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This thesis explores the story of the 1958 Kissing Case in which two black boys, eight and nine years old, were arrested for kissing a white girl in Monroe, NC. In telling this story I seek to understand what happens to black families in the midst of white terrorism by exploring the psyche of each person through persona, the dishonesty of fairytales, and the traditions of formal poetics, god, racism, and religion.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU KISS A BLACK BOY

by

James J. Boykin

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Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Hear: (a verb)

1. to become aware of by ear; as in no one could hear the son of Timaeus begging for the Lord on the side of the street because he was blind, because he was poor, because he was a sinner, because no one hears the sinner (because they only hear the sin); as in I heard the nakedness of the man who strolls down Elm St. before I could hear his homelessness before I could hear his solitude, before I could hear his stomach ask for something more

than air, I would hear the quarters & dimes I never handed him praise dancing between the seams of my pocket, begging to be used. 2. to gain knowledge of by hearing; I heard the schools were closing & in hearing that the schools were closing

I heard the parents blamed the school board, the school board blamed the teachers, the teachers blamed the students, the school board blamed the students, the parents blamed the students, but there was no one left for the students to blame but the pencils a.) I heard the President the Governor & the Mayor wanted the kids off the street, I heard the cops removed the kids from the street, I heard mothers were weeping because they put them in the ground, I heard fathers were drinking because their homes have no sound,

I heard grandmothers are becoming mothers again, grandfathers are becoming fathers again, but I never heard the Mayor the Governor & the President again 3. to listen to with attention; Hear the kids that march in the street; their feet scream here

with every step, their hands cry here with each pump of their fists, the canisters hit their backs here, here the mace burns the color from their irises, here the battle cry of cocktails are thrown in their defense, here the Hammurabi coded glass of store windows breaks to even up the score a.) Hear them better than you heard Fannie Lou because you were never a fan of her being on your TV screen, hear them better than you heard the pen of Miss Wells before it was snapped in two; hear them better than you heard Randolph

when he was just a Negro representing Negroes suffering in shipyards, hear them better than you heard the gunshot that killed Chicago Fred, the gunshot that erased black forever's & then Evers, the one shot that devoured Harry & Harriette Moore, the one shot that sank the sound of Sandra's Bennett bell. Are you listening? Can you hear?

I: Child's Play

*Children have never been very good at listening to their elders,
but they have never failed to imitate them.*

James Baldwin

How Do You Kiss a Black Boy?

I was born in strange hands w/out air

pumping through the pockets of my still lungs.
My mother set the metronome to my
thumping heart, while practitioners waited on
husky breaths from my father to make me

whole. He paused. Never having kissed the puce
pudgy lips of another black boy he stood
cold (at first) wondering how men should kiss
each other. His father never taught him.

How do you kiss a boy masculine,
peach fuzz crawling in 5 o'clock shadows,
endowing the upper lip, even when it's not
there? He did what he had to, shot cool shells of

air behind my tongue (breathing has never been easy).

What Happens When You Kiss a White Girl? (I ask James)

Your lips grip something;
 something that rubs you
 like the bristles
of a rope against the neck
 & you choke
 on your breath
as if you were drowning,
 somewhere in the Atlantic,
after being thrown over-
 board to make more & more
room for her to breathe.

Your body doesn't move
 but you feel your lungs
thrash against your rib cage like a whip-lash
 while the gashes in your marrow flood
with white blood cells that salt the wounds.

 You don't yell when you feel a knife
between your teeth or when your gums start to bleed,
 you just pretend
 its not there,
 but you are forever stained;
like when fingered-blood slaps the fluff of cotton,
 or when the skin blooms into a keloid.

She won't ask you if you've had enough,
 that's not her problem, & you won't ask her
to stop, you don't have the authority.
 So your eyes will watch your mouth
until it tires or she releases you – either way
 you die & then come back to life
 worse than a nigger.

You See Those Houses? (Fuzzy asks)

Black folks don't live there no more. We got chased out after they heard the suctioning pop of lips releasing long held volumes of carbon dioxide into the air (Only the trees were happy). But we lived there together,

poor blacks & whites, with our thumbs in the ground both our ancestors were buried in, the word "no" our level of opportunity. But if you asked them they were far superior as every year they would repaint the color line on-

to the rotting planks of their houses with an alabaster sheen, while ours would stay a mossy coated brown. It was like we had washed away the whiteness from the wooden bones of their homes, from the merrowed skeleton beneath their skin,

that day James & I kissed Sissy down the street. When we kissed her we made them feel less than our Tar babies, Boo Hags, hand-me-down spiders, weaker than our John Henry's, & worthless on our Annie Christmas, but we still got to kiss the girl. If only for a moment.

