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## Exodus; Expansion

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Exodus; Expansion

A Thesis Presented

by

JR Mahung

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
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of the requirements for the degree of

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English M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers

Exodus; Expansion

A Thesis Presented

by

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## DEDICATION

For Brother T, who showed me the importance of our stories. May these be first steps in a path towards the power I felt in yours.

## EPIGRAPH

*I have not only been removed from my homelands, I have also been removed from my erotic self and continue a journey back to my first homeland: the body. "We were stolen from our bodies / We were stolen from our homes."*

- Qwo-Li Driskill

*Their country is a Nation on no map.*

- Gwendolyn Brooks

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ABSTRACT

Exodus; Expansion

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Directed by: Ocean Vuong

A collection of poems.



## PREFACE

My language is Garifuna. I do not know my language and so there are parts of me I do not know how to name. There are parts of me I do not know to look for either. My father speaks what some call “the female version” of Garifuna. The popular story suggests that Africans landed on St. Vincent and began war with its Arawak and Carib inhabitants. The African men took Arawak women for wives. Even today the men speak a more African influenced tongue while women speak one closer to Arawak.

My past is full of binaries. I cannot speak either tongue and so I write in english instead. I cannot speak either tongue and so I name myself clumsily. My great grandfather came to Belize from China. We cannot say precisely where from but we know the Guangdong province, we can say he was probably Hakka, as the majority of Chinese migrants to the Caribbean were. We do not know his name when he arrived but we call ourselves Mahung now, perhaps after an Englishman’s mispronunciation, perhaps of my great grandfather’s choosing.

I am sometimes asked if my name is a “chosen name”. I cannot think of any name that isn’t. My birthmom wished to name me for my father. My father wanted to name me for anything else. In Belize, a junior is called “Junie”. They settled on JR, a name chosen for me and by me. A name I now share with my young nephew, the two of us, named for what we are not.

Growing up, my gram called me any variety of nicknames she made up: “skinny winnie”, “tiny winey” (after her favorite song by Byron Lee and the Dragonaires), and “maga boy”. The theme is maybe clear. I was a small child and my gram always put extra food on my plate (when we had it) to try and fatten me up. The last name strikes me moreso now than it did then. Beyond the U.S. political connotations, maga is a creole word with no direct english translation. When something is maga it is without substance, or rather its substance is constituted by its lack. Maga boy. My presence was notable in the way I disappeared, I could turn sideways and poof. Gone.

A colleague asked me recently, “are we not the thing if we cannot name the thing?”. I call myself afro-indigenous. I call myself nonbinary, queer, gender deviant, an auntie and an uncle. I once called myself a boy and I was. And I was also a girl too. These words don’t always live well with each other. There are so many spaces in between their meanings and still these words are what I have. The title *Exodus; Expansion* is both instruction and imperative. To run outside the terms I’ve been given and stretch them as far as they will go in hopes of inviting someone or something of substance inside.

Thank you for reading and welcome.

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the story goes like this: a boy was unborn. the boy had no pronoun until they did. the boy was named 'he' until the boy was not. the boy considered leaving. the boy's body left them first. she named her body [redacted] their body was rendered ghost

the ghost lived with the boy & her & them in dreams. the ghost whispered but never loud enough for the boy to hear. the ghost screamed but never loud enough for the boy to understand. the body is still alive. the boy is not but also is. she sometimes lives inside the ghost they named belonging. a home inside a haunting

## mythology

from my father i learned of seven siblings  
one, a fisherman, who could swallow the sea  
his apprentice, a boy, with greedy hands  
the fisherman took in water while the boy  
grabbed fish at the sea's bottom, each time  
waiting at the last moment to return aboard  
the boat. your way is dangerous, the fisherman  
would say but the boy did not listen & so, one day  
the boy missed their signal to come back  
the fisherman spat out the sea & the boy,  
hands full of fish, was overcome

family is both the boy & the brother  
sinking while swallowing the salt whole

grandpa,  
his siblings, the haunt in my hands

my hands,

their tremble, the overproof to calm

the overproof as balm

the overproof as care

the overproof as thirst  
as quench



my grandfather took from his family to make offerings  
to a ghost. his brothers caught the boy but could not seize  
the spirits & so tried to beat them from his body i met them once  
he showed a gun by its handle. to greet his siblings

