

to be left



with the body

cheryl clarke & steven g. fullwood, editors



TO BE LEFT WITH THE BODY

To Be Left With the Body

Edited by Cheryl Clarke and Steven G. Fullwood

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In Memory of

Regina Shavers, 1941-2008, founder of the Griot Circle

Vincent Woodard, 1971-2008, writer, performer, educator

Me and My Shadow: Blah-blah in Fort Greene Park
— Summer 2007
Artis Q



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Me and My Shadow: Star Struck in Coney Island
— Summer 2007
Artis Q



Foreword

Vallerie Wagner

What an honor to be asked to write the Foreword for *To Be Left With the Body*, the third in APLA's series of communal works created to speak to, from and about black gay and bisexual men and their communities in the context of HIV/AIDS. However, almost immediately, panic set in. Could I provide an appropriate Foreword for the stories that constitute this amazing collection of work by women and men that I know (and know of) and admire for their voice, their creativity? Would I find the words to adequately call attention to the ongoing challenges faced by my community as we approach the 3rd decade of HIV/AIDS? How could I reach out from this page and give voice to what it means *to be left with the body*?

After much consternation, I realized that the stories, poems and digital images that you will find among these pages speak for themselves and my only charge was to provide my insight, my thoughts, my story (as it were) and hope that the words you read, the images you see, will touch your heart as they have mine. Cheryl Clarke and Steven G. Fullwood have done a marvelous job compiling a rich, challenging and compelling collection. In sharing this work, the editors and APLA hope to inspire you to lend your voice to what it means *to be left with the body*.

There's an old cliché that says 'you can never go home again.' Of course, we all know that it doesn't mean that you can't physically go home again; we've all visited our homes (however you define home). But with each visit, there is something different about home; it's not the same place where you were born, or grew up. I don't know who coined this phrase, or what the intended meaning was, but for me it means that not only has my 'home' changed, but more importantly I've changed. I'm not the same little Black girl (tomboy) from the south who lived in jeans and t-shirts and savored long hot summer days of playing basketball with the boys and trying out the latest stunts on my yellow spider bike! I remember the young girl who dreamed of exploring space a la Star Trek and defending the rights of the disenfranchised a la Perry Mason. In many ways, I am still that young girl, but in so many others, I am a different woman. When I return home to Shreveport, LA, I bring with me the little tomboy of my youth AND the lesbian engineer, LGBT/HIV/AIDS activist of my adulthood.

Before I could begin to read the powerful words of the women and men whose stories paint an alarmingly clear portrait of the continuing devastation of HIV/AIDS among black gay and bisexual men and the sometimes devastating impacts on the body, I was immediately struck by the cover; a picture looking out of a window of one of the slave-holding warehouses on Goree Island. In the early days of the slave trade millions of West African men, women and children were taken against their will, separated from their families and sold into slavery. These slaves — my, our, foremothers and fathers — were held in atrocious living conditions until they were walked through the ‘door of no return,’ loaded onto ships and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to create a new world. How did they survive when all they were left with was *the body* — stripped of their humanness, shackled to strangers in the belly of a ship, lying in their own (and each other’s) waste, torn from their homes, families and all things familiar? As they lay there, did they contemplate what it meant to *be left with the body*?

A small bronze plaque, at the infamous Castle of St. George d’Elmina, the oldest of the so-called slave castles on Goree Island, reads:

In Everlasting Memory of the anguish of our ancestors. May those who died rest in peace. May those who return find their roots. May humanity never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity. We the living vow to uphold this.

On March 30th, as South African Airlines Flight 208 quietly and gently touched down in Johannesburg, I was enveloped by a warm feeling and overwhelmed with emotions that, at the time, I couldn’t explain. I had the privilege to visit Cape Town as part of a historic delegation of black women (both HIV infected and affected) from the US who came together with South African women to discuss some of the most pressing challenges facing African and American women in reference to this disease and its unique affect on women: cultural differences, violence against women, health care and the effect of HIV/AIDS on the family. This ‘summit’ designed to recognize the often overlooked yet critical role that women and girls can and must play in our own health and well-being provided an opportunity for us to work with each other, discuss our common issues and collaborate on ways to meet these challenges together. As I stepped off the bus in Cape Town, signaling the beginning of a life-altering journey, I was again enveloped by that comforting warmth. I felt like I had returned home. Not to the home of my physical birth, but to

the home of my soul’s incarnation — to the Motherland. It was as though my cells recalled this land, this place where centuries ago, our ancestors ruled all that they saw. This land has been transformed from a land of plenty for all, to a land of despair for many. This land has become a land overrun by war, conflict, genocide, hopelessness and desperation. This amazing continent, once home to a spiritual, powerful people, now home to a people ravished by HIV/AIDS — yet still powerful, resilient, and spiritual in the wake of the devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. How do the countless men, women and children (both here in the US and on the Continent) contemplate what it means to *be left with the body*?

