

## **holy**

**Perhaps, the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. –James Baldwin**

I was born a punk—twisting and shoving until I coiled the umbilical cord around my neck—a homegrown noose. When the doctor finally untangled the mess I'd made, my body was so blue my mom thought I'd already died. She is Black; my dad, white. But my body alien upon birth.

Churches call such narrative testimony; told in a straight line, stretching from sin to savior, resolving with God. My family didn't attend church until puberty had control, my testimony always warped by anxious, agitated movement and so my testimony must return to that memory of birth—my body almost annihilated by my own restless need to position myself.

What do we do with a history we'd rather forget? And what if that history is our ancestry, irremovable, part of the lineage that made us? Perhaps it's learned behavior, conditioned from summers at my grandmother's side mouthing along with Baptist hymnals. Always the dutiful grandson in her presence. I could feel light coming from the pulpit.

“Would anyone here like to know the loving grace of Jesus?” the pastor asked, “Then raise your hand. The Lord sees you.”

Memaw patted my back—we'd yet to be baptized—I knew what she expected of me. Time and time again I shrank myself. I raised my hand dutifully. I was baptized, 12 years old.

I was told I would go to heaven when I died, I didn't understand what it meant until I went to church the day after Trayvon's murderer was exonerated.

“I'm glad the jury didn't give into the media hysteria,” most my church folks was white. I knew I mourned alone. Perhaps our american tragedy

doesn't come from a refusal to accept that the fact of life is tragic, but that america only grants an afterlife to certain bodies.

For white americans: death and rebirth while living Black bodies are terrorized, lynched for their very being. For Black americans: death without resurrection.

## **an america in lower case**

**maybe ain't no home, except for how your beloveds cuss or pray or pronounce. -Nate Marshall**

What's happening to our country? the principal asked  
the morning after yet another gunmen did what gunmen do.

What's happening to our country?  
A common refrain in turbulent times.

She meant the gunman's violence, but I thought  
about the droid remote detonated by officers  
the droid that undoubtedly turned the gunman  
into chunks of meat and tissue and blood.  
america; restless, rootless.

What's happening to our country?  
Death begets death which begets further death.

The great american tragedy began in 2015.  
The great american tragedy began in 2004.  
The great american tragedy began in 1980.  
The great american tragedy began in 1897.  
The great american tragedy began in 1829.  
The great american tragedy began in 1607.  
The rest of the tragedy a wrestling match  
to masquerade this theft as sovereign.

Colloquially, america is a melting pot,  
maybe a better metaphor is a house of thirteen cats.  
The bickering of people who'd rather blame the animals  
in the zoo than their keepers, u know what I'm sayin'?

I'm sayin' the cats needed a new home,  
I'm sayin' sometimes it be nice  
when we let nature run its course,  
but other times the house is left empty.

Rootless, maybe, but resourceful—we find ways to love  
our landscapes through our people, but goddamn! it's hard  
to walk with so much blood lost, maybe we ought to give in-  
to the stumble and fall, but no, Black will stand tall,  
you know how we do, in this lower case America.  
Black will blot this country all over with ash and dirt,  
blot it on real real thick, Black as Black can be.

## **burnout!**

**The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the ability to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.**

**—bell hooks**

I've never been as drawn to fire as I have been to the ash it leaves in its wake. Perhaps I was born the burnt tip of a candle wick, burnout my natural state.

I'd heard that term, burnout, and feared it, the great American boogie man. There, in what would soon become my classroom, I saw its shadow looming over the teacher I'd replace, I saw it stare into me. The teacher told me it's hard to get the students to care sometimes, I didn't understand what she meant but months later, my students lounged lazily off the couches that served as the desks in that classroom. Untucked sky-blue shirts and navy-blue slacks melted into the deep-blue couch cushions to complete the monochromatic still life.

I had sailed my ship of thesis onto the unfamiliar shore of a private school, I needed ideas. Inspiration. Guidance. Control. Yesterday, as the class read aloud from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, two students fell asleep, one snored, another ended every line of dialogue by adding, *deez nuts*, even after returning from the principal's office for that very same offense.

In the teacher's lounge, Sharon, told me that I needed to assert myself. You look tired, honey, she observed. Don't let the little shits get to you, said in the tone of a parent who has had just about enough. Honestly, I felt it. I had lost so many discussions to chaos. So many mornings, I awoke body weighed down to the sheets, and thought, yep, this is it, I'm burnt out, but still I rose and still I sat myself before my laptop to cobble something together for school.

I love how much I hate the word burnout. It's perfectly visceral. I can feel the burning muscles, the heated tension in my spine. Still, the machine grinds on, the transmission ablaze—burnt out. It seems to me the greater american condition,

a country where leaders hold progress hostage under the guise of religious liberty when the most Christian gift this country could provide would begin and end with rest. Burnt out, yes, but is that not the foundation for the phoenix? Revolutionaries warn of a fire that will descend upon this nation. Yes, I see it there along the horizon too, a great american burnout. If you work the gears too hard, the transmission will erupt. The car will have no choice but to idle. Holy american Burnout,

grant us the stillness of your fire this time.