*back home they row you  
to sea & drop you right in*

*we don't all swim but we know  
to keep from drowning*

they were seven siblings who became six. a robbery  
in some stories, an infidelity in others. always a bullet  
that killed their brother, beloved. the siblings grieved  
how they knew

there is so much that we remember different  
than how it happened

a current sucking in  
my great grandfather meets my great grandmother in a dream  
neither speak the other's language  
a river, a father  
my great grandfather

sinks  
his back  
& the machete

recall  
the machine  
fermented  
tears  
recall *save them*

later  
an overproof  
or dark

a family is mythology

or their sister

a nation is  
within the myth  
drowning/alive

they learn creole  
jumps  
tells the story of his hands  
a boy flails

into smallness

that presses sugar

a man without a face

pulled a boy

rupture

there are rules

be kind. put the toilet seat down after use.  
wear shoes and shirt to receive service,  
do the right thing always. even when you don't know  
which thing is the right thing. the onus is on you to do it

like dad did. or tried to do. or tried  
to teach me as he said *this is not a beating*  
*it is a spanking* and boy there is a difference sometimes  
but always in that chasm is a lesson.

the night before my college graduation,  
i am getting ready to stop. after  
my third glass of tequila  
which i had after my first glass of straight tequila,  
which i had after a margarita.  
all of which i had after five beers.

there are rules to this shit. i promised  
my sister i would stop after three  
thought it all good so long as i paused  
after every third drink but this is not how rules work.

my dad watched his dad and his uncles,  
who i call my uncles, each drown their consciousness  
shallow in bottles. he promised his father  
he would never drink. in the gaps  
between whips of his belt dad said *don't*

*you ever. lie. to me. ever. again.*  
and somewhere in there is a lesson.  
my sister says i take after my uncle,  
slender with a back that bends forward

like a coconut tree in the breeze,  
the one who, daily, drinks himself into  
peace. i drink when i feel pieces of myself

drifting. sometimes it takes leaving yourself to

leave behind hurt as well. but i'm waking up  
in the morning and isn't that it's own discipline?

once, my other uncle once sliced a fresh, fat avocado with his breakfast

dropped his eyes to where the beans lay on his plate  
cut the silence to say, *you know*  
*we're all screwed up. every damn one of us.*  
when i was a kid i played a game

that each member of my family had died. the rule was  
that i stopped once i drew real tears.  
it always ended on my dad's turn.  
now i only imagine his eulogy

i'd like to say that he was a man who did the right thing.  
even when the both of us were wrong.

#3

simone,

when i was a child i was misguided  
& a boy. i lived in my body until  
i didn't. & then i was alone. or free. or neither.

portrait of gram in 90's hip hop videos (i left my wallet in el segundo)

*i left my wallet in el segundo*

q tip mentions he ordered enchiladas & he ate em while ali shaheed muhammad only had a fruit punch. the visual cuts to gram in her jacket over a hoodie over her nightgown which she is wearing over a pair of sweatpants. she is cooking rice & beans, says "you drive that far & get food and this boy have what?! juice?!? what kinda thing that? you eat & let your friend starve? that is not the way boy cho! el segundo & no food?! ayyyyy jesus!" gram heaps a small mountain of rice on a plate for ali. he begins to say he's not hungry but gram cuts him off "shush boy eat." before addressing q tip "now go to the store and get me coconut milk. i use it all on this boy rice." tip reminds gram he doesn't have his wallet gram replies "that your problem not mine. go get my milk"

on why i leave parties without saying farewell

there is something to be said of the moment before the moment  
when the person you love or are meant to love or who  
is meant to love you sees your begging eyes & shows only their teeth.

a clock's emerald face.  
light fixture to the left  
second to the right

the tv guide scrolling up  
pans on the screen.