As we enter the 3rd decade of the devastation known as HIV/AIDS, have we traded one injustice against humanity for another? This is not to suggest that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is an injustice brought about by one group on another — we are all either infected or affected. But the manner in which we’ve dealt with the HIV/AIDS pandemic — both locally and globally — amounts to an injustice against humanity. In the early days of the epidemic, white gay men and lesbians took to the streets, fought the good fight at the local, state and national levels — and wouldn’t take NO for an answer. As the ‘hidden’ face of AIDS became more public — a black and brown face — silence, stigma and denial have become the inevitable result of inequity. Poverty, stigma and innumerable social and economic factors including homophobia, high rates of unemployment, racism, sexism, domestic violence, and lack of access to quality health care, both here and on the Continent, speak to the multi-layered issues and co-factors that contribute to higher risk for HIV. These issues give voice to the challenges we face in the ongoing struggle, but only scratch the surface. Funding is consistently flatlined causing the streamlining of programs and services while infection rates continue to rise disproportionately in black and brown communities. We can no longer allow denial, stigma, poverty, homophobia, lack of access, global destabilization to force us to grapple with what it means to *be left with the body*. We, the living, have a responsibility to remember, take action, stand firm, disrupt the cycle, and stem the tide of this pandemic. To bring to light what it means to *be left with the body*.

Introduction

Now.

Make no mistake: we are living in dismal times. The most recent counting in December of 2007 of lives compromised by HIV and lost to AIDS is not the only event putting us at risk: global destabilization, environmental havoc, economic devastation of working classes and poor, and little hope of progressive leadership.

More dismal somehow because we were *supposed* to know better. We have gone through dismal times before AIDS, before welfare reform, before Katrina and Rita. Hungry, unsparing, swift days that snatched heartbeats and breaths from our daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, lovers and friends. We sat with our hands over our eyes, prayed, stuffed our ears, and fell mute — or fought each other. We were supposed to know better. We did not. And we did.

But we lived, anyway.

We lived to tell our stories and the stories of those we loved, honored, or sometimes barely knew. We crafted poignant love letters to the dead and austere warnings to the would-be living. Live *right*, we admonished. Love *fearlessly*, we pleaded. Be *yourself*, we fervently wished. Fuck.

Stand in light. Be light. Know it. Fuck.

With each heavy year, storytellers wrote through loss and spoke against destiny and told us more about ourselves than we knew or ever wanted to know: stories of parentless children, left loves, fugitive melodies haunting because they fled soon as they turned up.

We got older, walked slower (or faster) and considered (or didn't consider) — with the seriousness of the soon-to-be-and-realized-it dead — the value of our lives.

Twenty-five or so years ago new challenges were ushered in for sexually active people. We lived through a diagnosis that was supposed to prescribe/proscribe our living, like previews of films we would never view, not even as our own credits rolled up and faded

to black in those cavernous rooms where some denied our lives and our deaths.

Illness reminds us of our fragile living, pries open the battered eye to see the unseen and that which we do not want to see. Frequent bathroom trips. Night sweats. Pills. Hospital visits. Pain. Tears. Loss. A dryness where there once was blood.

But there is light in loss, and there is lightness in *To Be Left With the Body*. Matter is the densest form of light, and what matters here in these pages is the glow of insistence on living life, oxygen coursing through hearts and lungs, footprints leading us back to the matter at hand — us. We. Our. You. Me. Community. Forcing us to health, healing, a fractured wholeness. Turn these pages with anticipation.

This book is for you — and us. Words for you to absorb as we the editors absorbed them. Let them resonate in you. Feel them for days. Recall them in a pivotal moment of conscious decision-making. Add them to the sum of your already-tallied desires and wants.

Because we want and desire.

What?

The libation and funk offered in this anthology of queer writing.

What you will find in the essays, poems, and stories gathered in the four sections, “Our House,” “NOW/What?,” “Let In the Street,” “Conjuring Memory” is life touching itself, familiar and unfamiliar accounts of bodies being at war with themselves; bodies aging, being positive, holding illness; and bodies seeking and finding their grace. The witnesses whose writing appears on these pages respond with range and scope. Most vital is that there is light here, in this compact volume, for you, reader.

