and mess up she hair," responded Sunshine, before her daughter. "Di gal know she goin with she father tomorrow. But she gone and loose she braids. I vex." In light rage, Sunshine accidentally combed too high too soon.

"Ouuuuch!" Iman bawled out.

"Just hush yuh mout. Yuh hair soft."

Grandfather made his way to the garage door and came back with his double seconds. He set them up in his granddaughter's view.

"Well it a good ting di news done," said Granny sarcastically.

Grandfather smiled and began playing.

Iman bowed her head, closed her eyes and listened. The chromatic scales reminded Iman of stars. The constellations were in conversation. They transformed into song.

"What's this called, Daddy?" asked Sunshine. She began to sway her upper body slowly to the melody. She reached for a red barrette.

"Stardust."

## GRANDFATHER NEVER SAID IT, BUT IT WAS IN

the center of his plate  
saltfish & dumplin'  
stew chicken, rice  
& callaloo leftover  
for friends who haven't ate  
in Trinidad

the weight of his arm  
during his naps  
disguised as mine  
before I trickled  
from under  
at the right time & back  
outside to play

his jokes  
vocal cords vibrating  
in laughter, the sound  
of falsettos on  
chalkboard

his stories  
in tunes as I beat  
his belly with my hands  
as if playing  
steel-pan to his  
lyrical scales

his music  
within notes  
that would rise  
above clouds & exhale  
down, quenching  
like water

## A CONTEST

*My skin is lighter than yours.*

*No, my skin is lighter than yours.*

*Look! See, your skin is darker than mine.*

*No way! Your skin is darker than mine!*

*Ask my mom!*

*Let's ask Kareem!*

*I'm caramel, you're peanut-butter.*

*No! I'm peanut-butter, you're chocolate!*

Who said what is irrelevant. Why did our complexions mean so much to us then? Whose idea was this? When exactly did the competition start? How did it start? Why was the one with lighter skin the winner?

## SKIN I

Sunshine laid down the law one final time before kissing her daughter goodbye.

“Now, make sure you take a bath before you sleep tonight. I know you gon be filthy before bed. And don’ be talking in yuh grandparents’ face with stink breath. Make sure yuh brush yuh teeth in the morning. Breathe hard in yuh father face though. Tell yuh father don’ ignore me when I callin to speak to my daughter. Say your prayers and call me before bed. Behave yuhself.”

Iman was dressed in her apple-red turtleneck, black corduroy skirt pressed and lint free, black tights that blended with her shin-high suede boots. Her red, white, and black plaid scarf complemented the shiny red bobbles, hanging tight to her braids like cherries in a cherry tree.

“Well look at di celebrity,” said Aunty Sammayah.

Sunshine only sent her daughter to the Hope residence perfect. She worried that they would somehow connect what their son said about her—during their ongoing quarrels—with Iman’s appearance. Her daughter was a representation of her: clean, mannered, beautiful. She felt it necessary to show that she was a good mother.

“Where you going?” asked Fatima.

“With my dad! To my Grandma’s!”

“Calm down. Dressed like that?”

“My mom packed more clothes, so I could play!”

“Want to play hairdresser?”

“No, I don’t want to mess up my hair.”

“When is your dad comin?”

“At like 3.”

“That’s almost five hours from now. You don’t want to play?”

“Yeah. I just can’t get dirty, and I can’t mess with my hair.” Iman took notice of her cousin’s hair braided back in two cornrows.

Noticing the direction of Iman’s eyeballs, Fatima responded.

“Mommy said I can’t wear it down, because the water will make it nappy.”

“You goin swimming?”

“No. I have to pray, remember?”

The girls played Barbies, while Aunty Sammayah screamed out numbers to Bob Barker.

The doorbell rang.

“Wait. Don’t open the door until you know who it is,” commanded Aunty Sammayah.

“It’s Daddy!” said Fatima ecstatically, peeking through the curtains.

“Just now. Girlfriend, go get me my hijab, please?”

Iman hopped from the sofa and ran to fetch Aunt Sammayah’s hair cover. She ran back.

“Where is it?”

“It hanging behind the door.”

Uncle Malik wasn’t allowed to see Aunt Sammayah without a hijab since they were no longer married, and he wasn’t allowed to come inside.

Iman handed her a brown hijab that matched her mocha brown sundress, the yellow flowers a shade darker than Aunt Sammayah's complexion.

"Assalaamu Alaikum, Daddy!"

"Walaikum Salaam, Daughter." He turned to Iman. "What's up, Suck Fingah?" He'd changed her name from *Pacifier* to *Suck Finger* once she changed her addiction.

"Hi, Uncle Malik."

"Assalamu Alaikum, Ms." He said it just loud enough for his voice to trickle into Aunt Sammayah's ears.

"Walaikum Salaam."

Uncle Malik's voice never rose. Silence listened attentively whenever he spoke.

The girls followed him to the trunk of his car. Inside were five Dominos mini cheese pizzas, three fresh red licorice ropes, four bags of kettle popcorn, and a box of Shasta soda, all goods granted to him from his job at the King Dome.

The girls came back in the house with their hands full.

"Aye yi yi! Tell di man we have popcorn to last us seven years from he. I gave the birds three bags already," said Aunt Sammayah. "Here. Tell him I just make the curry cabbage and rice, and the pelau from yesterday."

Fatima took the Tupperware full of food to her father, sitting on the porch. Iman followed.

"Tell she thanks." He rested the plastic bag on the step. "She's wearin brown."

"Huh?" said Fatima.

"I used to love to see she in brown. Did she know I was coming?"

Fatima smiled. Iman laughed.

“Alright. I gone.” He kissed his daughter on the forehead, his beard tickling her brows. “Assalaamu Alaikum.”

He turned to Iman, “Lata, Suck Finga.”

From a distance, his gray kufi almost blended in with the sky.

“I hope it doesn’t rain. I want to play outside with my dad.”

“You’ll survive.” Fatima quickly rose from the steps and headed inside. Iman followed.

“Mommy! Daddy wants to know if you wore brown for him?”

She smiled. “He betta keep he damn eyes to heself. He know the rules. Next time I gon’ wear niqab too.”

“You should just get married again. You cook for him basically every day,” said Fatima.

“Yeah!” co-signed Iman.

“I don’t cook for he, I cook for people,” said Aunt Sammayah. “My Lord said to give charity as much as possible, even if it’s just a smile. I love my husband. Two more days, I think I’m gonna make him an apple pie”

The girls glanced at each other and smirked.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” said Fatima.

They continued to play Barbies.

“Let’s pretend Jasmine is a Dougla and Belle is Puerto Rican.”

As Iman attempted to wrap Jasmine’s hair into the perfect honeycomb, her eyes caught sight of Aunt Sammayah’s foot when she walked through the girl’s setup. Her feet were even lighter than her face.

“Aunty Sammayah, are you black and white?”

“You see yuh granny and grandfatha? They look white to you?”

“Then why you so light, Mommy?”

“I don’t know. Ask Allah. My grandfatha, yuh granny fatha, used to call me a white woman back home in Trinidad.”

“I wish I was your color,” said Fatima.

“Me too,” whispered Iman.

“What wrong wit you? You know di blacka di berry di sweeta?” She headed to the bathroom to make wudu. “Unless you sweet vanilla.” She glanced back and shimmied.

The girls laughed.

When the phone rang, Iman knew it was her father. She answered.

“Get your shoes on, Knucklehead. We about five minutes away.”

Iman ran to the door and slid to the floor, causing a run in her tights. She quickly slipped her boots on. She flung her backpack around her shoulder before planting her feet and fell into the wall.

“Just don’ mash up my house before you leave.” Aunty Sammayah heard Iman’s excitement from her room.

“Fatima, time for Asr. Lock the bottom door when you leave, Girlfriend. Take some sweetbread for your grandmother. But don’t give yuh fatha a ting from me.”

Iman spotted her grandmother’s car. She didn’t give her a chance to honk. Iman ran for it, forgetting to lock the door, leaving the sweetbread behind.

“Get on this side. Don’t run in the street.” Michael hopped out of the passenger side and ran around the car to greet his daughter and open the door for her. He picked her up and spun, then rested his chin on her head and nuzzled.

“You’re gonna mess up my hair. Mommy did it yesterday.”

“Did you give her the finger for me?” He assisted Iman with her backpack, then shut the door.

“Hi Grandma!”

“Hello Ms. Mani. You look really lovely today. Do you have a boyfriend, yet?”

“Don’t play, Moms. She’s never having a boyfriend.” Michael turned to his daughter. “You hear me? Never.” He rolled down the window. “You hear me! NEVEEER!” He hollered from the diaphragm. They laughed.

“Woooooowooo!” he screamed. “I’m on top of the world! I got my baby!” Michael knew how to make his daughter feel special, right after he disappointed her. He taught his daughter early that a man’s affection was unstable.

“You hungry, Chump?”

“Yep.”

“Can you pull into McDonald’s, Mom? I just want to get her a snack until the food’s done.”

As Mrs. Hope rolled down her window to order, Iman noticed her skin tone. It was the same as Aunt Sammayah’s, the color of a vanilla flower.

“Grandma, are you a Dougla?”

“A Dougla?”

“Yeah. Are you Indian and Trinidadian? Or ... Black and white? Or Puerto Rican?”

“No. Grandma’s just a black woman from Alabama.”

“Yeah, no Dougla, just straight neeega!” said Michael. His laugh changed the stop light to green.

“You need help,” said Grandma Hope, laughing, shaking her head. She pulled up to the window.

“Girl toy or boy toy?”

“Girl, please.”

The McWorker handed Mrs. Hope a white princess figure skater.

“Pardon me. Do you have an African American doll?”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am.”

The drive to the Hope residence seemed like days to Iman. Out the window, she watched cars, bus stops, stores, neighborhoods turn into trees, trees, fields, a farm, cows, trees.

After some miles, the Navigator stopped at its first traffic light. To the right, Iman noticed a field of horses, stallions. A brown that reminded Iman of her Grandmother’s polished maple cabinets, a white that reminded Iman of all the royal horses in her favorite princess movies, and an ebony black that reminded Iman of night.

The ebony one was her favorite. She did not know why. She pondered. On that stallion, deep pigmentation was beautiful.

Iman loved the sound of gravel under tires when her grandmother slowly made her final right. Michael reached above his mother's head and pressed the opener to the black iron gate. It closed silently behind them as Mrs. Hope made her way around the cul-de-sac.

At the sight of Iman, the dog Brutus hopped up to level his face with the car window.

"Get down now!" said Michael, jumping out of the car. The Labrador Mastiff panted in excitement, mouth frowned into a smile. Iman's heart pounded. She loved Brutus, but only when he behaved. Michael locked the dog in the house after he brought in the first set of groceries.

"You can get out the car now, Kid."

Iman opened the door and stepped down hesitantly.

"Brutus will never hurt you. He's just excited to see you. Trust me, Daddy wouldn't let anything happen to you. I bite harder."

Iman's smile revealed her two missing bottom teeth.

"Let me finish takin in the groceries, then we are gonna rock out."

Iman felt overwhelmed. She didn't know what to do first. The Hope residence was a grandchild's paradise. The land was made for exploration and the house was made for fun, or that's what the grandchildren believed every time they came to visit.

Iman made her way to the circular lawn and stood in the center. Some trees stood large and massive, the perfect shape of a spade, others extended up and flopped

over, branches roping down like beaded curtains. The paved driveway, wrapping around the lawn, was a perfect race track for Iman when she entered the Olympics, or directed her remote-control car for NASCAR.

The many gardens around the perimeter reminded Iman of the different flowers at Points Defiance Park. Above, the sun peeked behind the cluttered clouds. She felt it's beam gently caress her cheek, as cold bit her knees through her tights. Early spring still felt like winter in Tacoma at times.

“What you doin, Chump! Come inside!”

Inside, Iman headed upstairs to the girls' room to put down her belongings. She walked through the family room, bright with recessed lights, *Law and Order* on the television screen.

When she opened the door to the hallway, the lighting shifted to dim. Iman hated this part of the house; she called it the dark side, the side where the bedrooms, forbidden living room, and ghosts were located.

The hallway was lit by one lamp that resembled a candle stick. Iman slowly walked through the halls of the ancient pyramids. She opened the door to the girls' room slowly, head swiftly turning left right left right. She knew that she could be attacked from all angles. Switching on the light, she quickly closed the door behind her.

*Olly olly oxen free.*

She changed from her modeling clothes to her Nike sweats. She frowned. Her mother packed the loud sweat pants, the ones that screamed *here I am* when she and Michael played hide-and-go-seek tag.

She opened the door. Looked right, looked left, looked down to see Michael on all fours, glasses off, eyes wide, menacing grin.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrr!”

“Awwwww! That’s not funny, Daddy!” She collapsed to the floor next to him. He picked her up like a lifeguard retrieving an unconscious victim.

She laughed as he ran down the dark stairs and entered the bright side of the house through the kitchen. At the sink, Grandma deveined and washed jumbo prawns.

“What’s for dinner?” Michael hollered. He kissed her forehead.

“Garlic shrimp, steak and baked potatoes!”

“Mmmm mmm mm. We gonna grub tonight, Chump!” he screamed.

The growl of Mr. Hope’s tractor intimidated the space, then quit.

“Come on. Let’s go say *hi* to Grandpa.”

“Can we go on the paddle boat?”

“Only if you wear a life jacket.”

In the back, the birds made music: courting, gossiping, shushing like sprinklers surging back and forth, blows in a glass coke bottle, a dropped dime catching balance on a counter top, tiny wind chimes, the sound of squeaky clean, a squeezed rubber duck, the quacks of actual ducks, a note sung by Minnie Ripperton into a fan.

At the pond, Iman heard the grinding moan of bullfrog, the sound of Mrs. Hope's mixer hitting the side of bowl. She noticed the pink and white water-lilies sprawled on their beds. They beautified the murky pond that held them down by the roots.

"How are you doing, Ms. Lady?" asked Grandpa Hope, making his way from the other side of the pond. "Want to go for a ride with Grandpa on the tractor?" He exhaled cigar smoke that hovered over the pond like fog, then disappeared.

"Hi Grandpa! Smoking is bad."

"For young ladies." He smiled.

"We gonna take a trip out on the paddle boat, Dad."

"Okie doke. I just put fresh trout in last week. Plenty to catch in there."

On the paddle boat, they idled. A Mallard glided close to the right. Above surface, the duck floated with ease. Iman looked down to see its webbed feet flutter like a ballerina. Michael threw a handful of fish food toward the tall cattails. They resembled Little Red Hen's wheat.

"Ready to see some fish, Chump?"

Just ahead, she spotted a cream, almost yellow lily, the color of Mrs. Hope.

"Daddy, why is Grandma light skinned?"

"I don't know, Knucklehead. She's the tallest Korean I know." He laughed.

She stared.

“I’m just playin, Knucklehead. I don’t know ... I guess there’s different shades of black.”

“I wish I was a different black,” Iman said in an almost whisper. She looked toward the ripples of the pond. The fish began to surface.

“You are beautiful, Iman. Repeat after me, Okay?” her father said.

“Okay.”

“Say it loud!”

“...”

“I said, say it loud!”

“It loud!”

“Nooooo, chump. Okay, when I scream ‘say it loud,’ you scream ‘say it loud’ after me, okay?”

“K.”

“Say it loud!” he hollered.

“Say it loud!”

“I’m Black and I’m proud!” He spread his arms wide, ready to embrace the weight of his own proclamation.

“I’m Black and I’m proud!” She expanded her arms wide.

“One more time!”

They repeated, ending with a James Brown *Who!*

It would take Iman years to understand and believe their antiphony.

Michael said he felt the chill come in, a breeze that made the trees dance to the wind chimes on the back porch. The sun rested its head just behind the wetlands. “How

bout we feed the fish today, get them nice and fat, and catch a big one tomorrow?

Tonight, we eat, watch movies and catch monsters.”

Iman’s shoulders were up to her ears. She scooted closer to her father. “K.”