a  
&  
a  
in emerald stick

so no wonder when i depart each time it is unnatural to say goodbye.  
to bring attention to the way i learned to leave myself tick

of the clock's mechanics. i remember thinking the tick could not have been more loud.  
i remember wishing myself a home in the distance between it's sound.

there was a time when i did not know to disappear. i remember  
searching for a bridge back. i found a well, myself at its bottom heaving  
an emerald song.

here is the story whereby the black boy is carried unto a river named  
by their people for a road into the sun / the black boy cedes themself to  
an ebb / her people call this bathing / a baptism / on this day the black  
boy believes herself drowned/ first by the air around them /by the  
waters second /sunken the boy becomes dirty floor /a vast, flowing  
body /or a dead creature amongst its bottom



coming to america during independence with many voices  
after lynda hull

*belize city, 1981*

the theater's curtain unfolds pulling forth a mountain from  
the heavens its sound a chorus, green, soft, a humming light

to mark this boy, this mother, the nation budding  
between them-- garifuna, once culled & kept  
to baliceaux, then culled and kept to roatán & culled

& kept again. voices from the radio: british troops  
remain stationed in cayo & guatemala draws land  
further east on each of its maps. the boy, his mother,

a country so free, let me have a word with you,  
my child good luck for you is obeying my words.

i have tossed and turned in my bed but where can one go

they will talk about our stars in the streets dear  
patron saint of my country, please protect us  
at least until daybreak when the boy will leave

## belize: an etymology

from baliza. i am told the word is related to ballis, a spanish/creole mash of wallace who is believed to be the first man (white) to land on belize. the name, i am told, may also mean lighthouse.

consider the land. who it belongs to. or rather, consider those who belong to it (carib, mayan, many lives whose names we may not know) who have belonged since before man (white) ever arrived on their shores.

consider the lighthouse. built by man (white) & beckoned violence come by sail.

consider my people (garifuna) exiled from our land by man (white) & arrived at belize. the beacon, point of arrival & origin beckoning an unfamiliar soil

on the beacon

a boat is for travel. travel is a verb  
a verb suggests intention. in creole  
one might say we go fa boat. the boat  
is medium from point A to B

\*\*\*

from point A to point B the boat  
carries our intention. in this sense,  
a boat can give a vision legs

\*\*\*

in visions, my people travel by boat  
sometimes, are carried. my people  
are taken & carried from west africa  
we cannot say precisely where  
so origin looks like [                    ]

\*\*\*

an origin may look like a pier  
a pier is where a boat comes to rest  
a pier is where a boat begins.

\*\*

was the boat their beginning?  
did it tie intention to new land?  
what were my people before  
we were? how did we become?  
by boat?

\*\*\*

maroons would flee by boat  
to st. vincent where they heard they  
might live free. (freedom here is not

a concept, abstracted. instead  
it refers to a condition outside  
of slavehood and its logics  
the garifuna on st. vincent  
lived outside of the nation-  
state. they existed for each  
other. themselves. the land.  
they took in others  
who were also them)

\*\*\*

who is an other that looks like me?  
are we not tied by a shared condition?  
does that not mean i need to love you  
further than any hurt or hatred?  
where does that love begin? as verb?  
as intention? how to end this world?  
how to build another?

portrait of gram in 90's hip hop videos (four page letter)

aaliyah emerges from the forest path  
begins climbing up a fallen tree trunk  
gram's voice enters "gyal you gon fall from  
there & bust up your head chuh! in your good  
leather outfit too. leave that damn boy alone gyal  
here" embarrassed, aaliyah, walks back to the path.  
aaliyah & gram find a bench to sit and pen a letter  
to the jehovah's witnesses down the street instead  
asking that they please leave the house alone