The Blood Beneath Our Floorboards

On March 18th, 2018 Stephon Clark is killed by police.

A tweet from 2015 resurfaced; *Dark bitches bring dark days.*
I'm sorry you felt that way.

I'm sorry you didn't know your worth and although most
black folks won't admit it,

if I can be honest I didn't either, once. So I'm sorry for the growth
you were never allowed

to have, although that doesn't excuse what you said. And I don't know
if a black woman ever hurt you,

or made you cry, but I'm sorry if one ever did. I'm sorry no black
man or woman ever told you

how beautiful you were. We tend not to see it in ourselves most times,
so I'm sorry you never saw it

in yourself before you died. It probably wouldn't have kept you
here but it might've helped

the rest of us catch our breath a little sooner, war a little softer, kiss
each other a little warmer

but instead you opened this lock box filled with shredded blood stained
fabrics we've kept below

the floorboards and couldn't give to Goodwill,
but secretly we enjoyed the carnage; the blood of African Booty

Scratchers, of Redbones, of *I have Indian*
in my family, of Good Hair, of *I'm not trying to get any darker*, *You're pretty*

for a black girl, *You're ugly*
for a light skin, the blood of *Why you talk so white & You must want*

*a white woman, of Dwight around
your lips, the blood of Talented Tenth, New Negroes & #blackexcellence.*

But none of it even matters now because you'll never get to kiss
your black boys or your black boys'

black boys, but god how you might've been if only black people
would have just kissed you more.

Whatever Happened to Northside?

Nobody will ever ask me what happened
in the end but just know that Northside lost.
Sorry if I ruined it but this isn't about the end

but how you get there. My father drove.
We went to watch the basketball championships
between Cox Mill & Northside. The color line

drawn at half court though the players remained
black on both sides. My father and I sat where we less
stood out. The game had started; black lips were animated,

popcorn casualties hit the floor, drinks refilled
to hydrate keratin clogged with salt & butter.
Maybe they could win, but maybe not. Every time

Northside took the lead refs blew points away with whistles &
fingers, but I didn't think too much of it (refs always make bad
calls) but maybe I should've, maybe I didn't want too.

8 seconds left; Northside had possession.
They passed it from player to player until Spalding
settled in the hands of a Northsider I'd seen

limping onto the floor *It's over*. I watched him take a 3
pointer over the top of a Cox Mill Behemoth. I waited
for the ball to drop. I imagined how Mary felt as she waited

for Lazarus and then again for Jesus to walk out
of their tombs; the eyes begging to see God re-craft
his body while he fades from limbo. *Swish*.

Every black foot was in the air, including mine. Northside
restored our magic, made us whole. But the scoreboard hadn't
changed. Cox Mill players cheered. The crowd looked around.

Northside boys drove their heads into the ground

What happened? A woman sitting in front turned to me: *They said he was out of bounds.* The refs duck out;

their hands covering their eyes & their heads low. They run past curses. *Please no questions.* Kernels explode on the gym floor. *This is Bull Shit! Y'all Cheated!*

becomes the soundtrack to an instant replay that shows the boy's foot in bounds as he takes the game winner without the win. White eye refuse to move. Black ears

are told, over the intercom: *If you continue, you will be escorted out of the gym.* And all my father could say was *I can't stand that shit!* He forgot to tell me

that this could happen, but I think he thought I already knew. I wanted to ask him *What happens to a dream deferred?* I know he doesn't know, or at least he tries not to think about it.

But maybe it deserves a kiss after it explodes.

How to Threaten a Child in 140 Syllables

Knock-Knock. Knuckles wear on a door
locked by little black girls
who think the whops from the other side

come from their mother,
who has once again misplaced her keys.

Knock-Knock. The knob turns,

the door conjuring a mob of white
men liquored up, ready
to nick a nigger at the throat for raping

a white girl he only kissed.

Where's Hanover, they ask his sisters,
shotguns pointed at their pigtails. Guns-

Cocked. No one knows, not even the red muddled
mutt barking, between blinks
of fidgety lashes, for men to vanish

from the doorway. They weigh
reciprocity for what they've contrived.

Gotta come back some time.

How to Write Your Name in 140 Syllables

Play Cowboys and Indians with white children,
below the street that separates

straight hair from afros. Be a cowboy; grab a stick
& hold it like a gun. Save the girl. Share your cheek with
her lips. The next day go ready to share the other.

Hold out your hands (but not for her) and cuff the wrists.