Michael gave his daughter’s twists a quick ruffle. “Be proud of your nappiness, Baby Girl.” He kissed her on the forehead. His eye condition prevented him from noticing his daughter’s frown as he paddled to shallow water.

From behind the patio door, Brutus waited. Iman felt her father’s grip on her hand. She felt brave. When they entered, Brutus sat up and gave Iman’s forearm two big laps.

“Yuck!”

He flopped back down in satisfaction.

At the table, Mr. Hope sat with an unlit cigar in his mouth and a glass of whiskey and ice accompanying him. He didn’t lift his nose from Stephen King’s *The Green Mile*.

“Dinner will be ready in about one hour.”

“How the hell you know?” asked Grandma from the kitchen. She smashed the steak with the meat mallet. Loose spices scattered across the cutting board. Grandpa bit down on the cigar and grinned, gaze still deep in the novel. Iman scooted a chair to the kitchen counter.

“Is that a hammer, Grandma?”

“Nope. It’s a Grandpa-tamer. I’m just using it to cook today. But when Grandpa misbehaves ...” She waved the mallet in the air. They laughed.

“Mom, will you watch Mani for a sec? I need to handle some business in the garage.”

She shook her head. “You just don’t have my backroom all smoky, Nigga.”

“One H.I.T is all I need.”

Iman listened, but she didn’t understand. She sounded out the word, still didn’t understand.

“I’ll be back, Shrimp.”

“Do I look like a shrimp to you, Daddy?” She pointed to the direction of the raw shrimp in the sink. They laughed.

“Want to mix the salad for Grandma?” Mrs. Hope placed a glass bowl full of Romaine, spinach, croutons, parmesan and fine cut bacon. She handed her the Caesar dressing. “Now just put a little bit, then mix, a little bit, then mix. Show Grandma when you think you put enough.”

She trusted her granddaughter.

Iman dragged the stool back to her spot at the table. She climbed up to her plate of food. She loved what kids loved, French fries and chicken nuggets, but her Grandma and Granny’s food were an exception. She couldn’t wait to eat.

Neither could her father. She could tell by the noise. He was into it.

“Man oh man, Mom. I just can’t stop eating. Fuckin grub.”

“I wonder why?” She rolled her eyes at her son and rested her husband’s plate in front of him before taking her place at the table.

“Because you know how to throw down, that’s why!”

“Yeah, Grandma!” Iman picked up a prawn and bit. Butter ran down her wrist. She licked.

“But the best part is this salad,” said Mr. Hope. He smiled at his granddaughter.

“You did a mighty fine job, young Lady.”

Iman blushed.

“That truck needs washin. You could write a whole letter on the windows.” Mrs. Hope took a bite of her potato.

“I’ll take it in tomorrow, May.” He sipped his whiskey.

“How about you make that our job tomorrow, Dad? Want to get wet if its warmer tomorrow, Chump?”

“Yeah!”

“If it’s alright with Mama, it’s alright with me.” Mr. Hope nodded his head toward his wife.

Iman suddenly remembered her father’s droptop. It was no longer parked in the garage.

“Where’s your car, Daddy?” She bit into a piece of garlic bread. The crumbs decorated her shirt.

Michael let out a long exhale. “I had to give it to Uncle Randy, so I won’t drive it. If it’s in the garage, I’m gonna want to take off.”

“Will you ever get to drive again, Daddy?”

“I don’t think so, Knucklehead.”

Michael gently pushed his plate forward. He was done eating.



Iman slowly flopped tangled spaghettis in a Tupperware bowl. She used the spoon to tidy up the mount. Sunshine would pull into the gate at any minute. Her parents' relationship was unstable, but Sunshine's love for Mrs. Hope's cooking was consistent. And Michael used his mother's cooking as gravitational pull.

“Make sure you get her a couple pieces of corn on the cob, Knucklehead. Your mama could eat a pot-full of em. Hurry up, so you can say goodbye to your grandparents.”

“I'm trying not to make a mess.”

Mr. and Mrs. Hope were down by the lumber out back. He chopped while she stacked. They were a team. To Iman, the kitchen and the Port of Tacoma were the only locations that separated them. She took her final sprint down the hill, slowing down when she noticed Brutus dashing up to meet her. He understood. He circled around her like she was his tail and leaped and leaped and leaped but he did not pounce.

“Come on, boy!” Michael whistled. “I'm gonna lock him in the house before your mama pulls up. Go say bye.”

“I am, Daddy.” She patted Brutus three times. He lapped. She didn't mind.

Iman made her way toward the music, the blues, BB King's guitar moaning in despair. Mrs. Hope lightly swayed her hips to the melody on the stereo. She hummed, high, the sound of a robin, like she was the thrill that BB King missed. Mr. Hope cleaved. He joined with words:

*I know I'll be open armed, baby. Just like a good man should.*

“You leaving already, Ms. Mani?” Mrs. Hope spoke, feeling her granddaughter’s gaze.

“Yeah. Daddy has a hoot owl and my mom misses me.”

Grandma Hope heard disappointment in her voice. “We will pick you up this weekend, okay? Grandma will make sure if it.”

“And Grandpa.” Mr. Hope sparked a cigar, then regripped his ax.

Iman gave her grandma a hug and waved goodbye to her grandpa. He waved, tipped his hat, blew smoke, then *Whack!*

She ran up the hill, through the light side of the house and out the garage to find Sunshine already in the driveway. Michael placed his forehead on his forearm, his forearm on the car top, and gazed down at Sunshine.

“You know I love you. I promise I will try to do right.”

Sunshine kept her head straight, eyeing the rose bush. She held her hand out the window.

“Food, please an’ tank you.”

Michael laughed. He handed her the plastic bag of Tupperware. “You are something else. Bring back Mom’s dishes.”

“Hi, Mommy.” Iman jumped in the front seat, backpack still on back.

“Hello my prec— oh gaaaawd! What di ass is this I seein here? What happen to my chile hair?”

“We washed the car today. She will be okay.”

“Okay? You tink I wan’ my chile walkin round wit she hair nappy? Was she washin di damn car, or was di car washin she?”

“Oh boy, here we go!”

“Whateva, Michael Hope. You know how I want my chile!”

“We had fun, Mommy!”

“Oh yeah? Well, we will see how much fun you have tonight combing out yuh hair. You know you should’ve put a shower cap on if you knew you was gonna get wet. Your hair is dry and nappy.”

Iman frowned, teared up. “I tried not to get it wet. Daddy kept splashing me.”

“Snitches get stiches!” Michael cocked his head back and cackled. He walked around the car. “Come give Daddy some love before you leave, my little snitch.”

Iman looked back. Her father slowly walked behind the car as Sunshine wrapped around the cul-de-sac. He stopped them just before they pulled out the gate.

“I forgot to tell you, your daughter’s been sweating about skin tone. I told her to be proud of her blackness, her nappiness.”

“My daughter’s hair isn’t nappy. Only when she’s with you.”

“Yeah, Daddy!”

“Later, snitch!”

That night, after the pain and *I can’t stop crying ing ing ing*, Iman lay her head neatly on her mother’s chest and fixated on the television screen. Together, they joined Aladdin and Jasmine in “A Whole New World.” In her hand, she gripped her Princess Jasmine Barbie. She twisted her doll’s hair when Sunshine braided hers.

“Mommy, I wish I was Jasmine’s color. She’s pretty.”

“Iman, I don’t want to hear you say that anymore. Jasmine is pretty, you are beautiful.”

“Am I a nappy head?”

“No, Mani. If you don’t take care of yuh hair, you will be.”

“If I hot combed my hair, would it be as long as Fatima’s?”

“You not hot combin yuh hair.”

“If, Mommy, if.”

“It would be long, but not as long as Fatima’s.”

Iman frowned.

“Remember, you younger than Fatima. Her hair had longer time to grow.”

“Would I be a Dougla too?”

Sunshine laughed. “No, Mani. And Fatima isn’t a Dougla. She hair just like Granny’s, that’s all.”

“Will I look like Granny?”

“You don’t have the same hair texture as she, but your hair would be long and thick.”

Iman smiled.

Sunshine excused herself to the living room. Iman followed.

“What time do we need to be ready tomorrow, Daddy?”

“If yuh sista don’ make we late, we leaving here 9:30 sharp.” He sat on the couch, patting the baby oil in his hair dry.

He turned to Iman. “Look me saga gal! Yuh hair ready for tomorrow!” He turned back to Sunshine. “Dress she in white pants and a blue shirt.” Grandfather made Iman a bandmember years before she knew.

Granny kneaded the chunked pieces of beef like dough. Minced garlic, thyme, onions, blood coated her hands. “All that cryin and look at you! Yuh hair lookin real good!” She smiled.

Iman took a seat next to her grandfather.

Sunshine stood over the sink to wash dishes. “The chile ask me if she a Dougla, yuh know?” She laughed, sighed.

“What she know bout Dougla?” Granny sprinkled in Johnny’s Seasoning.

“I say Fatima pressed hair looking dougla-ish, the other day. Who told me to say that? The chile only harassing me about it, since. She want to be like she granny.” They laughed.

Granny kneaded. “You know, back home in Trinidad they only want mix baby, bad. The women dem open up they legs thinking bout hair and color.” She shook her head, sucked her teeth.

“Trust me, I know, Mommy. My sisters are Sammayah and Patricia, white and red woman. Taunty Dianne an dem always used to bawl out how beautiful they were back home. But me, I was the one wit di shape, the shape that would get me into all kinda trouble. Even you favor their pink.” Sunshine laughed. Granny didn’t.

“Just hush yuh mout! You di one that look most like me, a brownin.’ You think I don’t think I beautiful?” She sucked her teeth, put foil over the seasoned meat.

“You know, when Iman was in my stomach,” Sunshine said, “I used to worry about those things, she color, she hair. Michael a very good lookin man, but the thing they teach we in Trinidad had me frighten. I didn’t want my chile to come out black black black with short tack tack hair. I knew I had your hair, and she no-good fatha had a good grain, but I still was frightened, Mommy.” She placed the last plate on the drying rack. She smiled. “But look at my precious, a headful of hair, the perfect brownin.”

On the couch, Iman heard everything. I heard everything. And that’s when it hatched. The love peeked and ducked, peeked and ducked, like it wanted me to go find it. It stayed in its shell, but it was breathing my air—

## BEAUTIFUL

The song “Black Roses,” by Barrington Levy, reminds me of my mother. I call her my black rose.

*I've been traveling all over all over the world. I've never seen no other black rose in no other garden, he says in the verse, so you see, my garden is so special...*

My mother is beautiful. My mother has the same complexion as me. My mother wonders why her aunties, uncles, family can't see her beauty as much as they see my aunty's. I know this, because she finally told me; however, I already knew. When you are of darker skin, you are more consciously aware of intra-racial racism in your community because you are usually the one directly affected by it.

To this day, I still don't know the true meaning behind the lyrics, but when I first heard the song I created a meaning of my own, a meaning that empowered the dark black woman, specifically my mother.

I don't think my mother has low self-esteem. And that is probably why it hurts her. She doesn't understand why they cannot see something that is so clear,

her black beauty.

## A TASTE OF IT

Iman made her way to the seat in the way back, behind Aunt Patricia, the sun-side. The van's blinds had only been up for fifteen minutes, the sun heated the seat, waiting for Aunt Patricia to swerve up to the curb, late, as usual. Iman loved the feeling of warm leather.

She had trouble sleeping the night before. She imagined the place, she imagined the performance. She couldn't wait to secretly join the band—to strum every chord, answer every phrase, play every tune in her head. She was on her way to the Bite of Seattle to see Caribbean Super Stars Steel Band perform on the main stage.

“I tell di gal we leavin here 9:30, sharp, it a quarter til.” said Grandfather, complaining to Aunt Patricia indirectly.

She giggled. Iman couldn't tell if it was a nervous or generous laugh.

“Sorry, Daddy! I had to turn back round. I left my wallet.”

Grandfather remained facing forward, both elbows on arm rests. Iman imagined his face, firm yet relaxed, the sun bouncing off his black shades.

“Leh we go!” he commanded.

“Leh-leh-leh we stop and get a drink, nuh?” said cousin Pana, old enough to be Iman's great uncle.

“We aint pull out di driveway, and di fuckin man askin for a drink,” said Grandfather. He scorned his nephew indirectly.

“I-I-I just want was for us to take a lil shot to warm up we body, da’tis all.” He laughed.

“Just long as you can play di conga an iron when we get on di fuckin stage,” warned Uncle Sam. He studied his chord-book. “Where Jacka and Yun?”

“They left early wit Audo to go Guitar Center to buy a new screw for di high-hat and a wrench for di cuttah. They meeting we dey.” Grandfather finally turned around to make eye-contact with his granddaughter only. “Saga Gal, you ready?”

Iman peeked from behind the seat, “Yes!” Her smile ran free.

They honked at Granny as they departed the driveway.

She waved, smiled and blew smoke.

Four cars of family followed the forest green van pulling a powder white trailer full of instruments. Grandfather insisted that Iman ride with the band. She stared at the Super Nintendo connected to the mini TV just above her head, wishing Fatima was there. They would start with Super Mario, then begin the *Karate Kid*. Although Seattle was only forty-five minutes away, thirty-five minutes if Fluffy relaxed her foot on the gas, the girls would take advantage of the occasional experience. But since Uncle Malik was technician manager at the Kingdom, he took his daughter to work and clocked out early. He and Fatima were already at the Space Needle, waiting for the band and the rest of the gang to arrive.

As they wound their way onto I-5, Iman began to wine her waist shyly to the fast pace of soca music. It commanded her body through the stereo.

“Gal! Don’t fight it!” said Uncle Sam, noticing his niece’s reaction to the sound. “Yuh movin like a real Trini! A scared Trini, but a real one!”

Iman stopped. Placed her thumb in her mouth.

Uncle Sam smiled and played the air like Timbales to the rhythm.

“The gal just need to breakway. Di music in she since she did born,” said Grandfather. “She ear sharp like a cutlass.” He beat his arm rests like bongos, scatted his own solo.

“What’s that?” asked Iman, peeking from her place in the far back.”

“Machete, a sword, like di one I does use to cut down the bush in di back,” said Grandfather.

Iman didn’t quite get the simile, but she was a good reader, good at using context clues. She smiled and continued to move timidly, timely. She slowed her pace. The next track was calypso.

“No matter what di youth them think today, nothin betta then sweet calypso,” said Grandfather. “The music used to make you move and think. Di calypsonian had to be cleva.” He paused to join in on the chorus. He continued. “Too much soca they makin now only for bacchanal. Like anybody can sing soca, long as you know how to say ‘jump, wave and wine on a gal backside.’” He paused, shook his head. “Calypso allow we pans to tell a story—”

## CALYPSO VS. SOCA

## I. Bloodwood Tree

*A chopped trunk or a damaged branch of the tree  
starts dripping deep red fluid, almost like a severed  
limb of an animal.*

—Kuashik

Yuh get it?  
Go for it in di moon.  
Wait til di jab jab dead  
wit sleep, make sure  
di Dame Lorraine gone  
too, den pass through  
di cocoa trees, di two  
dat stand up next to di  
big stone, shape like di jab-  
man belly. Watch yuhself  
headin sout of di hills.  
Hold di bamboo close  
and move down  
like a dance. Hush yuh mout  
when yuh feel di ants crawl  
cross top yuh foot, stay as stiff  
as stale bread if it's a slitha.  
Keep goin til yuh find  
it, di red pumpin like oil  
inside. Slice it open  
and watch di ting rise like  
sea, flood like forest.  
Catch it in di jar, here.  
Make sure yuh bring back plenty.  
Wear it tween yuh legs  
when yuh out choppin di cane  
cause he only want to thief we sap  
but di man hate bloody wood.

## II. Jouvay Courting Tips

When yuh spot she in di posse,  
 come from behind,  
 bring she close,  
 place yuh han' right under  
 she breasts. If yuh can grip she,  
 move on.  
 She not dutty enough.  
 Yuh fingahs should slip.