*i wish i knew  
how it would feel to be free*

dear simone,

the first time i questioned freedom / i was laid on the kitchen floor  
cheek to cold tile/ a blade /my fixation / i laughed / of course/  
& couldn't stop / you must know / which dreams live /because  
we're yet to imagine / otherwise /if you had your way you'd  
be a killer / if i had my own i'd be a haunt / breathing / how  
do we get to the beyond / a question in the dark / we're known  
best unliving / i fear / & i am sorry/ for it / i don't want a nation  
to know me / my people lived without nations / we will not live  
again / while they exist / a pale queer told me / my gender is / liberation  
i know / another's unfreedom / is at the other end of my rights /  
& *we can't forget that / no /* i want a body tied to the land / i want  
land free & sovereign / i want land & body & all of my relations /  
i want to live within them / *then i'd sing/ and i'd sing cuz i'd know /  
i'd know how it feels*

here is the story whereby at the rivers bottom the Black boy meets fear a creature with mouth for a body & a thousand teeth that rattle when fear speaks & fear spoke it's name into the black boy until the boy knew himself as a shivering thing a shudder & then consumed by the beast

## my gram's machete

My gram's machete long. A Black handled thing. Blade bleak with rust but still wave n break a blade of grass, crack a coconut, peel a plantain, chop a tree stump in the backyard, will *chop yo dutty hands if you no leave my kitchen bwai heck!* My gram's machete steady to the left, right and front. Will sign a cross and beckon the archangel. *be our protection against the wickedness.* My gram's machete a cutlass in Trinidad, a smile on our South Side porch. Stands at attention in uniform--house dress over sweatpants and hoodie. Sandals on the feet. My gram's machete not made for this cold *not at all my boy.* Gets real harsh when it snows, keeps to its room to remember heat like Dangriga. A knock at the window can shake my gram's machete. But believe it's still steady n prepared to cut. Can put itself at ease too. Jehovah's witness, a copy of The Watchtower in tow. Gram's machete say: here. A place the lord's children are welcome but cannot stay. *Jehovah understand.* My gram's machete stay near the front door, in the kitchen closet by the back, under the bed, next to the Wray & Nephew.



simone,

name born from your own  
two lips. lesson in returning  
without a mother's welcome.  
sign that leads a body toward  
being. how many ways  
were you called before your first  
arrival? were there days when  
a name couldn't hold you, when  
it forced your absence instead?  
what did you call yourself  
then? simone i want to live  
inside whatever my loves  
might call me. living or past  
or prior i want to know what song  
you would live within  
i would sing it, if you'd let me

songs for boys (a fractured crown)

- with frank ocean

*I'm the only*

*still*

*break*

my voice catches & i've downed enough jack  
to be anyone/anything

*show me*

fall

we survived another season & still  
i cry when mc tree sings his brother gone  
it's been [ ] many days since you or i  
wanted death even fewer since we grieved  
a new ghost i want to hold our  
bodies peculiar

& wide  
instead i pray

*show me wisdom in your movement*

we wailed a shared prayer  
the night before & watched  
lights flash blue beyond our vision

*And these*  
*New [redacted] up ahead*

around us

the knot in my chest  
the burn in our throats the anger  
the grief



a haunted devotion

what of this rage

what of this care  
a gentle ghost

*you*  
*couldn't live without*

*I don't see*  
*my [redacted] backing out*  
*here the night loops*

a ghastly quiet  
a set of hands  
clasping empty  
a boy's limbs  
before me  
a memory  
my eyes  
a silence  
sweetly kept  
a dream  
on the lips  
a wish  
for warmth  
a softness  
like sin  
a whisper  
so near  
a vision  
lovely & dim  
a din

*Tonight I might change my life, all for you*

*And these minerals on my body break light*

i read the times, reminder  
of chicago lovely & dim

i miss it

but never say so

i miss you

but don't say that either

i don't know

what survives a silence

so big

*the feelings*

*you provide*

i'd be your girl

if i could

i ask about you now & then when i can  
i miss the way you made me lose control

you haven't seen  
i could be [ girl/ghost] of your dreams  
if you give us

there are sounds that belong just to you  
it's  
nothing

but tears in my eyes

we grew up on the same lie  
you cut hair for living money  
i cut my own cuz it was free  
i wish we'd known how  
who could ever be right

i know you got someone

nothing

between us

*Is you a natural*

*serpent*

they ask who we are

they do not take our names

they ask what we are doing

talking, tossing pebbles

they ask for i.d.