Let your belly eat

police punches, and digest kicks. Let them call you a rapist.
Let them ask you your name. When they ask you how to spell it,
tell them you don't know & ask if they could teach you.

When they hand you pencil and paper, practice signing
coerced confessions for the bargain of your literacy.

Tricks & Other Terrible Treats

On the night of masks & make-up, eyelids
fall down in a jail cell ready to rid
two boys from the sight of their barred cages
while children outside run from house to house
beating tricks & catching treats, as wages

for their time in play. Mothers watch their houses
while fathers eye their children from the street,
& nicker men, who work inside the jail, pad

around the room covering themselves in sheets.
They watch the boys sleep, these husbands & dads,
like the guns that nap by their sides as they walk their beats.
But it's time to get up. A few hard bangs & kicks
on the bars do the trick. The boys levitate

on fear, & cops laugh at the ghosts they mimic.

A Prayer to Rufe Simpson (from Jennie)

Do you remember when I held you when you
couldn't breath and I hollered
the lyrics to *Take My Hand*
as bacteria ate away at the last bit

of your lungs? You gave me one last smile
before you left, the creases on both ends
of your mouth where your cheeks met
the inside of your gums sunk deeper

and deeper into God's cloudy hands.
They say death isn't easy but, of course,
you made it look beautiful; like this house
you painted for me (canary yellow) to cover

up the mossy wooden brown,
like the wardrobe you worked over-
time to buy 'cause you wanted the white
women I worked for to be jealous,

like the children you gave me
when you turned out that light at night
and covered us in darkness so that
we could share each other in privacy away

from even God's nose eye. When TB
took your body and there was nothing
that Dr. Jim Jordan could do you told me
that you would still find a way to be

a father to Fuzzy; the boy you tucked away
behind my navel. So if you can hear me
and you're out there somewhere between the creeks
in the floorboard, that millisecond between off

and on when I turn off the lamp at night,
that moment between being naked and covered
when I slip on the dresses you gifted me before I
head out for church. Could you please go

get our boy and bring him home?
I think he needs his father.

Jedidiah Brown is now live on Facebook
Everything I had, I lost, . . . too busy fighting for y'all.

Heart&Heart Sad-face&Heart
Heart&Like Like&Like&Like&Like

Last night I molded my bones into bullets,
bathed them in a sink of my blood, then loaded
them into this glock I kept under my bed for intruders
(but they were never afraid of death anyway).

Heart&Heart Sad-face&Heart
Heart&Like Like&Like&Like&Like

Lake Michigan stares at me now through my windshield.
The ripples breaking the surface pop in rhythm the way Travis
would laugh (I wasn't ready to be a father). The joggers rushing
by don't know he lives here now. Maybe heaven sits at the bottom.

Heart&Heart Sad-face&Heart
Heart&Like Like&Heart&Like&Like

I tried to heal Chicago. It wounded me. I tried to help my people.
Please don't help me now. I tried to be a son. I tried to be a father.
And I pretended to be straight ('cause my mom wouldn't love me)
but kisses from black men & women continued to land on my lips.

Heart&Heart Sad-face&Heart
Heart&Like Like&Heart&Like&Like

If I do it, should I do it for Travis? Chicago? God? Can I
do it for me? Am I worth a bullet the size of a mustard seed
planted under the porch of my mother's house. She tells me
they keep the evil out. I never told her I ate a few.

*Don'tDothis&Heart WeLuvU&Like Like&Like&
Like&Like Call911&Like GodLuvsU&Heart*

Jedidiah Brown's live stream has ended

Mary Lou,

I heard Brooklyn is booming in the black,
But please don't forget about your brother?
White folks knock at our door with bullets & bricks.
Can you imagine being this mad over a kiss?

But please don't forget about your brother?
I'm still bathing my boss's babies, hearing her bitch.
Can you imagine being this mad over a kiss?
I hope housekeeping, up there, ain't what you live.

'Cause down here I got fired; no more hearing her bitch.
But tell me you don't have to bite your tongue for a buck?
Tell me white folks don't bother you blue? I hope
all those Brooklyn boys are being beautiful to you.

Tell me you don't have to break your tongue for a buck.
Tell me you're not benched at the back of the bus.
I hope all those Brooklyn boys are being beautiful to you.
But don't forget about your blood. You can't wash it out with water.

I'm still benched in the back on my butt, but maybe
you could come for your brother? You can't forget
about your blood. You can't wash it out with water.
I'm afraid he'll be beat; bruised by the Poplar tree.

So you should come for your brother. White folks flock
to our door with bats & bricks, his body they'll beat;
lay stabbed & scabbed under the most unpopular tree.
Can you imagine being this mad? It was only a kiss.