When you finally feel di chocolate,  
 di mud, paint, and sweat,  
 rejoice  
 and start to wine, winding  
 yuh body like tornado  
 on land, Torpedo  
 unda di sea. Listen to di melody  
 and hold di gal waist to keep  
 di timing, as she gyrate  
 she backside behind  
 di big-truck.

She gon' an test yuh,  
 so don' slack.  
 When she close  
 she eyes an' grab  
 she head,  
 brace yuhself for di change  
 in pace.

Just shut yours too.  
 Or focus on di iron  
 and conga man, di sweet  
 tunes, di steel band,  
 anyting but di gal bumpa,  
 'cause if she feel a jook,

yuh goose cook.

### III. Hybridity: “Full Extreme”—Ultimate Rejects

*My dear friends, come to have the ashes put on your heads  
if you are genuinely grieving for the state of our nation and  
wish to do whatever is necessary to turn things around.*

—Archbishop FR Joseph Harris, Ash Wednesday,  
Trinidad and Tobago, 2017

Palance! Take out yuh rag and clean way di air.  
Di city could burn down, we jammin still.  
Spread yuh hands high up and jump!  
Di economy could fall down, we jammin still.

And when di city catch fire while we jammin,  
take a bathe under di hose of di big truck,  
and watch di buildings fall down, but jam  
til Ash Wednesday. Get on bad

while you bathin under di fire hose.  
Find a woman, find a man, and jam  
til lent. Then cry to Di Fatha for gettin on bad  
between di moko jumbees, in front di band,

behind a woman, in di middle of two man. Jam.  
Make we own business in di streets of Port-a-Spain,  
dancin an prancin like jumbees in di band.  
Soak in di mud, di powda til it dry-up like sand.

Make we own business! Take back we streets  
to “Full Extreme,” di hottest song of Road March, 2k17.  
Break ’way in di mud, di powda, togetha, pile up like sand.  
Rasta, shake hands wit di Muslim man.

Cause a scene to di hottest song of Road March, 2k17.  
Work dem! Spread yuh hands high up, and jump!  
Rasta and Muslim man, shake hands, don’t have a care.  
Palance! Take out yuh rag and clean way di air—



From Tacoma to Tukwila, the inside of the van was a jam session. Surfaces, cans, bottles, were percussion. Iman, watched, laughed, softly clapped her hands. Suddenly, the session was interrupted by a traffic jam.

Pana sucked his teeth in disappointment as cars slowed. He knew they would have to run like agoutis to set up as soon as they reached the stage. Grandfather huffed, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He lowered the volume. The van was silenced. He did not speak. They knew he was furious. Albert Chiddick was a business man, professional. Tardiness made him sweat.

“Call di people, make sure the trollies waiting for we.” He broke the hush.

“They will be there, like they are every year,” said Fluffy. She wiped the sweat from her neck, wiped her hand on her blouse, before gripping the wheel with both hands. “We are almost to the exit. Call Sunshine. Tell them to lead the rest, and we will meet them there.”

“Yuh-yuh-yuh stchupid? Di gal gon end up in Can-Canada. She sense of direction l-l-l-l-like a cockroach.” said Pana. He cracked open a Heineken from the cooler.

“What we gon do? Turn di van into a jet and flyway?” Uncle Sam and Aunt Patricia laughed.

“Karim is driving her. They will be fine,” said Fluffy, turning on her blinker looking over her shoulder. She swerved the van onto the shoulder.

Iman leaned forward and held on to the back of Aunt Patricia’s chair.

“What di aaaaaaaaass!” screamed Aunt Patricia.

“Di woman gone fuckin mad!” Grandfather gripped his arm rests.

Eyes wide, jaw locked, Pana moved gracefully with the van like a Jelly fish, not spilling a drip of brew.

“Look behind we!” said Uncle Sam, poking his head slightly out the window to see Sunshine’s car following, his nephew gripping the steering wheel, eyes sharp like a NASCAR racer, Sunshine, mouth open, lemur-eyed wide. She gripped her cellphone.

Aunt Patricia answered her cellphone and let out a laugh the sound of a hyena. Sunshine was on the line, praying aloud.

“Well I guess we breaking di law as a posse.” Aunt Patricia hung up the phone.

“We almost there! I see the exit! No ticket today, Gang!” Fluffy grinned. Her short, blonde whiskers trembled.

The driver of a home-painted Honda Civic *honkhonkhonked!* and flipped the bird as they took the exit, cutting him off one-by-one.

Iman unbuckled her seat earlier than she was supposed to, ready.

“One thing is for sure, this white woman gets to the money,” said Fluffy, pulling into the Key Arena lot.

“Di white woman want to kill we,” said Grandfather. He hopped out the van, adjusted his collar. “Leh we go!”

Iman stood on the pavement and watched Grandfather and his men load the trollies, give accented commands again and again and again to the helpers

who could not understand: *No, not so! Hold di pan by di rim! Don't hit we ting, yuh mad? Just rest it down so! Not so! So! Pass it so! Pass di ting to me, nuh? Rest it dey! Not dey! Dey! Bossman, wha wrong wit you?! Yuh hard hearin?*

The production workers were sweating, nervous, frustrated. They quickly learned to coddle the instruments. They looked at Grandfather's facial expressions for direction, reassurance. When Grandfather was assertive, people assumed he was going to kick their ass. They paid attention.

Aunt Patricia grabbed the final bass, the finely tuned fifty-five gallon industrial oil drum.

"I'll take that, Ms." said one of the workers, Zach. He quickly took off his shirt, revealing his tanned abs, defined back, "That thing has to way a ton."

She laughed. "Mrs," she said before lifting the tenor bass above her head. "Hold the trolley, Daddy! Iman! Look your mother and them coming up the hill! Walk up to the stage with them." She sat on the back of the trolley truck and rested the bass on her lap.

"There's room for she! Come quick, Saga Gal! Leh we go!"

Iman ran to the trolley and sat on Grandfather's lap.

The city of Seattle screamed. Iman devoured the atmosphere: people, ethnicities, business men and women waiting for the city transit, hustlers turning slowly at the light so those seeking can see their chromed wheels, a group of boys making cat-calls to a group of girls who look back, roll their eyes, smile, Rastafarians selling hand-carved Ankhs and natural oils, dreadlocked hippies, selling tie-dye

wear and incense, a group of Somalian muslimas passing a group of Scottish men playing bag pipes, a bus stopping mid-turn to avoid hitting a roller bladder, the smell of curly fries and grilled salmon, fried onions and elephant ears.

Above, the space needle gently swayed, the sun protected it from those who stared too hard. Blinded, Iman looked away to a vagabond. He stared back. She watched as his smile brightened between the passing bodies. He held a sign that read, "Pay me a buck, I'll try my luck."

When the trolley hit a sharp left, Iman went with the breeze, but she gripped the rail, clenched Grandfather's leg with the back of her knees. Grandfather held her, laughed. "Yuh see what happen when yuh don' finish yuh food? You gon' blow way!" *Beep Beepbeep beep!* They pulled up to the back of the stage. Uncle Malik and Fatima were there waiting. Fatima held two bags of cotton candy. Iman smiled.

The girls ate their candy on the edge of the stage-ramp. They reflected on the instant melt, they argued. Iman worked to create the perfect simile, Fatima was concrete:

"It's like a fluffy cloud turning into sweet sand, mmm."

"Or how bout its fluffy sweet cotton that melts to sugar."

"But clouds and sand makes me think of a warm beach, and cotton tastes nasty."

"But it's called cotton candy, Mani. So sand tastes good?"

"Cotton makes your mouth dry. *Have you ever been to the dentist?*"

"And sand quenches your thirst?"

“Well if the sand was a cloud first, maybe it was full of rain, yeah, so the sand isn’t dry.”

“So you like the taste of mud?”

Fluffy interrupted their debate, dragging a sky-blue wooden box. “Will you ladies set up the CD stand?”

Fatima smiled and tied her candy bag, Iman smiled and reached—

“Don’t touch them yet, Mani. Let’s go wash our hands first.”

#### A REFLECTION, A *VISION*

I listen  
 with my hands  
 as we set up  
 the band’s cd stand:  
*Hot Sweet Jumpy*  
 the rhythm *Dancing*  
 & *Prancing* in my palms  
 like possessed Blue Devils  
 beating bamboo,  
 biscuit tins, fire  
 blazing from mouths  
 as they jam south Jouvay  
 morning  
*Confusion*  
 each track changing  
 competing, proving  
 that it’s the *Best*  
*by Test* as I place stacks  
 of albums on racks,  
 I dream,  
 I listen,  
 as *Music Speaks*—

The girls carefully placed stacks of CDs on racks before setting them on the CD stand. They were instructed to organize them in the order they were released:

*Hot Sweet & Jumpy, Best by Test, Dancing and Prancing, Vision, Confusion, Music Speaks.*

Fatima was persistent, Iman lagged. She took her time to embrace each cover, each color. She turned to the back and studied each track. She declared that *Vision* was her favorite. It featured her favorite Disney songs, “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” and “Beauty and the Beast.” Grandfather arranged for a wide audience. He appealed to the imagination of children, the passion in adults, the nostalgia of the elderly.

“Pose for the camera!” said Karim.

The girls practiced for this moment together back at home, the day they would become models. Fatima placed her arm around Iman’s shoulder and smirked. Iman placed her hand on her hip, relaxed her shoulders, and smiled.

*Snap*

They finished their task and joined Sunshine and the gang on the lawn for the performance, twenty-five minutes before entertainment. Fatima sat next to her older brother, Karim. He crouched low in a prison pose to take pictures of the atmosphere. Karim was into production, he was into business, and he will grow up to be the family’s right-hand man.

Iman took a seat between her mother and Chris. Sunshine asked her daughter about the ride, wasn’t surprised to learn she enjoyed it, every last bit. She was her father’s child.

The audience gather  
 and scatter across  
 the lawn, the color of green  
 figs. Scatter  
 like notes on a music score:  
 Cs—*sharp* Ds E—flats Es  
*Accents*  
*accidentals*  
 natural Fs—*sharps* Gs  
 the feeling of Sheila E. rattling  
 her timbales in my tummy  
 as I wait to see  
 and hear the music  
 I felt in my palms  
 while placing stacks  
 of song  
 on racks.

On stage  
 water drips  
 from the tips  
 of Uncle Jacka's  
 dreads. Perspiration  
 pours  
 from the pores  
 of Aunt Patricia's  
 forehead. Poor mic-ing,  
 Grandfather erupts in rage:  
*Aye, Mic man!*  
*Yuh learnin today?*  
*Get off di damn stage!*  
*Lowa' di kick drum!*  
*Raise di leads! Sam!*  
*Pass mi di other*  
*stick bag...Wha!*

the whole band freezes.

“Kay! Come quick” hollered Grandfather from the stage. The band left behind all the mallets for the steel drums except the cellos. Uncle Sam kept them in his knapsack. Karim quickly rose, adjusted his hat to the back and sprinted to the stage; he was a track star for Woodrow Wilson High. He ran straight into a huddle of loud whispers, blame.

“i-i-iii-it wasn’t me! I pack di congas and tha ‘tis it!”

“Look di fuckin man admitting to not doing a damn ting!”

“If yuh did more den pack di kiss-mi-ass congas maybe we would have di sticks!”

“I-I-I I does play di pans? Fuck you! I di percussion man! Da ‘tis it!”

“All yuh, cussin ain’t gon’ give we sticks!”

“What do you need, Grandfather!”

“Kay! We left all di fuckin sticks for di pans in di kiss-mi-ass garage. We can’t play without we sticks. Go fetch balloons two balls from one of di booths, quick! Make sure they di sponge kind! Fast, fast!”

“What about the sticks? Want me to collect some small branches too?”

“We have di bag with extra sticks, it’s the tip of the sticks we need to play di pan.”

Karim ran back to Iman and the gang and quickly told them the task at hand.

## ENDLESS

I met with an old lost photo today. It was a picture of me and Fatima. Back when I took full breaths and my wings were so big that they touched with every flap.

I cried at the sight of my smile. I showed teeth. All of them. And I wasn't ashamed of the ones that came in wrong, together forming mountains.

My eyes said Iman Hope, my name. They were sure. And though I squinted to focus, they were still big and bright. My neck, long like time. My shoulders, relaxed, letting it show.

Not like my hair. Strands stood and danced into a bun,  
before Dark and Lovely,  
before they gave in to society's gravity.

What happened?  
When did I lose my name?  
The meaning?  
Faith.

What happened to that feeling of infinity? Endless like sky? Free and flowing like rivers  
undiscovered?

## DISSONANT CHORDS

I still have the book that brought grief to my mother.

And I still push the button on the cover to hear the tune.

*Sing, sing a song*  
*Sing out loud*  
*Sing out strong*  
*Sing of good things not bad*  
*Sing of happy not sad*

Sometimes melody and memory come together and clash.

Listen:

“You just don’ have nobody buyin’ anything for my chile’!” Sunshine had Michael on speaker as she ironed her blouse for work.

Iman watched as a cloud of steam fumed the air, mimicking her mother’s temperament.

“You sposed to be getting yuh shit together, but instead yuh layin up with some Druggy! You blind son-of-a-bitch!” Her Trinidadian accent sliced the air.

Iman cringed. She hated when her mother mentioned her father’s cone dystrophy during their reoccurring battles. And she was sure her mother hated it too, when everything was over—his provocations, her rage.

Sunshine didn’t want anything to do with Michael, but she couldn’t stand the thought of him having someone who did.

“Up yours, man!” he said, as Iman picked up her new book and headed to Grandfather’s room. On her way, she pondered the meaning of “up yours” and what her father meant by it.

“Look, me saga gal!” greeted Grandfather with a smile.

Iman’s grin resembled Jim Carrey’s when he stared in *The Mask*, one of her favorite movies to watch with her father. Book in hand, she dashed for the bed, his arms meeting her halfway.

“Look what my daddy’s friend got me!” she said, pushing the orange button:  
“*La-la-do-lala. Do-la-la-do-lala.*”

“Oh yeah? Well tell yuh father it’s time for him to give you and yuh motha’ something. Want to know wha’ i’tis?”

“What?”

“A house,” he joked. His laugh was the sound of air escaping a punctured tire, a hiss.

Chuckling too, Iman pressed the button again. She opened the book and followed along, identifying each word to the lyric with her index finger. The illustrations of dancing forest animals reminded her of trips to Northwest Trek Animal Park.

Grandfather beat his belly in time with the melody. By the third push, Iman knew he loved the song as well.

“Saga gal! You wan’ me to play this tune on pan for you?”

Iman's heart began free-falling, her mind stood its ground. "The whole band? How?"

"Wha' you mean how? Yuh grandfather can play anyting, man! I is an arranga'!" He beat his belly like a conga and created his own nursey-rhyme for his granddaughter on the spot:

#### A MEDLEY

Watch di mosquito  
dingolay,  
dodgin spray  
to di calypso  
rhythm of Lord  
Kitchy, singin  
"Bees Melody."  
Hear di humming-  
bird outside by  
di bush, buzzin  
in harmony next  
to di drunkard  
iguana in di coco-  
nut tree.  
Bachanaal  
in di alley, as stray  
dogs run down  
agouti into  
the cock coop,  
where they bawl  
out, and di fowl,  
feelin di treble,  
flaps, jumps  
and waves  
like flag-woman  
J'ouvay mornin,  
Carnival day.

Make way  
 for di moths  
 masqueradin  
 in di light til  
 dey catch fire, dustin  
 down on foreheads  
 like ash  
 on Wednesday.

That night, Iman pushed that orange until her mother finally responded: “Mani, if you push that button one more time, YUH GON’ SEE!”

“Can you just read it to me, Mommy?”

Sunshine read the song book to her two times before cutting off the light.

“Hug me, Mommy.”

Sunshine let out a sigh, the sound of waves hitting shore in the distance, before turning to her side and putting her arm around her daughter. Iman felt safe. She was almost asleep when she heard her mother snuffle. Sunshine was crying, and Iman knew that it had something to do with her father.