Conrad Pegues’ provocative question, “Who is the HIV/AIDS virus pushing us to become?” sets an unavoidable challenge in his piece “Becoming,” which opens the first section, “Our House.” Samiya Bashir’s “Clitigation,” reprinted from her volume of poems, *Where the Apple Falls*, asks a different question about

the location of desire and the lips of one’s lover. Moving you, as reader, along artfully, Kevin Simmonds poem, “Rent,” reminds of the bodies we have lost, their beauty. The elegiac “in intention” by Francine Harris, the multi-part “The Soul B4 Ma’at” by richard witherspoon, and Dante Micheaux’s righteous “Sabbathbreaker” close the section, citing the debts we owe to sex.

Cheryl’s humorous “body double” opens the second section, “To Be Left With the Body,” from which the volume takes its name. Raymond Berry’s poem “journal,” one of several of his offerings, poses in the voice of a young person with HIV and a history. Steven’s “Here” celebrates the milestones and the thresholds with a sigh and smile. Cheryl Boyce-Taylor’s “Tanty Verna’s Poem,” “Loan,” “Birth Mark,” and “Louise” show us varied bodies in their idiomatic and narrative elegance. The section closes with richard witherspoon’s urn-shaped poem, “without wine,” which acts as a vessel for the libation we can no longer swallow.

“Let in the Street,” the evocative third section, opens with Rams Brisueño’s “Faggot,” its gentle verses gainsaying its rough name. One poem each by Cheryl Boyce-Taylor and Steven make appearances in this tribute to the public. avery r. young’s “lil mama n’em” and “mandingo gun or notes on the sexploitation of coco dorms” offer a lilting poetics of repression and denial. “Sex Degrees of Separation,” the closing story by Terence Taylor, tells of the unavoidable connections that sex forges even when we deny them: “Mitchell looked down and saw lines run from his body to the guy he’d taken home a few months ago . . . to the guy he’d gone out with for six weeks . . . to the guy who’d lost his lover to AIDS the year before.”

“Conjuring Memory” pays brilliant tribute to those we have lost and holds us accountable to the living. Pamela Sneed’s “Popeye’s” for the artist Donald Reid, Cheryl’s “Elegy” for the poet Donald Woods, Jewelle Gomez’s “Choirs” for her cousin Allen Walker, and Ana-Maurine Lara’s affecting story, “The Tide.” Lara speaks for and to many women who have cared for their sick friends: “Her friends, so many of her friends . . . The stench of urine in stuffy apartments. Cleaning up all the vomit and mess. Excrement on the sheets, bedsores and other sores among them. She had hovered over them, running to the store for apple sauce . . . She stopped going to the funerals. She preferred to remember them in their homes.” Indeed, the poet Marvin K. White, the only man among the women in this final section, demands that we “show up” for our lives and for those

who can't in his prose poem, "14." So, fittingly we end this volume with A. Naomi Jackson's "Before and After," a tough tale of a young man coming to grips with what the "clover of purple lesions on the right side of his throat" means. "But then, looking up at the sixth floor apartment, where his sister has left the light on for him, it is enough to know that for now, he is not alone."

Imagine that light. Be with these pieces. Cover yourself with these words, as we did in library conference rooms, restaurants, cafés, over Martinis with the sounds of Mingus, Monk, Trane in the next room or in our heads. Offer yourself to these generous witnesses, as they offer their words to you.

How else would you know your own story?

Now.

Cheryl Clarke and Steven G. Fullwood, January 2008

**Me and My Shadow: 'Damn Shame,' Lower 9th Ward, NOLA — Spring 2007
Artis Q**



Me and My Shadow: Manhattan — Summer 2007
Artis Q



OUR HOUSE

Becoming Conrad Pegues

Who is the HIV/AIDS virus pushing us to become? It's a question that haunts and taunts me as I face the death of friends and acquaintances, in relationship with those who are positive, and how we *do* illness in this society, as a whole.

Many of us reminisce about the "good times" before HIV/AIDS in bars and cruising, when sex wasn't a game of Russian roulette. With those days gone, all any of us have come to expect are the preachers of abstinence, the proponents of safe sex, free condoms. We live under a barrage of debates: who infected whom, the so-called "down low," barebacking and judgments of biblical proportions. Exactly, what is the virus making of us?