How To Sleep with The One You Love

When we're 90 would you like to die with me
in the bed we made our kids in;
our fingers intertwined
like french braids while the music in our chests

starts to slow & the fleshy tubas
beneath our sternums
coil into bantu knots? I say we do it on a Sunday;
skip church & lay in bed

for hours without removing
all the decorative grey, white, & blue pillows you insisted
on having (though you never planned
to use them). You only added the blue for me anyway,

said I needed to be somewhere in the room. I know
you'll argue that we can't break tradition;
that all the pillows have to be off the bed &
on the floor during the day, so they can rid themselves

of all our bad thoughts & nightmares,
but we won't need them. On Sundays, when god
rests he turns into a dreamcatcher (a nightmare collector)
& when he wakes up he pulls shots of your REM sleep

from his scalp, slaps them in a jar full of preserves,
& sets them on a shelf for safe keeping. I really think Sunday
is a good day to meet god -- then we wouldn't have to
go to church & talk to the same folks who've never seen him

either. But then maybe Thursday works best? They could find us
on Friday, plan our funeral on Saturday,
& lower us side by side Sunday morning between
fresh cut blades of grass that would christen our foreheads

with the dew falling from their stems,
as we watch from limbo the condensation dance
on our children's cheeks. Doesn't that sound beautiful?
If it was only that easy.

What Was She Like? (I ask Dr. Perry)

She smelled like ginger & gasoline
when we first met; a gasket on her stove
was broken but she always kept some tea
grumbling in the kitchen so I'd know
she was home. We ate grapefruit & laughed
at her painting of White Jesus & God.
I see you still got that ugly photograph
I'd always say making her tongue & jaw
gallop beneath her nose. It kept her mind
from her kidnapped son but she still liked to play
with my gun, wanting to learn how to grind
those (cradle-robbing) white men to hellish
graves (& gravel) so I gave Evelyn one of her own.
Who knew the smell of lead could make you feel at home?

Did He Love You? (I ask Evelyn)

He smelled like bananas & burnt bullets
when we met; a banana peel was tucked

in his belt buckle where his gun should've
been but he told me he bucked

it across some cracka's face & bent
the barrel back (left him red white & blue).

But he always had an imagination; invented
his own stories of black cowboys (swore they were true)

nicknamed himself buffalo & became
a soldier, but he was still soft like the flaked

fleshy body of a banana after the frame
is peeled away & warm like fresh pound cake.

When he came, Albert never needed a beer
to bury his gut; when I was there he disappeared.

Evelyn,

I'm sorry there's no magic in a black woman's broom,
that you collect white dust under your apron
as you sweep your sorries & sorrows

across the floor into a dustpan with nowhere
to put their dead skin & hair except under the rug.
But there was magic, once, in a black woman's broom;

they told stories about her, called her Boo Hag,
said she'd like to ride the backs of white children
for fun after she'd sweep her own sorrows & sorries

from their bedroom floors. I think they put her
in a bottle, buried her in the ground by a mulberry
tree & black women have never held a magic broom

since, but I don't feel so bad. She did what she had to do
like the mother-bird who kicks the runt out of the nest, but I
(the runt) left before my exile; didn't care to sorrow or sorry

over a town that wishes we'd never been born there.
But you'll always be my Mama & I your Mary Lou,
but there's no magic in a black woman's broom so please
don't sweep, let them clean your sorrows off their floor.

II: Leviticus 5:5 NIV

*If you can only be tall because someone else is on their knees,
then you have a serious problem. And white people
have a very, very serious problem.*

Toni Morrison

Why Black Folks Can't Swim

*Dr. Albert Perry and Robert F. Williams; Vice President
and President of the NAACP Chapter in Monroe, NC*

Splash. Two black men, heel to puddle, walk in
w/ pistols hugging their waists, black children

at their backs ready to swim in a pool
that only allows white flesh to wade
between letters of H & O after school.
Splash. Minor black toes dive in to invade

warm waters in a flurry of white flight
trying to escape contamination. Splash.

The two men smirk, they have an appetite f
or disruption, eating with their lashes
the sight of ghouls blistering in errors.
But black children don't play for long; water

is there & then nowhere, white hands on a lever
draining smiles. Perry & Williams call their lawyer.

Jericho

Shotguns at the ready, 50 black men
& women surround Union County jail
ready to ransack the cells for a physician's

body. Southern ghosts were unfit to kill
the doctor a week before, so police
clock in to pick up the slack. They charge

Dr. Perry in practice, for him to cease
the treatment of white women; he who was forged
from the skin of their grand daddies' former slaves.