“Mommy, why are you sad?”

“Don’t worry. I just need to think of good things, not bad.”

Iman closed her eyes and prayed:

I say my prayers every night. I ask God to make me and mommy and  
 daddy a happy family. I pray and ask Him to make Daddy stop doing bad  
 stuff, the stuff Mommy talks about. I pray and ask God to let Daddy see  
 a little better, so we can have fun a lot instead of a little. I ask God if He  
 can continue to put a roof above my head, clothes on my back, food on  
 the table. Mommy says that it’s very important to say that. I ask God to

let me be a leader not a follower. I don't know what that means, but Mommy says it's important, so I know it's important.

Iman woke up the next morning alone in bed. The smell of fresh fried bake danced to Preacher's "Jump and Wave" in her nostrils. Stretching, she grabbed *Sing a Song* and headed for the door. The music coming from the other side vibrated her body into groove. She stopped twisting her hips when she reached the end of the hallway.

"Good mawning, Girlfriend!" screamed Aunt Sammayah as she balled the dough. "Yuh muddah just left for work."

"Gal, I thought you did dead! Yuh hungry?" Granny smiled as she flipped the bake in the frying pan.

"About time," said Fatima. She set a piece of fried bread on a plate and dropped it in Iman's place at the table. "The saltfish ain't done yet. Eat this for now."

Iman took a seat next to her cousin.

Noticing Fatima eyeing the picture book, Iman slid it across the table. Fatima tossed the final piece of bread in her mouth, wiped her hands in her overgarment and pressed the button, still leaving a grease mark on the cover. She flipped through the pages.

"This is super easy to read."

"My dad's friend gave it to me!" said Iman, pleased with herself.

"Well tell yuh faddah friend, you don' need no gifts from she!" said Aunt Sammayah, speaking Sunshine's mind.

“Ooooooooooooooh!” Fatima chimed in, understanding the situation much better than her little cousin. “Your dad’s girlfriend gave you that!” she continued, realizing Iman was taking the word “friend” too literally.

Iman felt a sudden slam to the gut, the force of a kick drum. *Girlfriend?* She felt an ocean begin to form in her throat that she couldn’t control, as if God commanded her to swallow the sea. She tried her best. Iman wasn’t sure if she was sad because her father found someone new, sad because the book made her mother sad, or sad because she loved the book, the music, that brought her mother pain.

“Don’t cry, Mani,” said Fatima, noticing the sheen in Iman’s eyes, the twitch of her bottom lip.

“The Chile is fine. It just the onion irritating she,” said Granny, wiping her own eyes in her apron. She continued chopping.

Iman refused to look up at Fatima, who knew the truth. She kept her eyes fixed on her untouched plate. Fatima closed the book silently, resting it away from both her and Iman.

“Want to play Barbies?” she whispered.

“No.”

Iman finally raised her gaze to watch her grandmother set the table for her grandfather’s breakfast. Granny set his two wine glasses, filled with orange juice and water, to the left, his champagne glass of milk and teacup of Lipton, to the right. She aligned his eating utensils precisely, and, in the center, she rested a plate of three fried bakes and

saltfish, making sure the sauce and bread did not touch. She crowned the plate of food with a bowl of sliced cantaloupe.

“Albut! Di food done!”

Within seconds, Grandfather made his way to the kitchen, patting the water and baby oil in his hair dry. He noticed the book placed beyond his placemat.

“We practicing soon, you know?” he said, grinning at Iman. “Come watch.”

Iman continued to sit at the table. Fatima excused herself to braid the hair of her My Size Barbie on the couch.

As Grandfather ate, Iman watched the sweat trickle across his forehead, over his temples, down the center of his nose. Noticing, Granny wiped her soapy hands in her morning gown and fetched his white handkerchief.

“Tanks,” he said, wiping his face. “You put di whole bottle of peppa in di ting or wha’? Di food hot.”

“You want some more milk?”

“I good.”

Grandfather took his final sip of tea, dabbed his nose, grabbed his granddaughter’s songbook and headed for the garage door.

“It half past eleven, and di gal ain’t reach here yet,” he complained, before slamming the door shut behind him. Iman was certain he was referring to his daughter, her Aunt Patricia. She was always late for rehearsal.

“You ready for your saltfish yet, Girlfriend?” asked Aunt Sammayah.

“Not yet.”

“Don’ come bother me sayin’ you hungry when I sit down, yuh know?”

“I’m not hungry.”

Iman knew what her grandfather was going to do, and she wasn’t sure if she should watch. She wasn’t sure if she should listen. She didn’t want to like it.

*La-la-do-lala! Do-la-la-do lala!* sang the double second steel drum.

Iman excused herself from the table to join the music.

When she opened the door, the shine of Grandfather’s gold tooth reassured her. He moved from behind the double seconds to retrieve the cowbell in the percussion bag.

Cheesing, Iman took a seat on the garage step. He placed the cowbell and mallet in her hand.

“Watch me, eh?” he instructed, with eye contact. He began to clap his hands, “1, 2-1, 2-1, 2-1, 2- follow me.”

Iman’s hands shook. The mallet felt as if it didn’t belong in her palm. It reminded her of the first time she held a crayon. She attempted, “1—2-1-2-2, 2—2—1.”

“Wha wrong with you, gal? Beat di ting like yuh beatin me belly!” Grandfather slipped the piece of percussion from her left hand, and placed it in her right, switching the mallet to her left.

“Try ’gain. 1, 2-1, 2-1, 2-1, 2.”

“1—2—1—2-1, 2-1, 2-”

“1, 2-1, 2-1, 2-1, 2” “1, 2-1, 2-1, 2-1, 2,” they knocked and clapped in time together.

“Saga Gal! You a left-handa? You will bring people real trouble if you learn di tenor pan! A threat fi trute! Keep it up!” Grandfather vocalized the count as he took his

place back behind his instrument. “Yeah, dat is it! Keep di timing! Count to yourself!” and at that, he began.

The song coming from Grandfather’s pan was Obeah, magic. Iman’s hands continued to shake, not from nerves but adrenaline. Iman felt like a saga gal, the boss, in control. She kept the timing.

Grandfather couldn’t keep his composure at the sight, at the sound. He broke into dance! “That’s it! That’s it!” he approved, as he swooped his granddaughter from the stoop. Holding her little hand, they moved and laughed together, like a consonant chord.

“How cute! I know, I know, Daddy. Sorry!” Aunt Patricia made her way up the driveway, hips rocking back and forth like a sailboat on water.

“You does get me real vex, you know! Real fuckin vex!” scolded Grandfather.

He placed his granddaughter back onto her feet. Hesitantly, she took a seat on the first step.

“But, Daddy, ain’t nobody else here but we!”

“I did want you to get yuh part before di percussion come!” Worry bout yuh kiss-mi-ass self!” Grandfather screamed. Iman noticed the vein protruding from his left temple. “We have only two days to learn di damn song! I want to play di ting for di people children at di festival!”

“Oh gosh, relax yuhself, nuh? I here now!” whined Aunt Patricia.

“Just get behind di damn bass.”

Aunt Patricia quickly placed herself between the four chromed barrels.

“I guess this is the wrong time to ask if yuh granny cook?” She looked at Iman and smirked. Iman returned the expression, then lowered her gaze nervously.

Iman waited patiently as her grandfather taught her aunt “Sing a Song.” She hoped to be able to play the cowbell one last time before rehearsal was over.

“No, not Pom-di-dom! It’s pom-pom-di-dom!” coached Grandfather. “Di notes right, but you moving too fast!”

He stopped playing the melody and began the harmony. “I gonna play di chords for you. Move to di next note when I move. You will hear when you off, ’cause di bass and chord will clash.” He laughed. “I want we to make music not confusion.”

Grandfather turned to Iman, then back to his daughter. “I tell mi saga gal to come listen, and you only making noise in she ears,” he joked. “Saga Gal, go and hang with Fatima, and when di whole band learn di song, you will come play cowbell.”

“Kay.”

Confident in her grandfather’s ability, satisfied that she would soon be part of the song, Iman was hungry.

When she reentered the house, Fatima was watching *Family Matters* on the couch.

“Fatima, can I have some saltfish?” Iman whispered.

“Granny put some away for you in the microwave.”

Iman was in her room teaching her imaginary class when Sunshine arrived from work.

“Let’s go, Iman,” was her greeting when she found her daughter slowly moving the picture book from right to left, so the whole class could see.

“Don take di chile to see no set of confusion,” pleaded Granny.

“Leave me granddaughter right here! You can go chase man if you want to!”

commanded Grandfather.

Gripping Iman’s hand, Sunshine headed straight for the front door.

“Where we goin, Mommy?”

“To visit yuh no good father at your grandparents’ house.”

The drive to the Hope residence was even longer for Iman than usual. From the backseat, she watched the shadows of the trees. They frightened her. The trees looked as though they were trying to tell her something. The wind forced them to sway the opposite direction of where they were heading.

“I want to go back, Mommy,” said Iman, not too far from a whisper. She was always ecstatic about taking trips to see her Grandpa and Grandmother. But, this time, she wanted the gust to gently sway the car the other direction. She wished the wind would graciously waltz them home.

“Not right now, Precious.”

“Why we goin’ to see Daddy? Are you guys gonna fight?”

“No, Iman.”

“You promise?”

Sunshine didn’t respond. Instead, she turned up the volume to the radio:

*Like a moth to a flame,  
burned by the fire.  
My love is blind,*

*can't you see my desire?  
That's the way love goes.*

As the beat dropped, Iman's worries dissolved into imagination, detachment. Janet Jackson's voice was a lullaby to her anxiety. It was almost asleep when she took notice of her mother's shoulders. They were moving like Grandpa Hope's when going over bumps and potholes around the pond on the tractor. She knew her mother was crying again.

Sunshine made the final right, arriving at the iron gate. The trees stood stern to watch it all unfold. Usually, the gate was closed. But that night it was wide open. Unlike the trees that wanted them to turn around, the gate was an instigator. Iman pushed her thumb in her mouth.

Outside of the car, the world was pitch-black, except for the two lights on the porch. Sunshine looped around the cul-de-sac before turning off the engine. Instantly, she hopped out of the car. Swiping her daughter up like a fumbled football, she headed for the front door. For the first time, Iman didn't feel safe in her mother's arms. Safety had been substituted for solitude. Iman was in her arms, but she knew that in just a few moments, she would be on her own.

Sunshine pushed the doorbell: *Bing Bong Ding Dong!* The doorbell rang Iman into three months ago when her mother and father first fell out. Sunshine told Michael that she didn't want to hear from him until he had gotten his life back together.

Curiously, Iman had asked her mother what was wrong with his life. *He no longer had control over it* was what Sunshine said. As if it was a disobedient dog.

“Your father has to get ahold of his life, before he can get back ahold of his family,” she told her.

Iman didn’t understand. She knew she had—

### THE COOLEST DAD IN THE WORLD

My daddy says that I’m his best friend, and he is my best friend too. Before his eyes got reeeeeally bad, he used to pick me up from Granny and Grandfather’s in his car with no ceiling, and we used to zoom! We went everywhere! To the Zoo, the movies, the Puyallup Fair, the trails!

When we zoomed, he used to say, “Tell me the right color of the lights, or else the cops are gonna capture us!” I did a good job. I loved that game, and for some reason, I think my daddy loved it too.

But now his eyes are too bad. So bad that the cops told him that he couldn’t drive, or he’d be captured. It’s hard for me to see him now. “I’m sorry. I can’t come see you today, no ride,” he says. He pinky swears. He tells me that it’s his word. That means he can’t break the promise, he says—but he does.

Mommy yells at him on the phone. She tells him that he is a “no good liar.” She says bad words and calls him a “drug-addy”? I don’t know what that is, but drugs are bad. My dad’s no drug-addy.

She tells me not to hold on tight to his promises, because it will make me sad. But I believe my dad. Every time he asks me to,

I do—



After three minutes of making them wait in the porch light, Michael came to the door.

“Who is it!”

Sunshine didn’t answer. As he opened the door slightly, with her left hip and elbow, she rammed the door open.

Behind Michael, a silhouette of a woman with a hand on her hip stood in the dimly lit hallway.

LA-LA-DO-LALA

*Sing of good things, not bad.*  
They begin. In her head, she screams  
*Sing of happy, not sad.*

Needle fish, barracuda: Mom, Dad.  
Words puncture flesh, blows, steam,  
*Sing of good things, not bad.*

Enraged, they forget the guppy they have.  
Splashing thoughts tread murky water. To re-  
deem her security she sings, *sing of happy, not sad.*

Snatched, door slammed, hand slivered a tad.  
“Give back my child!” shattering windows, Dad’s dream.  
Car-alarm flashing, it beams, good things, not bad.

Grandpa strains to restrain, Grandma goes mad.  
Now on the scene, patrollers, a team  
of police officers. *Sing of happy, not sad.*

A mix-up, millisecond: Grandpa's cuffed, adds  
to the tragedy. Anxiety bellows, tearing her seams—  
Just sing, sing, Sing of good things, not bad—  
Just sing, sing, Sing of happy, not sad.



Grandma Hope placed a band-aid on Iman's sliver, set her on her lap, and slowly rocked back and forth.

"Mrs. Hope, may I have a word with you!" said a police officer.

It was her time to share her perspective of the incident. Iman was told to stay upstairs until everything was settled—the shoreline after the typhoon. Trembling, she walked to her red plastic tub full of picture books. After skimming through a few pages of *Swimmy*, she decided to take a peek.

From the family room window, Iman could see the flashing lights of the cop cars. The trees danced back and forth gossiping, and the breeze softly hummed the tune, *la-la-do-lala—*

## A THANK YOU

Dear Grandma,

Remember when I used to be your mini helper? When stirrin' the batter was my job and, according to you, I was the best? Remember re-twisting my hair? And I hated it because the twirls were always fat, and would smack me in the eye when I turned? Remember when we colored pictures? And you saw beyond my motor skills and said I was an artist? When I was four, and you put peroxide on my sliver from the broken glass, and gave me a book and a lap to keep my thoughts from the cops outside? Remember when you told me your meat-mallet was a grandpa-tamer, and every grandma needed one? When you said I was smart, strong-minded, and if I silenced myself for a boy, it would kill me?

Remember me, Grandma?

Me, with barrettes, teeth missing, brittle scabs, who derbied with grandpa around the pond? Do you remember feeling the vibrations of our laughter colliding  
with the tractor before calling us in to eat?

Me, with the side-tail, relaxed to my shoulder, class skippin, *my lip gloss is poppin*? When I pierced my nose, went from hiding to look-at-me type clothes and begged for all the Chuck Taylor's and the Jordan Retros?

Did you think you lost me for good?

Me,  
now, with locks that rope down,  
grounding like roots, who cooks,  
adding your secret pinch of cayenne,  
my meat-mallet, a boy pulverizer  
until the right man?

Me,  
who writes about you,  
who speaks louder,  
who strides farther,  
who stands  
on your shoulders?

Do you remember me,  
Grandma?

Remember me.

PART II

## WAITING IN VAIN

The first time Iman heard Bob Marley's "Waiting in Vain" was in the windowsill at her grandparents' house. Her grandfather had put the song on repeat, humming the bass to his arrangement-in-progress.

Backpack on back, Iman sat with her eyes staring out the living room window, waiting, living, for her father's arrival. The season beautified the yard, splashing shades of green, red, orange, yellows, pinks on Granny's tulips, a reminder of the vibrant colors of carnival, back home in Trinidad.

"What i'tis you doin still by di window?" asked Grandfather, entering the living room from the family room, plate of curried chicken and rice in hand, "Come eat! That man not go' come!" He exited the living room to share his frustration with Granny.

"She there wit she shoes on back-to-front, waitin on di man whole day! I tired he do she that!" He slapped the paper plate on the wooden table. Grains of rice scattered across the surface like ants on a picnic cloth.

"Well, look di mess you makin!" scolded Granny. She headed to the sink for a washcloth.