I hold a historical image of the nuns, who, during the black plague of the middle ages, went into contaminated areas to care for the sick. When one wave of nuns died, another would step in. No one knew what caused the plague or how it was transmitted, but what was clear is that those nuns stared death and suffering down. The disease *shaped* them, bringing forth the desire to serve in the name of the God of their understanding. Others were shaped by the disease as well: abandoning families, children, and property, pillaging towns and pointing fingers of blame. Disease can evolve us or break us down to our worst selves.

I contend that disease molds from the clay of us, in our attitudes about ourselves and others, our lives and loves, our communities and most of all our creative imaginations as only we can imagine who we will be in the world. HIV/AIDS is shaping us by choice into something more or something less, individually and collectively. The AIDS virus co-opts our natural cellular machinery to keep itself alive although its proliferation will eventually end in a suicide when it destroys its larger host body. The AIDS virus is only concerned with its own selfish survival — life at all costs!

Is the virus imitating us?

The virus has its own story. Live. Live. Live, not caring about life in balance or how that life impacts the community which maintains it. We've all heard of the ways to protect against and/or limit the spread of the disease, but how can we (or should we) imitate the virus?

The virus is a trickster. If we follow its lead we too must take on the imaginative powers of the trickster in its most potent, positive form. The trickster recognizes the necessity of change and pushes beyond concrete limits. The trickster never fits in, never truly complies with antiquated systems of thought and practice and only wants to push the limits of culture. Not necessarily to destroy it, the trickster's job is to push culture beyond its vanity, especially cultures that are stagnant and in their last breaths. The trickster offers new life, new beginnings.

The virus can be a sign and a wonder to us of what happens when creative, imaginative and cultural practices have reached their limit and we refuse to evolve. Instead we stand in a narcissistic mirror admiring our iPods, cell phones, lap tops, research hospitals, keyless cars, vaccines, computerized weapons, and rocket ships. Or it's the "good old days" of bars, sex bereft of conscience, and hiding in plain site in churches. We have advanced technologically, but not very far in building a humane, loving culture. Currently, our work as human beings remains unfinished in this world.

If the disease would shape and mold us, we must co-opt its transformative abilities breaking the limits of all those forms of death we hold to as traditions when they are nothing but fears dressed up in Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. The virus speaks through our bodies and our particular kind of dying, as to who we must become next, all the masks peeled away, no room for a charade. An end to bad drag! We can shape-shift into those things that are deepest within us, given to us by a divine being and not just the run of the mill Father God Christian variety either.

The AIDS virus hides until its worst work is let loose, a deadly drag show that nobody knows is going on until too late. How much good have we hidden away in ourselves, not releasing out into the world and the universe to change it for the better than what we currently have? Too many nightmares have already escaped making human lives and dying a most miserable spectacle to a world that has mistakenly presumed that the virus will stay on the gay side of the street, or the black woman's side of the street, or the sinner's side of the street.

Tricksters never stay in place, never respect the high barbed wire fences human beings erect to keep what frightens the hell out of us on the other side. What has been those black folks, or white folks or Asians and Hispanics, Arabs, those gay folks, other people, has become a disease we can't see telling us we're hard-headed, not learning fast enough in a world sitting on the bank of a river called Apocalypse, about to burst its banks with the countless tears of human suffering.

HIV/AIDS has pushed us into a limbo state of potential from which we can create society anew, but we cannot use the master's tools, as the late Audre Lorde has said. One of the master's main tools is fear. Those left alive are too often afraid to love dragging around loss and shame like a ball and chain. Mourners are denied a place to wail and a people to hear their cry. Fear, like the AIDS virus, co-opts our best selves until it breaks out in behaviors that are nothing short of slow fanciful suicides.

We have not learned the deeper story of the HIV/AIDS virus. That breaking forth of our authentic selves is always a matter of the artistic, creative and imaginative capacity within each of us. The AIDS virus does it unto death. Why can't we follow its lead unto life?

Taking on the shape-shifting qualities of the virus offers us an opportunity to become much more than death. We become the re-shapers of the world not just transforming art, fashion, literature, and music, but politics, law, sports, science, architecture, religion and sexuality — culture! Transformation to reach our own deeper truth is a mystical art, not easily learned if the would-be student lives in the vacuum of non-community, with fear being more real than love reduced to the stuff of rumor.

The AIDS virus is a thing so committed to a principle of life that it doesn't comprehend the necessary balance between all forces of life in a community whether it is the life of the culture, the neighborhood, the street, the home or the individual. There must be life in balance with personal truth and the means to express what is within us, so that even the ugliness inside must step out on the scene a sacred beauty.