How often must God tear down Jericho
before kings let this castle die in a grave
of its own rubble? As cops let Perry go

two black boys kiss a white girl in a tree above
Harvard St. by the Humming birds & Cuckoo bees.

NRA

Niggas Ready and Armed, waiting patient,
perched on the porch of the only black

doctor in Union County, with guns sent
by the rifle's association back
when they cared about the safety

of negroes against white collar Klans-
men. Forty-Fives bud in dewey Dixie

jungle air and shells fall past Denim pants
as bullets pollinate the doors of pick-
up trucks that pull up with kerosene &

rope. White sheets snag on the thumbs of branches
and white toes hop away in sync

with the sound of lead blooming at the heel.

It turns out black people are hard to kill.

Have You Ever Killed a Deer? (Gov. Hodges asks)

I put one down last Spring
as it grazed between a dog-
wood and pine. The bullet

pierced right through the neck
where it strummed the larynx
and blood coated the vocal

chords so that no sound could
be brought to scale, not even to hum
an insignificant life of Does.

What I didn't see was the fawn
nearby, who right after hearing
its mother hit the ground rushed

over and began trying to suckle
any last remnants of comfort
she could from her mother's

draining breast. I felt an instant
burning sensation in my chest
when I took that poor baby away

from its mother. But I don't feel that
now. Ms. Thompson would like the nation
to believe that I am that same hunter

who ruthlessly left her darling fawn
without the nurture of its mother's milk,
but is Ms. Thompson a mother

compared to that Doe? Has her son
not been caught repeatedly stealing
food out of hunger? Does she not have

nearly 10 kids out of wedlock all by

different men? The boys aren't in prison
but a disciplinary facility learning

what she and Mrs. Simpson should've taught
them a long time ago. I would suggest
that instead of trying to mold me

into her Pontius Pilate she take
the time to scrape the khol
of Jezebel from her face.

Prayer from Jezebel

I am the war paint;
I am the khol I apply
to my black face.

I am the warrior
they mistook for a whore;
let my brush be

my sword as I sharpen
it against the kinks
in my hair, let Jehu

come if he dares,
let all of Israel melt
my doors, let Yah-

weh himself
show his horrid face,
for if they all desire;

I'll be the Pagan,
the Savage, the Slut,
but I won't be a Slave.

I didn't ask to be here,
to be married,
to be imprisoned

by this religion, to be burned
by their glare, to be poisoned
with their whispers. Yes

I killed the priest
for their insolence, &
Naboth as a gift

to my husband, yes

I banished Elijah
for his treason,

but I don't want forgiveness
-- this isn't repentance.
I serve Baal &

he services me, if
they all despised me here
why would Ahab make me

Queen? I did what any woman
should; I added to the gold
on his crown

and when no more
could be crafted on
I encrusted the diamonds

to match, and when I gave
him all the riches
his god wishes

he could accept
I gave him a son,
a second life

to live while he left
me undone.
So give me my after-

life under the dirt!
I hope the worms that rub me
are coated in honey, I hope

my heart orgasms
when the last beat thumps
the back of my lungs, I hope

decay labors me
like birth, I hope
my tombstone wears me

like a crown, but above all
I hope death vindicates
my flaws like amen.

Look at Me When I'm Speaking to You

I would've been better if I had the chance,
maybe more of a mother, if I had the chance.

Having you was like getting dealt a poker hand full of 2s
& 7s, and so wish I'd gotten better if I had the chance.

No one really knows how to raise a child. I guess
I figured you'd learn, by chance, to write

your own horror story but maybe I should've taught you.
Maybe I should have rolled up that blonde hair that slid

down your spine, hit the back of your heels & stapled it
to your scalp. Chances are you'd been better off

bald than you are now. Should've mowed those eyebrows
naked too; took a chance on a bloody floor & scrubbed

your face with sandpaper. I'd still be better than my mother. S
he's never cared to have another chance; thought I'd be better

in the care of someone else -- I thought you would too. I know
Negro housekeepers are common but she taught you how to be

the wrong kind of woman, to trust the wrong kinds of people
before I had the chance to tell you that loving her was beneath

someone like you & me. I know why you bit on that boys lip;
thought by some chance you might find that same colored

love -- he should've never gotten close.
I would have killed Hannover if I had the chance.

Why you had to kiss that nigger, Sissy, I'll never know . . .
but trust you won't have another chance.