you hide in your hands

you ask if they carry

a tremble in your palms

again, are they carrying?

we ask them for space

they put you in handcuffs

i can't see through the night

simone,

you said yourself

*we're headed for the brink* & i think perhaps  
we've been there. my dad says back home  
they used machete to cut grass, cut weeds,  
cut vines.

                  there's more he didn't say but  
must be true still. the grass grows back  
the weeds return to choke it & vines  
they climb & climb & climb  
*we can't forget that, no*



here is the story whereby the black boy runs from fear so  
far she finds herself outside her body. the black boy  
becomes a dark cloud over herself—breaking thunder &  
the shivering sky just the same a boy  
blue & still

who weeps like rain

mistranslation of umalali's 'hattie'

- after aika misawa, safiya amerin & ej koh

*you cried out*  
"citalopram"

*a dreadful storm*  
a tablet/i am told has a liquid form too  
*my child*  
celexa is the brand name used in the states

*earth has been answered*  
but at the pharmacy citalopram

*let us repent*  
my psychiatrist says

*for we all perish*  
ssri for short there are several drugs of this kind

*syl, you cried out*  
the nurse at the partial

*you cried out my child*  
i don't know what that means

*at daybreak sadness covered the land* i go through the same thing over again  
*we stood around*  
& find nowhere  
*where are our homes?*  
before the therapist was an episode

*hattie washed them away*  
& that too was a repetition  
*we just stood around*  
major depressive means sadness is water  
*we gazed*  
on my best days i remember breathing  
*just*  
when i am drowning

*where are our homes?*  
i do not know / my body tells me

*hattie has washed away*  
what was /the rest of me weeps

notes on hunger ending in an erasure of aurelio martinez's landini

when i speak of hunger

i speak an ache

a diseased absence

a wish  
for self

my tongue  
spits  
depression  
& gram hears

demon  
a line of ills my uncles knew  
a

[  
]

& dad hears

a  
passed from his father to me  
say suicide  
& i hear yes  
yes  
& sometimes

to be  
no more  
splits

silence shaped like

say drink  
drown  
haunting

a song

*oh quiet the  
the field work  
me here sister*

*Along the river*

*What happens is our hamlet  
will cultivate tomorrow  
we cultivate cassava to make bread*



reflections on watching missy elliott's 'lose control' video

my gram hums & i imagine a chorus behind her  
we listen to paul nabor. she tells me 'when i die,  
bury me with music'. a man on youtube said  
the other day, it is your duty to care for this land  
until we can return. there was a time before the music  
imagine garifuna before us with a whole world to build.  
a professor this morning says we came from a king  
that our name means those who traded in gold.

consider another tale, a people who tasted cassava  
& called ourselves after that dark root which kept us  
consider our beginning an unburied body

*everybody*

*everybody*

is where imagination lives

*everybody*

*here*

*everybody*

*get loose*

portrait of gram in 90s hip hop videos (wu tang ain't nuthin ta fuck wit)

fire & explosion at the beginning  
inspektah deck opens the chorus.  
everyone is in their hoodies & ski masks  
gram steps out wearing her black hat,  
& a jacket over a hoodie over her nightgown  
over a pair of sweatpants. she is holding her machete  
gram scolds the wu tang clan says "cho! who make that noise?  
you boys grown and no know how to act? want to blow up the  
whole building what is that? using those foul words in your mouth  
it late & it cold for this now too!" gram becomes more fervent, she shakes her  
machete at the wu tang clan, "you boys go from here before  
i beat every jack one of you" the gza, the rza, ol dirty bastard, method man,  
ghostface, inspectah deck, raekwon, u god, and masta killah run home promptly  
everyone makes it home in time for supper. the video ends with gram  
sitting comfortably in her big chair watching the days of our lives as she  
eats tortilla with stewed chicken feet