"I sorry, but I vex! Di man get me so vex! He a junkie!"

"Not in front di Chile! Don' talk bout di man in front she! And di day ain't finish! Give di man some time!"

Back in the living room, Iman's throat began to close. Tears formed. She pictured her father sprawled out on the living room floor of his apartment, sleeping. His snores reminded her of a walrus's burp she heard at the zoo when her father was still able to drive her there.

*Wake up, Daddy, you pinky-swearing. You pinky-swearing you would put on your clock right this time,* she thought.

*I know you're waiting to hear it in your dreams,* she whispered.

Iman buried her head in the cushions. She felt a bungee-chord of snot whip the forest-green pillow when she sneezed.

Michael was a man who couldn't walk past someone on the street without a greeting. Yet, he was also a man who believed disabled beggars should "get off their ass and get a damn job." He was a man who loved to just go, travel, discover—yet he hated vacations. He was a man who always wanted to spend time with his children. Yet, for some reason, he barely showed.

Iman sat by the window until her mother finally pulled into the driveway from work. The sun had set. They both were starving.

At the table, though Sunshine was hungry, she could not manage to take a bite. As she watched her daughter trace her name in the curried stained grains, she took notice of how much she looked like her father. She shook her head, before fixing her focus back to her own plate.

She had no idea why Michael hadn't shown up, and she allowed her lack of knowledge to provoke her thoughts. When Michael did manage to call his daughter, the day after every disappointment, he seemed as though he was exhausted from a hoot-owl, down at the docks. But Sunshine knew that he had probably crashed from a night of partying. Michael swore on the vision he had left that he was now a clean man.

Sunshine was not sure.

“Eat, Mommy.”

“Okay, Precious.”

It was after Michael choked Richard that the rest of the workers nicknamed him Blind Fury. Richard had told his last Ray Charles joke that night on the dock at the Port of Tacoma. Being a part of the Union, the worst that they could do was send Michael home for the night.

After he told his boss off, Michael waited outside the gates. Squinting at every car that slowed to see if he could make out a sign on top that read “Taxi,” he reached into his steel-toe and pulled out a cigarette. As the cherry trail-blazed from the pull, he thought about his daughter, the sound of her voice when he had finally managed to call.

A car honked twice from straight ahead,

“Excuse me, sir. Are you waiting for a taxi?”

“Well, no shit!” spazzed Michael, tossing both arms in the air.

“Well, I’ve been here the whole time. Sir.”

Michael squeezed himself into the back.

“I told the prick on the phone to tell whoever’s picking me up to look out for me, cause I’m blind. Literally fuckin blind! Cone Dystrophy!”

Michael was unaware of the taxi driver’s stare through the rear-view mirror. He waited for more information regarding the disease.

“Sorry about the wait, sir. Please fasten your seat belt.”

“Yea, let’s just get outta here, Tonight’s not my night, and I hate waiting. No patience.”

As the smell of Tacoma Aroma invaded his nostrils, Michael thought about his annual promise he gave his daughter—a trip to Disneyland. He thought about Sunshine. Though he loved her, he hated the fact that she knew him too well. He hated the fact that she would soon teach their daughter everything she knew, the side of him that explained the reason for his lies and no-shows. Right then, Michael knew it was time to make things right. He would call Sunshine. He would tell her that he is ready to be with his family, and that they would live like one. He would apologize for everything, everything. And with an attitude, Sunshine would forgive him like she always did.

LEAVING THE HOUSE OF 45<sup>TH</sup> AND SHERIDAN

Goodbye two bedrooms,  
the third being a garage,  
sealed by grandfather  
to keep the creepy  
caterpillars from creeping in.

Goodbye to the fifteen members  
of blood, occupying the three rooms.  
A nuclear family eruption,  
spreading extended love  
like nuclear bombs.

Goodbye wondrous waterbed.  
I will miss riding your waves,  
'til I fatigue & crash on land  
accidentally wetting  
the sand.

Goodbye marching ants  
as they stomp  
through the kitchen, in a single-file  
line, while my aunts cook  
roti, curried-goat, curried eggplant.

Goodbye blackberry bush.  
Sticky purple slew on my palms,  
as Tupac says  
the blacker the sweeter  
on the radio.

Goodbye blocked, black stereo  
blasting grandfather's band:  
*Caribbean Super Stars Steel Pan,*

or bacchanal from Calypsonians  
like Lord Kitchener and Super Blue.

Goodbye old man next door  
with the royal-blue slug-bug, next  
to the old woman who let me tug  
at her flowers, around  
the baby-blue picket-fence.

Goodbye small decline  
of a cracked driveway,  
as my cousin Khadijah  
and I share a pair  
of roller-skates.

Goodbye Matt,  
neighbor with the Dad who never  
let him play, his smile was untrue.  
Wondering if the rumors were real,  
praying that wasn't happening  
to you—



Iman remembered:

“One more thing before you go,” said Sunshine as Michael headed toward the front door. He turned around as she stuck up her middle finger.

“What do you want, witch?” Michael stood in the doorway, gazing back, yet making no eye contact, a conga bag of workgear over his shoulder, an Olde English “800” and hard-hat in hand.

“She’s giving you the finger, Daddy,” reported Iman in a low puny tone.

“Oh, up yours, man! Later, baby girl!” He slammed the door behind him.

As Iman gathered her colored pencils from the floor, she noticed her father’s glasses next to the Nintendo 64. He forgot them. The lenses, the color of rusted oil barrels that Granny used outside to catch rain, was smudged with grease from Tim Cascade Jalapeno Chips. Iman wiped the lenses with her shirt, before taking a peep through the clear windows. The power of the prescription felt as if the sun was piercing her pupils. But nothing was bright. She quickly took them off, before turning to her mother.

“Why does Daddy always leave his glasses? Don’t he need them, Mommy?”

“I don’ know what yuh fathah need, Iman. He needs help; tha’ tis what he needs.”

“Who’s taking him to works?”

“I believe yuh Grandpa jus’ picked him up, Mani.”

“How come we couldn’t? I love seeing the lights at night.”

“You know I does be scared to drive down there at night, Mani. It’s too confusing. You want a machine to crush we? And I don’ like that man a’tall, right now. I don’ want him next to me in my car.”

Iman took her mother’s response as her cue to go and read a book to her imaginary class. In her room, she walked straight past her soft-pink and baby-blue Barbie Dream House, stuffed with dolls of all shades of brown, and headed straight to her huge crate of picture books.

She cautiously began lifting out each one. Her technique grew more careless as she realized the book she wanted was at the bottom. When she finally pulled out *Old McDonald*, she had a pile of books surrounding her to use as a lounge chair.

“Today, we are going to learn about animals,” she said, holding the cover up to an empty space in the corner.

When she turned the page to the ducklings, she began to reflect on the past trips with her father to Point Defiance Park—back before he was diagnosed, before they had to take his license away. Bright and early, Michael would pull up to Granny and Grandfather’s house, while Sunshine was at work. He would blow on Iman’s belly until she awoke in laughter. He used a washcloth to wipe the dry spit crusted around her mouth, no time to brush teeth. Together, they were out the door for a morning of feeding the ducks and squirrels.

Iman closed the book. She thought about the sudden change in her father after he sold his car. He stopped showing up. She thought about the day that they moved in

together as a family, her father’s promise that things would be different. She did not like the change. She was tired of waiting until Sunshine or Grandma and Grandpa were available to take them places. She was tired of having to reschedule fun because her parents were unable to make it out the front door peacefully. Iman was tired of waiting for her prayer to be answered, her prayer for a happy family.

“Mani,” Sunshine said from the doorway, “Let’s read and get ready for bed.”

Iman listened to her mother read Mary Hoffman’s *Amazing Grace* for the seventeenth time. Sunshine was not keeping track.

“So what does the book teach us, Mani?”

“That black girls can do everything too.”

“Yes, Iman, that you can be anything or do anything you put yuh mind to. Now, say your prayers and go to sleep.”

*Where there is faith, there is love.  
Where there is love, there is peace.  
Where there is peace, there is God.  
Where there is God, there is no need*



That night when he picked up his son for work, Mr. Hope felt the intrusion of tension as Michael entered and closed the door.

“How you doing, kid?” he asked as he lit a cigar—he didn’t care. He figured it was the usual weather between his son and Sunshine. The storm between them that

made him drive from Puyallup to the eastside of Tacoma to take his thirty-three-year-old son to work. He amped up the blues on the stereo, to buckle the tension somewhere in the backseat of the Lincoln Navigator, away from him.

On the radio, the king of blues growled and howled, *you braggin' bout yo woman, but good God, you ain't see mine. Once she start her lovin' she bring eyesight to the blind.*

Michael's blazing thoughts of Sunshine shifted to warm ones. His nostrils, the part of his face that told the ones who knew him best to give him space, were no longer flared. He thought about her nonverbal communication right before he walked out the door. He smirked. Her feistiness was a turn on.

"Pull over at the next gas station, please. I want to grab a pack of cigarettes and something to drink for lunch."

Inside Chevron, Michael asked the store clerk if the soda he held in his hand was an orange or grape Fanta.

The clerk stared blankly back at him.

"Hello! I'm going to be late for work!"

"Can't you read? What, are you color blind?"

"As a matter-of-fact, I am," responded Michael with a faint smile.

"Grape."

Michael put the soda back and picked up the one in the next row. At the counter, the store clerk read Michael's work-badge.

"A blind longshoreman, huh?" he asked.

"Right," said Michael.

“Right,” said the clerk, handing Michael his small plastic bag of purchases.

Michael sensed the sarcasm in his voice. “Fuck you, Mother fucker.” He snatched his bag and exited the store.

“You want to know one of my biggest challenges?” he asked his father, settling back into the Navigator, unwrapping his pack of Newports.

“And what’s that, kid?” asked Mr. Hope, buckling back his seatbelt, before putting the car in reverse.

“Living in both worlds, the world of the seeing and the world of the blind. It’s either motherfuckers act like assholes when I need their help, or motherfuckers want to rob me of my independence. Sometimes I need help, an’ sometimes I fuckin’ don’t, Dad.”

Mr. Hope did not respond. He knew his son just wanted him to listen.

“It’s like I’m waiting to lose all of it. A cancer patient has hope. Doctors constantly remind them that someone out there is searching for a cure. But me? My job it just wait, wait patiently and watch my life slowly vanish before my eyes, literally. Fuck this shit.”

Mr. Hope pulled up to the gate and popped the trunk.

“Be safe out there, kid. I love you, Son.”

“Love you too, Dad. And sorry for having to call you so late.”

Michael grabbed his conga-bag from the trunk and headed toward the lights, the sounds of the cranes.



That night, Sunshine couldn't sleep. Turning slowly around on the bed, she peeped at Iman before cautiously rising. In the family room, she lay on Michael's couch, the one closest to the television. She stared at the muted box while Bob Marley's greatest hits played softly on the stereo.

Suddenly, the new Mustang flashed across the screen. As the Ford sign followed, she thought about Michael. She thought about Michael having to call his father to take him to work. Guilt squeezed her. She imagined the way he would talk to her in the car, on the way to the Port, as if he didn't need her, as if he could still jump into his all-white 5.0 drop-top and go.

As she turned to her side, burying her head into the cushion, her earring slipped into the crack. She reached down. A tear between the springs. She reached further. When her fingers touched the surface of glass, she pulled her arm out to discover a small charred glass tube, a pipe. Sunshine knew what it was and who it belonged to.

It all made sense now.

Sunshine thought about the day before last. Allergies sent her home early from work. As she entered the house, startled, Michael had jumped up from the couch. "Have you seen the remote?" he'd asked, bending over. His calloused hands searched in the same corner where Sunshine now found the pipe.

What if Mani did find this? She thought. "I knew it! I know di man!" she screamed in the cushion as Bob Marley cried, "I don't wanna wait in vain for your love!" In rage, she pitched the pipe to the wall and watched the stained piece shatter.

*Why am I doing this? What am I holding on to?* She cried herself to sleep as she waited for Michael to return home from work—or phone her to pick him up.



Tell me it isn't  
me again and again  
and again  
even when it is

Weigh on me  
crush my worries  
with limbs  
melt it away  
with body heat

turn the sweat  
coming from my palms  
into rain

## SALTWATER

In my head,

I practiced the way

I would tell my teacher

as I felt the pee absorb my stockings,

tidaling its way to my deep blue, green, black

plaid skirt that reminded me of the nightmares that I never

told my mother about, until years later when I find out we share

the same dreams. Before I ever had to piss in a cup at the doctor's office,

I learned at an early age that it was hard to urinate when it was for any reason

other than merely emptying the bladder. I wanted to go home. I needed to go home.

I tied my sweater around my waist before leaving the bathroom stall. At the sink, I

globbed soap on my hands, interlocked my fingers, pressing my palms tightly together,

and imagined an octopus as I waved my fingers, up and down like seaweed in the sea.

I couldn't wait to go home and watch *The Little Mermaid* with my father. I was sure he was home. He worked hoot owls. I figured that's why he slept all day, though my mother would sometimes blame it on drugs. He would put his arm around me, and, though his snores were a constant foghorn, I would finally feel at ease.

I washed my hands until I was sure that I would be the last in line. As we entered the classroom, I grabbed Mrs. Alterae's hand, timidly pulling her back into the hallway.

"Ummm, Mrs Alterae, I think I had an accident. My stockings was too tight." I lowered my gaze to my new black clogs that my mother bought from The Bon Marche. I couldn't let her look me in the eyes. I knew she would discover the lie hidden in my pupils. She rested her hand on my head. My barrettes sank into my scalp.

"No worries. Stay right here, Iman." She hurried inside and phoned Ms Magera, the school counselor. She came and escorted me to the office, so I could phone home.

When my father finally arrived, I learned that I had peed the bed a couple of nights ago. I didn't remember.

As we walked home, my eyes caught a squirrel leaping up a tree. My mind pounced back to a few years ago, when my mother and I used to stay at my granny's. Before my father's sight got too bad and the doctor diagnosed him with cone dystrophy, when my mother left for work, my father would pull up to my grandparents' house with plans for us to go. He never really pondered where he would go. He was just a man who "goes."

I thought about a particular morning when he sporadically came to pick me up.

"But di chile, jus wake! Wait, let di chile brush she teet', and let me comb up she hair," said Granny, her Trinidadian accent spiced the air.

"She'll be fine, Ms. Norms," said my father as he wet a piece of napkin to wipe the dry spit from around my mouth. "Ready, knucklehead?"

We ended up at the Point Defiance Park where we fed peanuts to the squirrels and bread to the ducks.

My thoughts exhausted my feet. I slowed down. My father stopped suddenly and crouched. “Hop on!”

“But I peed.”

“Hop on, chump.”

I climbed on his back.

“Vroom, vroom, vroooooom,” he said as he ran down the hill.

The wind caught the twists of my hair, and for a moment, I was back strapped in the back of my father’s 5.0 drop top, going—

As I scraped the old chili into the garbage bag, I worried that we wouldn’t finish in time. “Come, Knucklehead. You’re going to miss the best part of the movie,” my father said, the heat from the television screen damped his forehead.

“But Mommy’s on her way.”

“Oh, man! Let’s get outta here while we can, baby girl!” he said before exploding into laughter. My father would turn anything into a joke. That was his way of making people think that he had no worries.

“Please help me clean-up, Daddy. Mommy said—”

“Just relax, Knucklehead. We’ll clean as soon as this movie’s over.” He laid there, stretched on the sofa, the headrest, a pedestal for his leg. His sock was halfway off his foot, and I could see his crusty heel, a used stainless-steel pot scrubber.

“But look at the dishes. Fix the pillows. Get up, Daddy. My mommy’s gonna be here—”

“Oh, Jiminy Christmas, Chump!” he laughed as he rose into a stretch, his arms reaching toward the roof, revealing the scar above his navel. He gathered the cushions from the floor and tossed them on the couch. “You should start by puttin’ all these damn Barbies away. You know I can’t see. If I step on one, it might puncture my beauties,” he said referring to his crawdads for feet. He flopped back down on the couch.