When I Was Let Go (Evelyn says)

1.
bread burns beneath my
breasts while butter bends within
my bones & I bow before
a child's brush because she is
white & I am black

her blonde hair is 9
years of age, the same as my
James, & the brighter it beams betters
the chances my boy
will come back to me

2.
a broom swipes the bald
tips of my toes to remind
me to breathe to the beat of
my heart rather than from the
bend in my teeth where

I smile even when
there is no son in my home
no bail for his innocence
no rebuttal for his guilt
he's just a baby

3.
grocery bags I
bought from the white market up-
town grab the edge of another
woman's counter because her
home needs a mother

and she has always
bothered me about it,
bitched but never bit me, &
yet today she tells me *James'*

case is just too much

4.

broken drab & cold
I wait for the bus to come
I see other black women
bringing home the cabbage to
cook in the bellies

of their boys and girls
they see me too, beaten & unable
to lift myself off the bench
so they offer me their Bibles
I've read it already

Louis Austin & George Weisman Reporting

the crisis in Monroe had	as for the boys,
nothing to do with the assault	it was clear to us
it stemmed from the embarrassment	that no crime had ever
occurred that children had not yet learned	in the culvert below
Harvard St. that white is right and God above all things else	
is a respecter of persons	Simpson (8) and Thompson (10) understand
that he has made one race of men	their accusations their charges of being
superior to another is repulsive	repugnant perverted and deviant
only a bunch of numbskulls with	a lack of common decency
hearts full of the filthiest kind that	attracts the lowliest sense
of dirt would attach any significance	or sensibility a disturbed humanity has to offer
to what children of 6 to 10	years before hair sprouts from the armpit
do at play	and the realization that something is wrong

Truth Is (Fuzzy says)

I couldn't forget we were black, pine needles
from the trees above kept brushing past
my ears whispering strangled reminders of life-
less levitating fruit that once filled the air just below

the branches. When James kissed Sissy I felt
their grip gnaw at my jaw, it was cold & stabbing
as if someone had rolled a pine comb inside
a snowball & threw it hitting me in the mouth.

I've never kissed a white woman but mother always
told me what happens when you do; you disappear
into the woods, a man will take you after you have wiped
the last drop of vanilla from his sister's lips.

He'll drag you down the path of crumbing broken bodies
he separated from other loaves of black bread & give you
to the wizard in the cabin covered in white robes, & pointed
hat. In your tongue and balls lie the magic he'll need

to restore her powers (the rest of you is of no use).
He will break the skin apart & sprinkle it on his way back
to town, to return to his sister the potion made from
your voice & the code of your offspring. I waited in that jail

cell, with James, for Hansel & the wizard for months
but instead our mothers showed up. I guess we were lucky.

Hoodoo

Inspired by the Sanford Biggers Quilt Collection

When I needed a new body

I went to see Dr. Jim Jordan down
in Como, North Carolina; a noose

stole my old one after sundown
as I was trying to make my way
back home from an affair across

the color line in Mitchell County.

He asked me why I came, and I told
him white Jesus said it served me

right, so he pulled out his trick
bag, his magic, his mojo, his jomo,
his toby, his gris-gris, his Jack bag &

Jack ball, his hand to conjure, to craft
me a vessel which he fashioned from
the skin of a zebra's hide, from the scales

of a snake, from the feathers of a peacock,
from minstrel-blood, from the dust
of a cloud, from the gravel & the dirt,

from the sweat of the sun, but most people
don't believe me. *That's just some ole negro
chicken bone folk magic* they say, but then no

one ever believed in black people

Zollie Murphy

I heard the only time you cried was back in 1915,
smothered by the arms of Willie and Sally Ann in 1915.

But I wonder what happened after they let you go?
'Cause nobody seems to have too much to say after 1915.

Did you rage like a 17 year cicada, bursting from the mud, &
swinging your wings strike everyone in your way since 1915?

Did bug-eyed blindness bruise your wife from chin to brow, or
had too much whiskey heated the bottom of your belly after 1915.

You couldn't admit you were still scared of fire breathing Klans-
men & lullabies of Haitian Boogeymen Sally sung to you in 1915.

How does a sharecropper kill American made assassins who've ripped
more black skin from the bone than southern whips built well before 1915?

I don't know, but whiskey made you think you could; made your children
call you "Boogeyman" even though the real one died back in 1915.

You could never really be America, even though the skin of slaves
has always been American as three K's or an X across the flag before 1915.

And you never met me either -- I'm your daughter's daughter's son. And I do
believe you cried more than once in your life -- at least for yourself after 1915.