here is the story whereby the back boy is dragged into a body & their  
ancestors learn them their name /black boy with crown of marigold who  
comes from a line of well moisturized negroes who bathe their kin in  
coconut oil / reap their nutrient from plantain & cassava /a trade learned  
from a line of considerate niggas who used their hands to feed the earth  
& drew gifts from its soil/ a line of niggas who come from the the sea /  
who once spoke the unborn boy's name /fixed their mouths like so  
became butterfly

til boy

aubade for the boy

*when i woke up i dreamed*  
you were the sea, body  
of movement dressed in a dress  
that swayed, sashayed, a lapping tide  
moonwalking cross the shore you,  
spoke like a mango before ripeness  
impossibility, impossible to unsee  
bangles that banged your own welcome  
i found myself singing  
*That I love you, I love you*



a name is a symbol

- *after noname*

a shape at rest in a lips cradle

a mother's lyric to coax me into being

*i used to have a name*

called me

a royal people

called me

a ridge

called me

the edge of everything

called me  
forgetful

called me

never mind

not at all

called me

[redacted]

*i used to have a name*

traded it for a brush of indigo

& the bloom forgot me still

boston triptych

i.

i was a kid  
& i looked at myself  
& i couldn't be anyone  
else so now  
                  here i am

ii.

oh honey most of us queens grew up fighting. we was lookin real cute but we could scrap too. we watched out for each other. if they did anything to another girl they could do the same to me. i talk about it in my raps i have an album coming out you can hear it soon

iii.

honey i was born in boston but i grew up a queen in new york/ a lot of us ran away or moved /you couldn't imagine/ it wasn't like now we didn't have any words like transgender or any of that/ we got called all kinds of things but we were queens/ that's what we called ourselves/ mhhmm & we looked more fabulous than any royalty you ever read about baby/ elizabeth who? i still don't know all the words /kids say they're one thing or another and i'm like what is that?/ i'm learning but you know what honey/ just tell me what to call you / i'll call you that

portrait of gram in 90s hip hop videos (the rain (supa dupa fly))

*beep beep*

*who got the keys to the jeep?*

missy pulls up in a black hummer  
says she is going to the beach but stops short  
before vroom. gram raises her hand from her front porch  
and yells “gyal heck! you go leave without me chuh!”  
gram ambles to the passenger seat in her big black coat  
which she’s got over her nightgown  
draped over a hoodie and sweatpants

“your cousin syl call  
& ask for powder bun take me to jewel  
we need margarine”  
as it turns out gram also needed to buy a calling card,  
find cassava, pick up her prescriptions, & get her lotto numbers  
missy never makes it to the beach

#10

*i'm not bout to be nonviolent honey!*

dear simone,

most of what i know is imagined  
chatoyer was born & then he lived  
& then he didn't. his hands looked  
something like my auntie din's.  
calloused palms, fingers thick. *he was  
not a violent man* at least i like to think,  
though did fight & did kill. i suppose  
you know better than me the ways life  
is an impossible demand. how death stares  
from the end of it. do you ever dream  
of those who lived so you could live after?  
is it different from remembering?

( )

simone,

do you ever mishear into the truth?

*we can't [forgive] that no. limitations*

of a certain love. or maybe love's nature

itself.

a call

to arm oneself beyond this world

where perhaps something might live

*don't you know how we gotta react?*

here is the story whereby the boy gives her name to the water & the sea  
speaks it back let the water say  
monarch boy fluttering boy boy with wings boy who kissed the flowers  
with full mouthed glee boy who bathed her petals in laughter sweet  
like mango tandasha or blue boy who voice soothe like slosh of water  
inna di coconut fi true black boy who love like breeze in the tree who  
leave at time but always returns to the sea

gram was always a cubs fan

she says it started back home where your arm  
was the bat & you swung at a small rubber ball

or rock depending on who played that day  
(or who couldn't). gram's cousins told me

she was among the best in pg, dangriga wherever  
she could play. gram had power in her swing

*& bwaaiiii that girl tencie she was quick man. 1981*  
& on gram watched every cubs game on wgn

& the love was only cemented when she made  
her first trip to wrigley. we talked about it once.