“Get up, and move the couch back, Daddy.”

“Well ain’t this a bitch? No love for Dad, huh? Who cares if Daddy can’t see shit, as long as the house is how Mommy wants it, right?” He grinned in my direction. I didn’t smile back. My father had no idea how nervous I was.

To this day, my mother will never admit it, but people who know her best knows that, when it comes to her house, she has a slight case of OCD. She wanted her house to be perfect. She wanted everything to be spotless. My father was a mess. He couldn’t stay clean.

When the doorknob rattled, I whipped my neck to my father, my barrette slapping me in the eye. “See, daddy. Told you.”

“We’re goners, baby girl,” he whispered.

My mom opened the door, and we immediately made eye contact. She observed the Barbies scattered across the floor, the empty beers, pop cans, Tim's Cascade Potato Chips next to a bowl covered in dried ranch resin, the indents on the carpet floor, where the couch was supposed to be.

"Hi, Mommy."

"Mani, look at meh house. Hi." She couldn't even look at my father.

She walked down the stairs and into the bathroom to retrieve the 409 and Awesome from the cabinet. She witnessed the tobacco and shit stains that occupied the inside of the toilet bowl.

"Gross," she said, shaking her head, "Di man sick."

"Hiiiiii, Sunshine. Love, love!" My father said as she headed up the stairs. She didn't look back. I followed.

As my mother washed the dishes, my father came up to spark a fire that would soon burn out of control. "Me and my daughter was havin a good time. Are you gonna ruin our day with your bitchiness?"

"Michael Hope. Jus leave meh alone," she said, as she flipped on the switch to the garbage disposal.

"Oh boy, Iman. There goes our fuckin night."

"Don talk to me chile that way."

"I can talk to my got damn daughter however I want to. She knows I ain't cussin at her. That's my dawg. You gonna bitch about everything?"

My mother let out a soft giggle, before turning off the machine. I knew then that her patience was almost out of fuel. I got off the bar stool and wrapped my arms around her waist, placing my head on her stomach. I put my thumb in my mouth.

“Move, Iman. Let meh finish cleanin. Go downstairs and pick up yuh mess.”

“Yeah, Mani. Go clean up your mess so the witch will stop bitchin.”

My mother picked up the can-opener and chucked it at my father’s eyes. He tilted his head back just in time for it to bust him right in the nose. I moved out of the way as they charged each other.

As my father went to wrap his hand around my mother’s throat, she dug her nails into his cheeks as if she was trying to palm sand, her fingers digging deeper into his flesh with each attempt as he fought to pull his head away. He grabbed her by the shoulders, lifting her slightly and crashing her body onto the counter-top, the edge of the table stabbing her lower back. She melted back into a limbo stance, her head now placed on the cold, slick surface, her only support. He finally had control.

“What the fuck’s your problem!” He screamed, as he held her down. He made it seem as though he was trying to calm her down, but I couldn’t help but notice how stifling his grip was.

His hands contorted her upper body like the pressure of water when you’re in too deep. She fought to kick her feet, but the weight of his body restrained her. I yelped in the corner. Neither one of them turned to look. The sweat streamed down my forehead as I gasped for air. My own cry was suffocating me.



I didn't know then that my father was spiteful. He calculated his provocations, until my mother combusted into flames, an excuse for him to go get lit.

That night my mother and I slept on my twin bed. It was over, but my body was still in fight or flight. "Hug me, Mommy."

Her arm was already around me, but she pulled me closer. The rhythm of her breathing usually rocked me to sleep. But that night her breaths weren't the same. They were too hesitant. I turned and pressed my ear to her breast,

"We forgot to say our prayers, Mommy."

She sat up on her elbow and cradled my head,

"Where there is faith, there is love. Where there is love, there is peace. Where there is peace, there is God. Where there is God, there is no need."

As she leaned in to kiss my forehead, a drop of liquid plopped on my upper lip and trickled down to the opening of my mouth, the taste of saltwater—

THALASSOPHOBIA AND NOCTURNAL  
ANXIETY IN MY LUCID DREAMS

Aquarium  
I'm in keeps  
them out  
keep them out  
Close your eyes  
wish for a switch  
The glass aquarium  
I'm stuck in

Outside  
the glass  
infinite ocean  
Eels, towering black serpents  
ooze around like the fresh  
spill of crude oil  
in the sea

Whales  
whipping tails  
closing my eyes  
praying for a switch  
Keep me in  
Keep them out  
Just a dream  
Just a dream

Switch

Sand  
Clear waters  
in front of a grand  
green hill  
I know this  
Wish for a switch  
Please switch

Tides  
summoned  
surf out and stills  
Clamp eyes shut  
Keep them shut  
Head for the hill  
I head for the hill  
Water kicks the back  
of my knees  
Eyes closed  
Switch switch switch  
Falling for the floor  
I feel no ground

sinking  
please switch  
sinking  
keep them shut  
sinking—

## FIGHT THE POWER

Iman and Fatima were never part of a club, so they weren't quite sure of the rules. They only knew that they were going to form one and only few would be given the opportunity to join, only few would even know about it.

“Can I ask Rachel if—”

“The more people know, the less of a secret it will be. Only Chris,” demanded Fatima, as she parallel parked the jeep perfectly alongside the brick.

“Why does it have to be a secret club? Why can't—”

“What's the point of a having a club, if everyone could join? How do you expect us to make secrets? How do you expect us to keep them?”

“Iman thought about her own. The secrets she observed, experienced, lived.

“You're right. Chris only.”

“Fatima!” yelled Aunt Patricia from the stoop. “Time to take you home! Yuh Motha say you have to get ready for Jummah.”

“Can I come back after?”

“No, cause then you have to wash and plait up your hair for school, Monday!”

“But it's Friday!” said Fatima pleadingly.

“Yes, true! But you have to let your hair breathe! You know how yuh hair does shrink up after it wet!”

Furious, Fatima slammed Iman's Barbie jeep in frustration, chipping off a piece of the tire, now the shape of a sliced pie.



Iman rode with her aunt to take Fatima home.

“This is a big tune this year for Carnival,” said Aunt Patricia, raising the volume to Soca 97. The rhythm of the music provoked Iman’s imagination into gyration. She looked up and out at the overcast and imagined herself on stage with Machel Montano. The young Calypsonian stole her attention when she first saw him perform on Soca Monarch 95, an annual Soca competition in Trinidad.

Every year, Grandfather received a VHS of the performances in the mail. Though Iman was only six, something about Montano made her want to touch him. She wanted to grab his waist and feel the muscles in his stomach, as he wound his waistline like a drunk cyclone.

When they arrived at Aunt Summayah’s house, Fatima shoved an apology out of her mouth. It flew out stumbling: “Borry for saking...sorry for breaking your tire, Mani.” She paused. “I’m sure your daddy will buy you a new one anyway,” she teased, counter punching Iman’s loud, dismissive, silence. “Bye, Aunt Patricia,” she said before shutting the door.

“Ride shotty, Mani,” insisted Aunt Patricia.

Iman unbuckled her seatbelt to take her place in the front seat of the pearl-white Acura.

“What of yours did Fatima break?” She responded to the look on Iman’s face.

“My tire to my Barbie jeep that my dad just got me!” Iman’s own rage startled her into a fit that she had hemmed to her throat, until her aunt asked the aggravating question.

“Calm yuhself, Mani. It’ll be fine. I’ll have your uncle take a look at it when he gets homes. And, I’m sure, if you ask your dad, he’ll buy you a new one.”

Her aunt’s answer made her cry more. She was tired of things fixed. She didn’t want it to happen at all. Since she could remember, adults always fixed her surroundings, without stopping the cause of destruction. Or the adults themselves were destroying, and the damage done could not be fixed.

The car slowly stopped outside of Iman’s driveway.

“Stop the tears and go in there and ask yuh father.”

Iman slowly lifted her chin up and then down once, a response that didn’t mean she would obey, but that she heard. She closed the door and walked to retrieve her jeep and its sliced pie, as her aunt slowly crept forward before turning into her own driveway next door.

When Iman entered the house, her father was finalizing his work attire.

“Where’ve you been, Knucklehead?” he asked as he fought to find the hole for his left arm.

“I was outside playing with Fatima, then I went to take her home,” she said as she made her way toward him to assist.

“Yeah, I walked over and noticed her car gone. I figured you were with her. That’s the only reason why I didn’t set the whole block on fire looking for my chump,” he said, placing his calloused hand on Iman’s head. He rubbed his hand on her hair as if trying to remove dried sand from his palms. Iman dipped low and back, like an escaping tide.

“Stop, Daddy. You are going to mess up my parts.”

“You are beautiful, Baby Girl. Even with tree branches for hair, and that caveman skull” he smiled, “Hurry up and grab what you want, so I can take you back next door. My ride will be here any minute.”

Iman realized she forgot to ask her aunt to ask Uncle Frank if she could stay there until her mom came home from work. She thought about how messy her cousin Chris and Rico’s rooms were. She imagined her uncle’s reaction to the dirty rooms plus company. Iman would rather stay home alone and clean up her father’s mess than to go to another chaos, with a chance of embarrassment. Uncle Frank was known for announcing an unwanted presence.

“Can I just—”

“No, you are not staying here by yourself, Shrimp. Now hop on.” Michael crouched low for his daughter to board. “You know, you’re getting too damn old, girly. Pretty soon you’ll be able to help me carry yourself. Your damn feet’s gonna be draggin’ on the floor like tin cans on the back of a hooptie.”



On Aunt Patricia's porch, Michael gave his daughter's hair one final ruffle, he kissed her forehead. The feeling of his mustache reminded Iman of when her mother accidentally scrapes her skin with a bristled brush during hair-combs.

"See you later, Baby Girl. Tell your mama I love her, but don't forget to give her the finger."

"No, Daddy."

Michael didn't notice his daughter had been crying until he gently gripped her face and felt the gritted slime of dried tears and snot.

"Why were you crying, Knucklehead?"

At first, Iman hesitated. If she told her father, he would for sure buy her a brand-new jeep. But, to Iman, that was only confirming that she was the spoiled brat that her family knew. They were unaware that those toys were her escape.

She could not fight the need of wanting to hear something different. She wanted a reaction that was reasonable, appropriate.

"Fatima slammed my Barbie jeep and broke the tire," she said, her throat beginning to tighten all over again.

"The one I just bought you last week?" he said, in an it-better-not-be tone. Iman nodded her head up and down twice this time, signaling she heard and agreed.

"Huh?" he persisted, unable to see his daughter's response.

"Yes."

He took a breath and exhaled deeply.

“Don’t worry bout it, Baby Girl. We will get you another one. And I’m gonna have a talk with your mama. If they don’t know how to play with your shit, then they need to keep they cotton-pickin hands off.” He stooped down to meet Iman face-to-face. He slid his glasses from his nose, up past his forehead. Their eyes mirrored but couldn’t lock.

“The next time Fatima, or any of them lil shits, breaks one of your toys, you sock them right in the face.” He raised his hands as if surrendering to an aggressive chihuahua. “Give me the right, right, left, Mani!”

“Boom! Boom!” she responded, throwing a right then a left.

“I said right, right, left, but good enough, Chump.” he laughed.

Iman’s face brightened.

“The next time they pick on me, I’m just gonna punch their lights out!”

“Thatta Girl!”

Her father rang the doorbell, before hopping off the porch, as he heard a car approach and stop.

“Well, welcome back,” said Aunt Patricia, opening the door for her niece.

“My dad went to work.”

Aunt Patricia widened the entrance so Iman could slide by. “Hungry?”

“Kinda. When does Uncle Frank come home?”

“He should be here any minute. But don’t mind the Princh.”

“Princh?”

“Yeah, the Grinch’s brother. He don’t steal Christmas, he steal peace.”

They both giggled for reasons that differed. One found it funny, the other was uneasy.

Rico and Chris were already seated at the counter eating. Iman took her spot as Aunt Patricia dished out macaroni cheese, a barbequed chicken leg.

“Stop smacking, will you? Damn. Be careful before your food gets stuck in that big ass gap,” said Rico. Chris sucked the barbeque off of his chicken bone. “And chew with your mouth close, I can smell that breath from here,”

Rico continued—

#### A LUNCH ROAST

*La la la la la*  
harmony of breath  
when it hums

my face, Pacific  
Ocean, black-blue  
where it kicked

Spoiled pork-stew  
*Tacoma Aroma?*  
No, it’s you

“So, when do we start the club?” asked Chris, ignoring Rico, taking a sloppy bite of Macaroni. Iman glared at him round eyed. *Be quiet*, she thought. He discontinued and glanced over at Rico who squinted back at both with a smirk. Rico sucked the tangy sauce from his thumb and pointer.

“What club?” he interrogated, eyes low and sharp.

“For school,” said Chris.

“For Ms. Wallen’s class,” said Iman.

The secret was recovered. It wasn’t that Iman, Chris and Fatima didn’t like Rico.

But Iman and Chris knew he loved sabotaging. Fatima knew that, if Rico was a club member, her authority would be overruled by his, something that she couldn’t risk.

Iman was working on her last few bites, when she heard the chirping of the alarm system that notified entry.

“Oh boy. Here comes Mr. Wilson,” whispered Rico, referring to the old man in Dennis the Menace. Chris smiled, revealing the gap between his teeth. Iman placed a hand over her mouth, as if to smother a laugh, and smiled. She lost her appetite.

“Look at all these damn shoes in front of the door!” Iman, Chris, Rico and Aunt Patricia could hear the colliding of sneakers as Uncle Frank made his way to the stairs.

“The man a drama-queen,” mumbled Aunt Patricia, making her way to the top of the stairs.

“You just made a bigger mess, instead of just tellin the choorin to pick up the pairs they ain’t wearing and put it ’way.”

“You just hush your mouth. I’m the cowboy running this town,” he said, now at the top of the stairs, dressed in black dickies, fleece pull-over, and a Dallas Cowboys cap. He grinned. Iman began to breathe again. He was in a good mood. His team won their game.

“How about them Cowboys, Baby!” he said, flexing his biceps.

“They are trash,” said Rico. He was always in opposition to his father, a position he learned to take.

“Shut your mouth, Boy!” He turned his attention to his youngest son, “What’s up, Bonks?”

Chris smiled, swinging his legs as he finished his last bite.

“What are you doing here, Mani? I’m tired of coming home to you eating all my food. You got a home?”

Iman smiled and shyly hopped off the stool to scrape the bone and leftover mac into the garbage can. She knew from Uncle Frank’s tone he was in a good mood and happy to see her.

“What did I tell you about wasting? Make sure every scrap gets into the garbage and wash off your plate. I don’t want to see—”

“Oh, will you hush already?” interrupted Aunt Patricia. She took the plate from Iman. “What you eat? Parrot bottom? You ain’t close yuh mouth since you walk in.”

“I can talk as much as I want in my house,” he said as he made his way to the hallway. Iman realized he wasn’t finished with his usual inspection of the house. Rico bolted a look to Iman and Chris. Before Rico could foreshadow their demise, Uncle Frank growled out.

“Oh. Hell. No! Get y’all asses in here, now! Iman, get out! If you can’t keep shit clean too, stay at your own god damn house!”

Iman pruned in her chair, shoulders to ears.

“Don’t mind he!” countered Aunt Patricia. She made her way toward Uncle Frank. “The chile just get here! Leave she alone, Jesus Christ!”

Chris and Rico walked toward the scope of his militant stare. Chris didn't look at him. He calmly walked past and began cleaning. Rico, however, decided that then was the right time to make his point.

"You know, Mr. Wilson, I think you oughta finish your inspection before you trip. The reason my room's still a mess is cause I spent the majority of the day folding clothes on the couch. Lighten up, will you?" he asked, patting his father on the stomach.

Uncle Frank slapped Rico on the back of the head. "Just hush your mouth and start cleaning. Mani, if you ain't gonna help, don't bother going back there and distracting them," he said, walking past her to finish his investigation down stairs.