Here's What Happened to My Father (James says)

Beautiful black boys can't help but be consumed by beasts
is how Mama started the story. She said that on his way

home from a weeks work out of town, picking cotton
and cutting tobacco, he grew tired from travel

and sought rest from strangers in Mitchell County.
Everywhere he went white palms turned outward

turned him away until he came across an old abandoned
plantation house where inside he found purses, padded

chairs, lamp shades, leather shoes, velvet curtains,
grandfather clocks, and hand-knotted rugs; all

fashioned from the skin of former slaves. They spoke to him,
whispered warnings of a blue eyed monster that cursed them

to an eternity as inanimate objects. But my father wouldn't listen.
His curiosity sent him looking for the monster. He found her

standing in the middle of the parlor room staring at a cotton
stem trapped inside a glass case. Blonde fur covered her body,

her face resembling a bobcat; ears pointed with a black eye-
lash accenting the tips, long white wispy whiskers falling

on either side of her snout, and a fluffy beard that fell under
either side of her chin. Her stature was human-like and she

pleasantly filled out a dress that matched the color of her eyes.
He found her remarkable but when he extended his tongue

to let her know she could only give him what beasts are allowed
to give (her teeth). A few months later I saw him at a service

station in town. Turns out he just didn't know how to be a father.

This Is Why She Left (James says)

Mary Lou always complained about being blue,
black, & country. That's why she went north
(thought she could erase 2 of the 3). Mama told her she was
lucky they weren't sharecropping. Said she used to know this girl, Jackie, over in Como

when she was young & everybody sharecropped (back then) except Dr. Jim Jordan. He

roamed 'round town trying to sell what black folks
thought was Satan til Jackie, being a child,
took him up on some magic sweet corn seeds he'd been trying to auction off
(but only to the most desperate of niggas. He told her he'd conjured them

from the fields of heaven where sweet corn grows in cobs of gold kernels, where the lord,

Jehovah, shucks it with them man-making
hands & then buries them in the earth for safe
keeping. But she didn't have money & her parents owed the Cameron
family more & more everyday, so Jordan made her a deal; 5 seeds for the same number

of baby teeth. She shook on it & in the next months hid her totting crowns from a

thieving tooth fairy until Jordan appeared once again.
She asked why he needed the teeth & he said he was
building a body for a man who had lost his on his way home. She only asked
to be polite. He gave her the seeds & one instruction; put them in the dirt

between the worms, or beetles, & pray over them with a conjuring prayer

he whispered above her neck. When he left,
she ran to her mother's garden & shoveled
the seeds between bug-legs, praying with her hands cupped around the spot
to contain the magic. At first nothing happened but when she got up to go,

to wait until tomorrow, the ground shook; 5 stalks shot through the air trying to return to

heaven. Her parents and the Cameron's came
bumping down from the field & were stopped

by the sight of stalks the size of pine trees.
done so she told them.

They all asked Jackie what she'd
When her father, & family friends,

got done cutting down the tops they found what Jordan promised; gold cobs the size of

watermelons covered in green blankets of hairy husks.

Jackie's parents praised God but the Cameron's

weren't happy with him.

What grew on their land was theirs so they asked

them to hand it over

but the answer was no

(they had no right). A week later Jackie's house lit itself

on fire, the Camerons said, Jackie & her family & the gold gone.

But the story didn't make Mary Lou anymore grateful, she left home even sooner.

Dramatis Personae

The Muse	I am the conjurer (interviewer) of the past & future
Evelyn Thompson The Invisible Man	mother of black children; who was abandoned by the lost father of black children; that never made it home to tell that last bedtime story (fairytale) to the daughter & sister of his many offspring; who were also the daughter & son that grew from his disease of invisibility
Mary Lou Brenda Thompson James (Hannover) Thompson	I am the mother of widows & windows that look out- side for the ghosts of their husbands, I am the father to a son who cloned himself in his image
Jennie Simpson Rufe Simpson David (Fuzzy) Simpson	I am the gun holder (the activist) who never saw the advancement of colored people & the doctors who tried to cure a cancer of whiteness w/ a scalpel & hoodoo roots
Robert F. Williams	I am the journalist who only tells his own stories because it's never reported, so I become the reporter (stenographer) even sketch myself in graffiti on the side of trains so America knows I'm here
Louis Austin George Weisman	I am the boy who died in blue blood, the grandfather who was never grand or knew his grandkids
Stephon Clarke Zollie Murphy	the woman who was never a whore but the one they horsed around the future of Chicago after Fred was taken down I am the boys who always lose to black & white stripes
Jezebel	I am the mother who never wanted a daughter (the daughter) & the girl who kisses black boys to prison
Mrs. Sutton Sissy Sutton	I am a hunter of deer & dearly beloveds (I am the law that performs violence like a gospel)
Gov. Luther Hodges	

Love Letter to my Baltimore Riot “Mom of the Year”

Have you ever heard a spine sever at the neck?
The day Freddie died I thought
it might sound like a plug being yanked out
of a plastic face in the wall; the cough of metal
prongs unlatching from the socket killing
the electric current with a deep breath like a child
blowing out birthday candles. But when I asked
you about it all you could say was *I don't know*,
that maybe I should focus on something more
productive like homework so I wouldn't end
up with a spine like his. So I did as you asked.