the only detail i remember is that the cubs lost  
but still i recall the first time i stickied my own

fingers with ice lemonade so sweet i nearly forgot  
the sun beating from above the scoreboard & yes,

i do admit i likely fell asleep sometime between  
the second inning & the first homerun fireworks

that shook me from a slumber & yes, i likely asked  
the score & fell right back into my nap before a response.

forgive me. i don't need to see what i already know  
gram wakes each morning & tells the windowlight

today is another day. she reads a bible verse seated  
at the edge of her bed & speaks a hail mary under

her breath & when i call gram says *you know bwai*  
*i hope. and if not today then next time my child. next time.*

my cousin asks me about the southside

& i say the cold starts well before the winter where i'm from october means get your coat & gloves save the hat for november you gonna want to wait til at least thanksgiving to cover all the way up cuz the cold don't stop til after it's supposed to & we like it that way i say there's only a few times we know we're alive for sure & one's when we feel the freeze in our bones a shiver some aching ask of our frame to be preserved at its worst the cold is deadly & at its best the cold is killing someone other than you & how can you not love a city so honest it'll hold you with its icy knuckles & whisper in its winds how it wants you gone over & over again so when it starts to warm & everyone starts to come out & kids start falling dead like snow we can look back to the first green we saw in the field at washington park when we drove past & said like we do each year that if we survived that last winter then we can make it through the summer too



angels on the southside

- *after chance the rapper*

when we sing  
we don't mean cherubs

angels

floating  
& playing

& pointing  
harps

& shit

we're talking about lil brown kids  
all in their diapers  
lookin like my brother  
with his nappy cloud head

back in the day  
when he used to climb  
atop anything he could

& yell *catch*  
to whoever was below

boy made it  
on the rooftop

once when he was about five years old

giggled & trounced  
about as gram whispered  
her prayers

& dad circled the house  
in case the kid jumped  
& i don't believe in a god

all the time

but gram says  
lord only knows  
how we got him down that day

safe from any sort of harm

the kind we imagined for him  
i mean michael didn't see that  
mess

said the way he got himself to jump  
was he never thought of falling

so then it's only a flight  
& i ponder the words

while watching a dashcam video  
of a body that looks like his  
& mine

brought back into  
the earth it was borne from  
i cannot know for sure

if laquan felt he was falling  
or if rekia taught him how to  
think it a jump

but i know some of my people

will only leave the southside

in the belly  
of a casket

& i know that heaven's gates  
are lower than

the white picket joints  
we see in them suburbs

& i know  
the choir  
looks like  
my people  
& when we sing  
we mean

angels

the ones  
who wear  
hoodies  
& histories  
as robes

heavy enough  
for the ground

to eat them early  
so this  
is how  
we cradle  
them back  
to peace



portrait of gram in 90s hip hop videos (juicy)

gram walks into biggie's mansion wearing her big coat  
over a hoodie over her nightgown over a pair of sweatpants  
everyone is partying by the pool. when she realizes there  
are no slots, gram says "oh no. this no the casino"

& here is the story whereby the black boy bathes in the sea & the sea  
whispers their name & their body is always clean & the black boy met  
joy once & they tell the waters & the waters say their name back they say  
our child is here our child is here our child is here & they are alive

the day milt palacio beat the nets any & everything was possible

- *after december 28th, 2000*

& this was before the days when news came right to you  
every minute on your phone or other such device  
we (that is, my siblings & i) relied on the television  
or a trusted adult to tell us all about milt  
who had the last name of andy & so we wondered  
might he be a sabal & if a sabal ( a family, who,  
our great uncle told us, are relations to most  
every garifuna in dangriga-- everyone in dangriga  
is sabal brother t would say) then might he be a cousin of ours?