Iman chose Rico's room. She figured she'd be more entertained. Chris was too much like his father, too serious when it was time to get the job done. She knew that she would laugh in Rico's room. She searched for the tidiest corner and sat down, knees squeezed to chest. Rico looked her direction with a mischievous grin.

"This is bout to be funny."

"What's funny?" asked Iman.

"You'll see. Any moment now."

Chris overheard as he walked past Rico's room to retrieve the Clorox wipes from the bathroom. He shook his head at his brother. "Just don't put me in it," he ordered before softly closing his bedroom door

Rico pushed the power button to his amplified stereo. "Time to get bout it, bout it!" he hollered as Master P's "Mr. Ice Cream Man" thumped.

Pressing her forehead to her knees, Iman slowly cracked into laughter as Rico twirled his hips stiffly. He stirred his arm in circles as if churning ice cream. Iman

pressed her head back against the wall, chuckling, as she watched her older cousin work his hips into the shape of a sharp eight. She imagined Mr. Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*, a movie her father introduced her to, that occupied her when he crashed from his high.

She imagined Mr. Tin's feet planted in dried cement, a rope tied around his waist, pulled and wound around by Dorothy in an attempt to retrieve him. Rico moved like a cobra with arthritis. Chris opened back his door to get in on the action. At the door-frame, he laughed uncontrollably as Rico continued the strange dance.

They were so occupied with Rico's malfunctioning body that they didn't hear Uncle Frank running and tripping up the stairs. He ran like a disjointed gorilla after coming across something unexpected, unwanted in his habitat. He arrived at the door, hamper of socks in his arms. He stood and interrogated each pair of eyes in the room.

When his eyes met Rico's, he launched the hamper. Iman and Chris watched as the hamper bounced off of Rico's forearm and knee, a quick move that shielded him from the blow. Dozens of paired mismatched socks flopped to the floor: knee-high green and gold Seattle Super Sonics sock, paired with a gray, linty ankle-socks; a black polyester tube-sock, paired with a white, hospital, therapeutic sock, royal-blue grips at the bottom; a holey white sock, yellow toes and heels, paired with a thick, maroon snow-sock; the brown with the red, the stained with the bleached, the big with the small, the small with the smaller. By the looks of it, Rico didn't even bother to sort the socks according to owner. The socks on the floor resembled a dysfunctional family reunion.

The three tried their best. They begged their eyes not to search for each other's, nor to make contact, because if they did, the sound of their laughter would break the

room. But their eyes had minds of their own. Chris's eyes contacted Rico's first, then from Rico's to Iman's, Iman's eyes back to Rico's, then to Chris's—eruption.

“Oh, okay. You think this shit is a joke, huh!”

By now, Aunt Patricia has arrived and discovered the joke scattered across Rico's floor. Her laugh reminded Iman of an old lanky granny with no teeth, trying to catch her breath after choking on a piece of gristle. They laughed harder.

The doorbell rang. “Iman, that better be your mom! Get out!”

At that, she scampered out the room and down the stairs to put her shoes on. It took some time to find hers in the swamp of soles her uncle created when he came in.

She hurried out and closed the door behind her.

“Well, eh eh!” said Sunshine, a phrase, or sound effect that Trinidadians make when they are caught off guard, also a synonym for “well excuse the hell out of me.”

“I was coming to visit my sister for a little bit.”

“Not now, Mommy.”

“Chile, please,” she said, turning the knob. I not scared of your uncle a'tall.

What di man gon' do? Beat me?”

Iman knew her mother was telling the truth about her lack of fear.

“Get the fuck out!” Uncle Frank screamed, as soon as he heard the door open.

“Screw you, Frank” hollered Sunshine, before shutting the door back. “Just know that yuh mother ain't fear no man. I just not in the mood to hear he crap. It like the man eat parrot shit. Leh we go home. Is the house clean?”

Iman knew it wasn't. “I don't know”

“What you mean you don’t know? You ain’t been in the house all day?” asked Sunshine as they walked up their driveway.

“No. Aunt Patricia picked up Fatima from Aunt Summayah’s. We was outside playing.”

Sunshine turned the knob, “I wonder if yuh Aunt Summayah coo—”

The word “cook” was cut. The condition of the house abruptly assassinated it.

“What di kiss-me-ass...” said Sunshine in shock, what the fuck.

Iman looked down to see what her mother was observing. Crumbles of compact mud, dry, loose sand coated the welcome mat. Iman noticed the dirt earlier, but for some reason, now that her mother pointed it out, it looked filthier than before, more invasive, more contaminated. She began to scratch the eczema on her inner elbow. Like her mother, she was suddenly disgusted. It was just the beginning of the inspection.

“I swear that man is so spiteful. Blind or not, he knows not to come in meh house with he work-boots on. I tell the man time and time again.”

“Iman couldn’t tell her mother that it was she who tracked in the dirt. That in Aunt Patricia’s garden, she and Fatima were taking their Barbies on a journey through the tropical rainforest, ending their trip between the dried weeds and burnt grass along the railroad tracks, the Savanna.

As they continued through the house, Iman felt less guilty once she realized the war between her parents was going to happen with or without her contribution to the mess. Her father had turned their home into an alley in downtown Seattle. The whole house was a mess. She was relieved she didn’t confess. Her father asked for it. Her honesty would have only placed her into the experience, instead of allowing her to be

the bystander. Iman did what she believed was her duty to do, tried to persuade her mother to keep the peace.

“Don’t fight when he gets home, Mommy. I’ll help you—”

“I don’t need your help, Iman. I need di man to grow di hell up! Chilre—, not even babies does dutty up di place like this!” Sunshine hollered. Her accent thickened. “He doesn’t need to grow up, he needs to be a human! He not a person a’tall! Di man a walkin Dump! A walkin dump is what di man is!”

“Just this one time, Mommy. Let’s both clean up, and I’ll write Daddy a letter to sign, saying that he has to promise to clean up his mess before work.”

“Didn’t I tell you, I mustn’t hold my breath when di man promises me something? I will die before I get it. One day, you’ll learn, Mani. One day you’ll know your father like the back of your hand, like I. One day, you’ll see that I give him a blasted time because he deserves it. A hard time for a hard mind, Iman. Di man don’ care bout a ting but himself. I tired telling he how I feel about meh home.”

Iman watched Nickelodeon Network until her mother finished cleaning.

That night, Iman asked her mother if they could sleep to Grandfather’s *Vision* album.

As the music began, Iman’s imagination trebled. She thought about which instrument belonged to her, which instrument was her voice. *Was it the bass?* The tone of the bass was bold. At first, Iman thought that was the one. But after listening closely, she noticed that, even though the bass sounded confident, powerful, it wasn’t independent or assertive. It depended on the melody, chords, and rhythm.

She then moved to the double-seconds, altos. At first, she was convinced. *That's me.* But she continued to listen and learned that it wasn't. She wanted her voice to be distinct, clear. What she heard was not an individual voice but a blend of voices, chords, like a group gathering for one cause.

Iman appreciated inclusion, the feeling of belonging. But at that moment, she wanted her own solo, she wanted to be the leader, the one in control—epiphany. I am the melody. She chose the soprano, the tenor steel drum.

“WHEN WORDS FAIL, MUSIC SPEAKS”

—Caribbean Super Stars Steel Band, 2001

I was eleven when my eldest cousin Karim interrupted my and Fatima’s game of Mario Party to tell us that our grandfather had passed away. Fatima began to bawl instantly, but I couldn’t cry. In order to cry, you have to feel something first. And that particular feeling depends on the situation. I couldn’t cry because my mind didn’t comprehend what took place.

“Get up. Let’s go. Your grandfather just died”

“Let’s go. Your grandfather just died. Get up”

“Let’s go. Died. Get your grandfather. Up”

“Get up let. Grandfather go. died just your”

The command bounced off the walls of my mind, a discombobulating echo, As I entered the car to head to Granny’s.

The night before his passing, when visiting hours were over, all of his grandchildren got a chance to say goodbye, except my cousin Rico and me. Rico was away at basketball camp, but I was there at the hospital.

There I was, sitting, sucking my thumb, surrounded by blankets, stained Tupperware, Jack in the Box bags, water bottles with water, Sprite bottles with vodka, deteriorating tissue, red eyes, tear eyes, drained eyes, drunk eyes, high eyes, gone eyes, eyes of pain. It was time for us to go in: “Three at a time.”

In the room, we gathered around him. I could hear his life, Caribbean Super Stars Steel band, playing softly in the background, fading out. To our family, his music was like a prayer, so playing his cd for him was vital.

He was unconscious. The ventilator breathed for him.

“Goodbye, Albert,” “Goodbye Grandfather,” they said kissing his forehead.

“See you later,” I said.

He never said goodbye, so neither would I.

He always said “Lata,” voice calm, flat, accent sharp. To me, “goodbye” was a period, “Later” was a semicolon.

I tried to speak my optimism into existence: “See you later, Albert.”

On our way, in the car after we got the news, I sat in the backseat and observed the side view of Karim’s face as he drove. His bottom lip was gated in his mouth by his upper-teeth; The way he breathed scared me. He appeared angrier than sad.

When we pulled into the driveway, the sound of my grandfather’s music from inside woke my anxiety. The strumming of chords, the running of scales, the wailing of his double seconds made me realize that the pan-man was gone.

Granny sat on the porch tapping her feet in time with the kick drum as tears shimmied from her eyes. Uncle Jacka stood in the lawn and untwined the dread wrapped around the rest of his locks, allowing the long ropes to sway with the rest of his body as he used a plastic-fork, stained with curry, to beat on the bottle of Heineken. He bashed the fork on the bottle to the music of Caribbean Super Stars Steel Band. His

eyes were bloodshot. I wasn't sure if it was from crying or the ganja smoke; the smell stained his clothes.

Thumb in mouth, I sat by Granny on the stoop, waiting for my mother to arrive. Granny began to rub my back in time to the tune.

“Yuh hungry, Mani?”

“N—” I said. I restrained the “o,” knowing that if I said the word correctly, if I opened my mouth to release the “o,” panic would come out from hiding.

“Well if yuh get hungry, I did cook some lentils, dumplin', and salt fish last night. It has some still in di fridge. But we cookin' big tonight.”

By eleven, the house was live: uncles, great uncles, aunts, great aunts, cousins, second cousins, friends, acquaintances, enemies, were all gathered to party lively for the dead: tables in between tables of cards and dominos. On the counter, rum, rum punch, Crown Royal, liquor, sorrel, mauby, sweet bread, sponge-cake, rum-cake, roti-skins, curry chicken, curry goat, callaloo, pilau, plantain and fish stew.

On the floor, tablecloths coated with toddlers, rice grains, chicken bits, fruit snacks, cartoon cups, and adults who couldn't find a spot to eat at the table. I made my way to his bedroom to get away from the noise, watch home videos, and cry.

In the room, my grandmother had already covered the mirrors, so that he could come visit her, if he wished. My mother found me watching a home video of the band on break, during the annual lighting of the Christmas tree in Downtown Seattle. The camcorder caught the sparkle of my grandfather's gold tooth as he smiled watching the

Christmas tree gleam. It was his favorite holiday. I washed my face, and we went back out to join the others in the family room playing cards.

“Yuh motha’ cunt! Pay attention to the kiss-me-ass game!” screamed my great uncle Sam to a friend of the family sitting directly across from him at the spades-table.

“Yuh keep cuttin’ me wit yuh spade! If yuh aint know wha’ tis yuh doin’, get from di damn table!”

“Uncle, just take it easy, nuh?” said my mother, noticing the vein fighting to break through the skin of his neck. “Let we dance.”

With that, they both rose. Uncle Sam braced my mother’s waist and hand as he led her into the Foxtrot, though their hips and feet moved like they were doing the Bachata. My second cousin, old enough to be my grandpa, took Uncle’s spot at the table.

As the CD switched, I pulled a chair to the corner. My mother, uncle, people were gyrating their waist to the fast pace of Soca music. I questioned their happiness. Realizing that their happiness was sincere, I questioned them. However, I learned that when a loved one passes away, Trinidadians party. Mourning is decorated in rhythm, rum, rant, and rage.

“PING! PING! DHOM DHOM! PLIING!” bangs and dissonant chords of pan drums were coming from the garage.

The door barely made it open before I screamed, “Stop! Stop it! You are going to un-tune them!”

From the garage door I could see my cousins Rico, Chris, Fatima, and two small boys—probably children of my third cousins—attempting to form a band of their own

on the pan drums, a cacophonous, painful sound—music that did not touch, but punctured the heart.

They didn't even look up.

The two little ones bashed on the cutter and toms with the conga sticks as if bonging gongs, one small foot kicking in the pedal of the kick-drum, the sound of bullets hitting bulletproof tarp.

The set of tenor bass circled Fatima; with the bass sticks, she smashed down on each note as if trying to set a record, running out of time, Tacoma Washington's Whack-A-Mole champ.

With the trap drum sticks, Rico popped a note on the double-seconds, as if trying to swat a fly: His own attempt at music startled him. He jumped before grabbing the proper sticks and trying again, stifled notes, a suffocated song. He hit to make noise, he didn't play to release melody.

Chris rolled on the tenor-pan's G-sharp, using the proper sticks. He did it right, yet it sounded wrong, it sounded like remorse, as if he knew he wasn't supposed to partake, but he needed to. The note echoed his feelings. We locked eyes. He hesitated, before rolling again.

"Please stop! Stop it right now!" I shouted.

At that, Rico stopped pounding the double-seconds. "Come make me," he noticed I was crying before I did, "you cry baby. You think just cause' Albert taught you how to play, you're the boss? Well you know what? We can play it if we want to."

“But you will un-tune them. You guys are hitting them too hard! You’re using the wrong sticks!”

They ignored. I was outnumbered. Enraged, I made my way through the garage, down the driveway, and sat on the bricks surrounding my granny’s garden. My adrenaline and anxiety trebled. I didn’t understand how they could kill the instruments that would have kept him alive forever. Ironically, the sound of un-tuning a steel pan was almost identical to the sound of tuning it.

I reminisced—

#### SENSORY MEMORIES AND A PAN-TOUM

The sounds that came from my grandfather’s garage were chromatic scales pounded by a sonic boom. It wasn’t the scales that frightened me, it was the tuning process. Before Boots, the ashy, terrifying pan-tuner, arrived, I would sit on the stairs and listen to my grandfather strum the chords to his double-seconds.

Some fears are actually dreams introduced to you at an intimidating time. It doesn’t want you to run, come closer:

He would strum, and roll, and run,

hitting every note, keen to every octave, every pitch, every sound, before moving on to the cellos, the tenor bass, bass. My grandfather made sure he knew which notes needed a good hammering, which ones he wanted untouched.

Sometimes, he would interrupt the routine with a tune. If he knew I was listening he would awaken my imagination: *Beauty in the Beast, The Lion Sleeps Tonight, Under the Sea, Sing a Song*. As he played, I felt the music deep in the belly of my stomach,  
as if the music was coming from inside.

No matter how hard I tried to resist, my body responded to song.  
“Don’t fight it! Get up! move yuh waist!”

he would say, smiling, revealing his gold tooth that glimmered, a sliver of the sun he stole and stored before leaving Trinidad and coming to the states. To this day, I still sometimes shy away from dancing in the view of others. However, on those days, when it was just us, I would set myself free, winding my body to the melody.

“Yuh gonna be my tenor-girl, one day.  
Wait, you’ll see,”

he used to say, noticing the flick of my wrist, the precision of my timing, as I watched and mimicked his hands as they moved inside the pan.

As soon as I heard the rattling of Boots, the pan-tuner’s 1985 Dodge Ram Van, I would dash in the house, straight to Granny, before the tires could even align with the curb. My grandfather would laugh, yell,

“What i’tis yuh ’fraid of?  
Come watch!”

I'll never forget a conversation between my granny and me:

"You musn't be scared, you know?" granny said, hoping my anxiety would molder. "It's loud, but it can't hurt you. It's part of yuh history."