The assignment for the day was mythology; Sisyphus
had to keep rolling this rock up a hill, only to watch it
fall back down for eternity and I wondered if he was black,
if this is why black folks never get anywhere, if instead
of rolling that same rock up the hill for the billionth time
we threw it at a police car (cracking the windshield)
would Hades step out of the vehicle to surrender his badge?
I don't know, but I picked up my rock anyway to see for myself.

When you saw me you beat me like a police officer
beats a black man for breathing, called me an embarrassment,
dragged me around to every tv news station (interview) to bathe
yourself in the sound of white hands applauding
what they wish they could've done to me, made me apologize
(ask for forgiveness). And I understood why; they promised you
money (a book deal), said you could stop rolling that rock
up the hill, but the only thing that ever came was an eviction notice.

I didn't say anything but I saw you crying
the other day like a mother who has to sit over her son's
comatose body after Hades is done breaking it and then drags it
up from the underworld only to have you send it back

through the ground. You needed a hug, a kiss,
someone to tell you that it'll be okay but then I wondered,

if it were me, would you have picked up your rock then?

Love Letter to Virgil Hawkins

They nicknamed you *Static*; said you were born
in a cloud above Dakota City, where black folks refuse
to look up for fear that God will strike
them down for trying to peek into heaven. But you
had a strange obsession with dirt; launched your-
self down in a bullet of lightning & hit your parent's
front porch like a cleaver hits the gills of fish
because the sky can be lonely (just ask the clouds).

When we met in my pajamas on my living room floor
it was months after my sister was born but she
never came from the sky, only appeared in a basket
in the doorway. When I tried to hold her, her body wrapped
in a purple blanket, a spark ran
from the tips of my fingers & I thought God
was telling me I'd gotten too close but then I thought
of you, thought maybe I was like you;
that I was magnetic, that my skin would dazzle in a force-
field of sparkling violent violet electricity.
But I never produced a shock of my own,
though sometimes sparks would appear
when I touched my father's car or the laundry
my mom would make me fold.

I never had a brother either, but I wished
you were mine: I wished that Saturdays happened
seven times a week instead of one, that you lived down the street,
that you could help me fold clothes, that you could twist
my hair to lock, that you could take me to the park
on your flying disc, that the distance between us wasn't the power
button on my remote (that you were real). But it's okay,
I know you don't feel the same. & I know superheroes

don't exist, you're just the first one I saw that looked like me.

Let Me Be Black and in The Mud

You can't talk
about a plant without the soil,
you can't mention black folks
without the mud; toe roots trapped
between brown glue, but somehow
we still manage to electric slide
our way through the drum of thunder.

When it rains its poison;
my aunts (still kids at heart) two-step
their way out of a downpour of droplets
(their locks once killed at the root). Our scalps
have always needed protection from the rain,
from the sun, the clouds, and the sky
in this country. No weather has ever been good
weather for us, so my cousin keeps a hat
on his head, but every time he steps inside
my grandmother's house she slaps it off
(frightens his curls that grow easier in the dark).
To her, only those that wish to hide
their thoughts from god cover their domes.

He doesn't trust god though, he lives
with what crawls in the mud. He remembers
when god told a man to name every living thing
that creeps and crawls on the earth; & he named
himself white, my cousin black, and the cylinders
that squirm between his toes polydora ligni.
Even the mud-worm has a better second name
than black people, but we tried to make it beautiful;
replaced the -er with -a, took the growl out of the -g,
changed our inflection, paired it with a hug
& a handshake, put it in our music, hung it
round our necks in gold, grilled it to our teeth
in diamonds, made it spin
on our rims, hummed it during sex, greased our scalps
with it. But my grandmother doesn't get it.
Why don't he have some self-respect? Why don't he
get a job? Why he act the way he act? See,
this why they don't like us! She forgets

they threw her in the mud when she flat ironed
her hair, wore dresses below the knee,
read her bible, gave up her seat on the bus,
& went round back to order food. Ever since she was born s
he's been trying to turn wet dirt into soil, but limestone &
black folks never grew in the same place.

Today, my cousin just wants to
loungue in the mud. He pulls his cap back and goes outside.