& we heard our maybe cousin milt played segunda, the shadow drum,  
as a kid. when he dribbled it was only in paranda rhythms  
& this is why milt has never turned the ball over not once  
in his life. we knew milt grew strong off meals of plantain,  
fry jack, & coconut stew & this is why he does not tire &  
surely milt's father, like ours, said when you have food you  
must always share & not the burnt plantain bwai give them  
this one here cooked sweet & there was once a time  
when milt's grandmother yelled out to stop the noise  
playing ball in this house & so our cousin went  
to the belize-guatemala border, chucked threes across for a week straight  
til finally each went swish & so, satisfied, milt returned home to a plate of 1-2-3

& so it made sense that our cousin milt, when he found himself  
at half court against the nets, the ball slipping itself from lucious harris'  
fingertips towards aaron williams that our cousin would, as if by obeah,  
guide the ball into his hands, that he would need just a single bounce  
to the floorboard, that he would first look to pass to paul pierce  
that he would notice marbury, a body in the way, that he would leap instead  
& milt would push the ball from his hands & the backboard would light red  
& the buzzer would sound & swish & we heard this all from our birthmom  
one morning & i remember maybe eating beans & fry jack  
which had never tasted quite as good as they did that day

all my niggas in the whole wide world

what is name?

who?

dread head boy

oohhh you know

you always called him

rasta

yah dread

rasta boy

or natty dread

huh what his ma

de say?

i knew he name

me too gyal heck

what his name?

you know?

one time you know

it joe you know

mmm that right

i remember cuz he ma

call the boy joseph

muhfucckas from school

your dress

what i look like to you?  
always in a barbershop

i got my son on the phone

oh my god

he think i'm a crackhead  
talm bout

chief keef ain't this

but that ain't me

chief keef ain't

you're so beautiful

i'm just fucking a married man  
that

i just had to say that

aye aye aye check

he say he selling me drugs

i got a business  
you support local hip hop?  
see?

& his wife don't suspect it

you need a lineup?

i don't do none that stuff



a full cut? i got you

take my card. call that number

i make beats too

if you don't need em

i know you know someone who do

flip the card see?  
same number

you know you could boil a egg

yo yo yo but this banh mi tho  
in a oven

right?

how they make it so good?

like nah you sound crazy

just put that shit in water

they put carrots  
in a pan or whatever n pop that shit

they put a carrot on a sandwich  
in the oven boom

& it's good as hell

how they do that

shiiiiiiii

you from ethiopa right?  
belize?  
where's that?

oh hey baby!

haven't seen you in a minute

you still wearing your bow ties too

you doing alright?

the islands

things good here

of Black people  
beautiful

i just stay driving my route  
Black people

so nice to see you baby  
that true? yeah?

i got four sons & none of them in jail  
& none of them sell drugs  
well that's not true

one sell drugs  
imma be up outta this spot soon  
he ain't never been to jail  
hear me out

he a father now

print that shit

sell that shit  
how do you feel about jesus?

you know,  
sell them right here first  
jesus christ?  
then move online  
smart right?

never been

but my friend she's west indian

she told me bout

they got all kind

strong too

you be blessed now

t shirts

make money

watch me  
imma be up outta here

the watchtower  
take a copy

aye

i'm the realest

i saw on the magazine rack

rap muhfucka

out here

i wrote all kinda shit

it had a photo of john legend

*thinking of a master plan*  
said sexiest man alive

*cuz there's nothing but sweat inside my hand*

can you believe that?

i got this phone, just this one for my son

he do his thing with the piano

he over at harvard right now

& the singing baby

studying something real smart

when i used to love youuuuuuu

boy always been that way

you getting off?

that boy average at best

the other phone for business

aight now

i don't know what they thinking

stay safe

these people crazy

my birthday was yesterday

i don't wanna tell a lie

aight so check

the pale germ

i just need a heineken

these colognes right here

that's what i call em

that's it

twenty dollars

they like a bacteria  
just one  
they go for eighty at macy's

all over  
you could just grab me one  
each  
everything in 'em is recessive

aight  
& a bottle henny too

ion't know what made them do that  
that don't matter to me  
just cuz you a nerd or whatever  
they wrong for that  
got your backpack on  
but five on one ain't right  
you alright baby?

they only hit you once?

they mommas gon hear it  
that's right  
let's get you home

they know better  
you got all your things?

don't matter  
now where you stay?

#7

dear simone,

i don't believe in the imperative of beauty  
& still beauty is among my desires.

beauty is a human category.  
the human is a lie.