"But I don't like that Boots, Granny."

"You musn't say that. What Boots do to you? You know yuh grandfatha' used to make and tune pan too? He a old man now. Too much work. But if it wasn't for the noise yuh hearing now, he wouldn't've been able to make good music.

His music is what got us all here, yuh know?"

she laughed, "the reason why yuh have an American father."

In the house, sucking my thumb, close to Granny, I would sometimes hear my grandfather's rage between the playing and pulverizing: "So yuh finish with the F-sharp? Does that sound right to you? You rushin' or what? Don't get me vex!"

When it came to music, few argued with him. My grandfather was a walking Korg TM50, and a pioneer of steel drum music. At the age of five, he began playing steel drums before the instruments were fully developed, back when pannists were labeled poor, unemployed, no-good rebels,

back before people realized they weren't lazy but dedicated,  
back when authority was threatened by the growing unity of lower-class.

Before his life crescendoed into a caesura that never ended, I finally decided to watch *The Rhythm in Steel*, a documentary my grandfather insisted I watch in hope of diminishing my fright.

I learned that from ugly, comes beauty, harmony from chaos.

How to transcend your country with useless oil barrels:

Sink them, mark them, counter-sink, groove them, set,

cut them, burn them, tune them, chrome them, fine-tune, blend—

*Pom pom di dom*

The sounds of memory

From war waste comes steel drum

Pan music is sensory

The conductor of memories

Melody of history

Seek refuge in sensory

Set your spirit free,

waistline run

Change the key to history

Sound of the 20th century

Making your spirit free,

a chromatic scale run

Crescendo against authority

Sunk, marked, grooved the century

Cut then burned before the proper tune

A new threat to authority  
Sun coons composing complex croons

“Rebels” to pannists, bangs to tunes  
Melodic thoughts, harmony blooms  
Musicians arranging dynamic croons  
Panorama orchestras, symphonies loom

Once accidentals on a grand score  
From World War waste came steel drums  
treasure of Trinidad’s shore  
Music of the sun,

*Pom pom di dom—*

That night on the bricks outside my grandfather’s house, I began to empathize with Rico, Chris, Fatima and the others. I was angry, they were wrong, but I understood. They needed to touch the treasure; they just didn’t know how. They didn’t know how and my intrusion, my knowing how, is what hurt Rico, is what caused him to respond that way.

“Yuh okaaaaaaay, Mani?” I heard a voice.

I didn’t notice my great uncle’s wife on her hands and knees, in all black, digging away.

“Come chile, come,” she said as she rose to her feet, dusting dirt from her dusty, black sweats. My body turned cold, it felt as if my tears froze mid-drip. As she wrapped

her trapping arms around me, pressing my head to her chest, I thought about everything that she was capable of.

The daughter of an Obeah-man, she used his teachings to get what she wanted, attempting to use or destroy anyone who stood in her way, even if the individual was unaware that he was blocking her path. My granny said my uncle was her personal moko jumbee, a zombie controlled by someone who raises it from the dead.

My grandmother never followed her comment with a laugh. To this day, whenever I go visit my granny, I make dua before passing the garden: “Auzu billahi mina’sh-shaytani’r-rajim.”

That night, in the garden, I believe my uncle’s wife was cultivating more than tulips and a Western White Pine, a mourning present from my father to my granny. She insisted that she be the one to plant the tulips and the tree for my grandmother as a gift. However, her intentions were unsettling. It was around 2:00 AM.

She was too determined, too calm, too detached from the music. She finally released one arm from around me and placed her free fingers in my hair, digging down for the roots.

PART III

## SHADES OF BLACK: A LYRIC ESSAY, ONE DOZEN

1.

Me and my lil' sister Karimah's complexion: mocha, like Mommy and Daddy.  
 Sometimes, me and Rimah argue about who's lighter. But at the end of the day, we  
 know we're both mochas, caramel frappes during winter.

Fatima and I compare arms. She is fine being the color of peanut butter, though she  
 wishes to be the tone of her mother—Aunty Summayah.

At a young age, The TV taught us that her type of black was sweet— the color of a  
 finely powdered lemon bar. Funny, cus'

Auntie Summayah's parents, Granny and Grandfather, both are the color of coco or  
 Nesquik, a milky chocolate, unlike my cousin Irv, skin smooth and dark as marbled  
 Ebony.

The total opposite of Grandma May, complexion creamy,  
 fair as a vanilla flower. And her daughter, Aunt Trisha,  
 the color of eggnog,  
 a pinch of pumpkin spice.

Her daughter, cousin Summer, skin the color  
 of butterscotch. Close to Cousin Rico's skin,  
 the color of Arabian sand, a golden brown  
 like his mother, Aunt Patricia,  
 the color of maple leaves  
 during fall.

Almost identical to Grandpa's skin,  
the color of a honey-gram

2.

As a child my favorite picture book was *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman. The children in class tell Grace that she can't be Peter Pan in the school play because Peter is neither a girl nor black. In the end, Grace's talent wins her the part. Recently, I bought my goddaughter the picture book *Penny and the Magic Puffballs*. I was watching TV when she facetedimed me. *My mom did my hair like Penny, See!* She screamed, pointing, eyes blazing. Both her hair and self-esteem elevated.

3.

Growing up, too many black parents warn their children not to play out in the sun for too long, for fear of them becoming "too black." What is too black? What are we unconsciously teaching our youth? Our melanin confirms that we are people of the sun. Why take our youth's shine? Colorism plagues the black community, a race-war within the race. Why one or the other? Who told us that we couldn't stand resolute in all shades of blackness?

4.

A year ago, I was secretly seeing my cousin's best friend. I didn't notice that my head-scarf fell off my head, revealing my natural hair, until he told me after he finished. *Your head wrap is off*, he said, laying on me. Though it was dim, our pupils locked. I was embarrassed. *You're beautiful* he said, *for real*, he said, *and your skin is so smooth*, he said, gliding his hand from my leg to the side of my breast,

*Especially for a dark-skinned girl.*

5.

I stopped saying I was mixed around the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. It was after I learned that race was a social construct and blackness embodied many ethnicities. I no longer checked the other box, I no longer argued with my peers that I wasn't black but Trinidadian, with a great-grandmother who was a Trini-Indian, and another great gran who was Venezuelan, and another great great gran who was half native. Though this is all true, I no longer felt the need to break down my genetics in order to not be labeled a black girl.

I love my culture, my people, my told and untold history of both power and perseverance. Yet, I broke myself down into shattered hieroglyphs in order to detach myself from my blackness when it came to my physique. When I heard *you have long hair for a black girl* I used to feed into the ignorance, explaining which part of my blackness was the reason for it, *I'm not just black, I'm—*

I'm Black.

6.

I was first introduced to Michael Jackson in my mother's room, back at the old house on 45<sup>th</sup> and Sheridan. It was '95, the year of his *History* album. The King of Pop thrilled the world with a double CD and a double VHS that recapped number one hits and videos and presented new ones. I'm sure *History* is titled "history" because it holds songs that influenced the past and addresses history, silenced. Today, I see the value and purpose of the album. But back then all I noticed was timeless melody, impossible choreography, and a history of physical alterations.

*I Love you Michael, I love you Michael, and I love you Michael.*

I thought he was three.

As a child, to better understand and keep track of the modified Michaels, I made each stage of his life a different him:

*Off the Wall/ Thriller* = Black Michael

*Bad* = Mixed Michael

*Dangerous/ History* = White Michael

I attempted multiple times to choose my favorite Michael. Sometimes I felt guilty after picking one Michael, only to change my mind by the second video. Same voice, same moves, different person. It was so confusing.

It wasn't just his complexion that caused the confusion. Children are intelligent and empathetic. My family is all shades of black; I would have known Michael was Michael, even after some, then most, if not all, melanin had faded.

However, his, nose, his cheeks, his lips, his hair?

Today, I am one of many who claim to be his number one fan. When you love someone, it is hard to tell whether or not that person loves himself. To me, then, Vitiligo was a valid excuse. And to this day I believe that Vitiligo was part of the issue, but that problem was only skin deep. The king had deeper issues evenly rooted in genetics, history, and self-identity.

What would Michael look like if his fans didn't make fun of his *fat* nose?

What would Michael look like if he wasn't pressured to be *perfect*?

What was *perfection* to Michael?

7.

My Native friend from high school has the word “Savage” tatted on his forearm. I wonder who judges him. I wonder if it saddens his parents, grandparents, ancestors. If words have power, can we depower them? Depending on the context, does the meaning of names like *savage* and *nigga* change? Or do they remain? Does consciously redefining a negative term lighten its weight? Or does the weight stay the same, only the people who carry it get stronger?

It was 10<sup>th</sup> grade year when it happened. Eight years later, I remember:

Him: Deejahney, you a funny looking black girl. Light skinned, chinky eyes, with big ass smackers.

Her: I’m not just black, im a mut, creole, Japanese, Jamaican and Native.

Me: Me too! My dad is from here, but my mom is Trinidadian, my granny is a Trini-Indian, and my granny said that her mother is Trini, Indian and Chin—

Him: Girl, if you don’t shut the hell up. You black! (laugh)

I thought degradation was in his tone, but I’ve realized it was in my perception. At the time, I thought my native friend was saying that I was nothing more than a black girl. I realized, however, that he said I was nothing less than a black woman. Today, he has a little girl, Native and African American, Black. I wonder how much pain she will carry, how much pride.

Self-love or self-hate?

8.

My older cousin has three girls, and all three are different shades of black. Once, her second to youngest cried herself to sleep, insisting she wasn't black but gold. Did she already learn the negative connotations that come with blackness, or is it the complete opposite?

She was too innocent to understand the concept of race. When she looked at her complexion in the mirror she saw gold, a color she learned in preschool.

9.

In high school, my girlfriend's boyfriend was cheating. She decided to vent her frustration to me. *I can't believe it*, she said. *And with an ugly, short-haired dark skinned girl*, she said to me, her face flushed. She was hurt, so I refrained from questioning her specificity. She was hurt, so I refrained from telling her that I actually thought the short-haired dark-skinned girl was pretty. I just continued to listen to her,

hurt.

10.

Today, my favorite episodic show is still *Dragon Ball Z*. Recently I've begun to analyze the storyline and characters in Season 4.

I notice the similarities between the Saiyans and my people. The Saiyans are colonized by Lorde Frieza and his gang. Considered "inferior monkeys" (they can actually transform into giant apes).

However, the Saiyans have an untold history (revealed in the show). They have extraordinary power hidden inside them that Frieza is aware of and secretly fears. He fears that if they unleash their hidden powers, transform into Super Saiyans, he will no longer have control.

*Yes! I can make a poem about this! I analyze more.*

They have black hair that flares out and up. Black, or maybe dark brown, eyes. Who can tell, right? How didn't I notice this before? I knew I've always wanted to be a Super Saiyan for a fuckin' reason. This is definitely going to be a controlled metaphor in a workshop.

And then it finally happens—the Saiyan's rise. Goku, the strongest Saiyan in the universe, has had enough of Frieza. His need to save his people begins to transform him in the middle of battle.

*Yes, it's happening.*

I'm eager to see the new Goku. The planet shakes as Goku flexes, screams, and transforms into his perfection. Finally, his new face is revealed:

Blue eyes,

blonde hair

*Damn—*

11.

Slavery debris continues to downpour on the black community, tricking us to believe blackness looks a certain way, and that certain way is not beautiful,

Or not beautiful on us. They can't get enough of Angelina Jolie and Kylie Jenner's lips, Kim Kardashian's butt, Marc Jacob's "Minnie buns," insisting cornrows aren't cornrows but instead the new trending 'boxer braids.'

On the bus, I choose to sit in the front, every time. I wonder how many other blacks are making it a conscious move still in 2016. You know you are walking transcendence when wearing your natural hair is a political statement.

12.

About a week ago, I listened to the original "Hound Dog." I put myself in Big Mama Thornton's shoes, tried to imagine what it was like seeing Elvis's cute ass singing my song, moving like someone's drunk uncle unable to get through the sliding door, as the crowd goes wild, intoxicated by the liquor he stole from me.

I wanted to know more about her. I googled "Big Mama Thornton" and within seconds I learned that her real name was Willie Mae, born in Alabama. *Hell yeah, now it makes sense.* I called my grandma. I thought she was named after her.

I learned that my grandma's real name was Willie around the age of twelve. Everyone called her Macy or May. The day I came across mail for Willie Morrow on the kitchen table top, I automatically assumed it was for my grandpa. *I didn't know grandpa's middle name is Willie, Daddy,* I said. When he told me it was my grandmother's name, I thought it was a joke. *Well why does*

*everyone call her Macy? Because her name is Willie Macy, my father said, and he left it at that.*

Fourteen years ago, I wonder if my dad knew what my grandma told me the day I asked if she was named after Big Mama, but just didn't want to share:

Me: Hi, Grandma. Random question for you. Were you named after Big Mama Thornton?

Grandma: Who?

Me: Big Mama Thornton, the woman who sang "Hound Dog." Her real name is Willie Mae, and she was born in Alabama like you.

Grandma: No. My real name is Willie Mason. I'm named after the white Doctor who was kind enough to deliver me. I hate it.

My grandma explained that, back then, white doctors didn't assist blacks, and black doctors were scarce. The only reason Doctor Willie Mason delivered my grandmother is because my great great grandmother reared his children when she worked for him as housekeeper. *Very few know my real name, my grandmother said, I don't tell nobody.*

The midwife insisted that my grandmother be given the name Willie Mason. She told my great grandmother that what the doctor did was an honor. To the midwife, he deserved infinite recognition. I say *infinite* because names live longer than people. To the midwife, my great grandmother needed to show respect and name her black baby girl after a white man who did his job.

We learned recently that my grandmother has dementia. To her, the present is continuously new; however, she remembers the past—history—her story not his.

When she leaves us, her name will be here, in this book, defined by her, recorded by me. Here is a book that I needed to write, but I'll never let her see. I just want her to be free in her memories.

## DON'T PLEASE 'EM

## I.

Men love to see a black girl  
 bust it wide open,  
 expose the diamonds  
 between her thighs, give  
 what her mama  
 gave her, induce  
 a body high.  
 They love to see her do it,  
 wear her value  
 on her sleeve,  
 a tailored fit grip  
 telling how easy  
 they can come,  
 how quickly  
 they can leave.

## II

men hate seeing black girls  
 bust it wide open,  
 dilate their mouths  
 and vocalize,  
 when they pick  
 the lock and let  
 the caged bird free,  
 singing songs  
 of self-serving words  
 like *I* and *me*.

## III

*I am me*  
 distant, familiar  
 sounds like golden  
 oldies, played

and serenaded  
for grandma  
from grandpa  
subliminals to me:  
a man's world  
would be nothing  
without a woman  
or a girl

IV  
Do you hear the solo,  
the howling of guitar,  
the pained plucking  
of strings, played  
by BB, weeping  
*the thrill is gone*  
'cause this black Queen  
found agency?

## IN TRINIDAD,

I didn't mind waking up to cock  
 crowing. I couldn't reach to hit  
 snooze, but I didn't want to. Instead  
 I chipped to the kitchen filled  
 with Trinis and the rhythm of Kitchener's  
*Sugar Bum Bum*, through the living-room,

and out the door to gather wet clothes  
 on the line, cause I slept through rain  
 beating the rooftop, like *Silver Stars*  
*Steel Band* playing pan. The damp

blouses kept me cool, on the days  
 I was able to take warm showers  
 cause hot water's back on the block.  
 Grateful that I didn't have to catch

raindrops in oil barrels or pales  
 just to clean off or wash a load like  
 the family down the road. The chilled

baths soothed the mosquito bites that  
 tickled during the day, and flamed  
 during the night, waking me up to

*I tell yuh you too loud, shhhhh!*  
*Look, yuh wake she wit all di Bachanaal!*  
*But how she can hear we quite on di moon?*  
*Hush yuh backside til she fall back down!*  
 my ancestors whispering in the distance.

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