It's an awesome and awful knowledge. Like Robert Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein and the gang who played with atomic bombs we have stepped into a profound responsibility for which we must

catch up spiritually and morally. It is a responsibility that has always been ours to keep. We just forgot. It's not as simple as safe sex, the down low, or who is infecting whom. We are our sister and brother's keeper. It's a responsibility for one another's livelihood that most of us might not know how to do, or simply not ready to do.

Viruses, like tricksters, are always changing the story, changing its variables so that the same old tragic themes are not passed on generation to generation. The HIV/AIDS virus can't force us to see potential in death and suffering. Only human beings can imagine more. The HIV/AIDS virus teaches us that we've too long remained in a dark that was neither safe nor accommodating regardless of sexual preference. It has pushed all of our hypocrisy about sex, which is only a synonym for community, out into the public sphere.

If people do not feel that their lives are valuable, whether or not behind a thin latex shield, all the hype about safe sex means nothing. The HIV/AIDS virus has an allegiance to life too, so much so that it leads to death. Life is not the answer. *Quality* of life is. It's spiritual work too large for any one person, community, religion, path, or organization. Death can either cause confusion or teach us limits. Once we settle down beyond our fear we can release those pieces of ourselves and our cultures that have kept us from truly living. In that beautiful stillness of soul, in that infinitesimal moment of searching within, we can explore who we must become for our own good.

Rent
Kevin Simmonds

Any part of this would be hard to tell.
Even how I walked his back to ease the tightening.
Even the rent-controlled apartment he and Victor shared for years,
absurd in Harlem for under a grand.
Six big rooms.

He'd danced. But there was no controlling his body then.
Dance Theatre held a memorial. They'd become routine.
But he'd made it to '91.
Danced through full blown stages.

I saw Victor in *Miss Saigon* in '94. He sang out of tune.
Rent is a much better musical but it's hard
to keep track at first. Not just one person is dying.
And it's so emotionally draining, since they're all young
and not supposed to die yet.

The music's awful but the story rightfully complicated,
torn.

THE SOUL B4 MA'AT: House of the Dead Prayers
richard witherspoon

1.

I cannot b-blamed
when others conspire against me

together: ear & eye & tongue
prove redoubtable enemies

how can I
or any heart resist

when men they hear & see & taste
storm my very soul?

immediately assailable —

when traitors surround one
who cannot b-defeated?

2.

consider the trouble & pain
u fingertips bring me

whether hair or chest
muscles or caps of flesh

u cannot resist tasting w/ur tips —

my heart's heart burns & never rests
from ur longings

enthralled

@ ur mercy
stunned

by the pleasures u
transfer 2 its core

3.

eyes it's u I blame

u who actively seek out
men's thighs

u who watch bulges
if it weren't 4 u
wouldn't my heart b @ peace?

ur fault ears

thrilled *antennae*
2 masculine cords

repeatedly u turn this poor heart
upside down

it scarcely ever
sits
comfortably
in my chest

4.

what can I do?
he sniffs toes

my mind admits
he owns his own

following
there's nothing I can do —

possessing such strange tastes
armpits delight him

the juncture of sweaty thighs
before & behind

not me

but my nose is 2 blame
leading 2 temptation

I swear
these things have nothing 2 do w/me

I swear
ask him

5.

even in ur darkness
how dare u wink?
I know
the morse code of ur existence answers
the hiccup of a brother *glans*

shameless u take joy
in such fraternal lengths

how can it b my fault?

spasming like daisies
plundered by first light

u open & close like a fist
w/something 2 give —

playing such hide & seek
how can I not join in?

6.

how can I judge u

always lengthening as u do
brothers tightening in their sac?

even if u do not listen 2 me
it's not ur fault

together we can blame the throat
4ever greedy

4ever stuffing such delights as it will —
he never gets enough

7.

when people talk
they blame me

but am I not blameless?

they forget all about the liver
heating the blood

how can I
be responsible in the face

of such fiery pounding?
(icy showers refuting)

am I not blameless
w/such culprits

when it's they responding so hotly
2 the beauties of men?

in intention
for dumba: it was our house
francine j. harris

a kiss is for tomorrow. because there is sufficient light
i believe my body. because we believe in this house

in intention. the face will not get sick, the lips will not shrivel
the lungs will not collapse, the bowel will remain

gorgeous. must slither under wine and kiss the concrete
raw. must pray together in ink on the floor, in

fetish littering the halls. must take lipstick in mouthfuls
and fist. must see in the dark, bodies filled with

reverend. filled with shells with sweat in the throat louder
than infection. this is the intent. to kiss tomorrow is to

remain the same. because there is sufficient light in these
bodies, we believe in this house. we believe.

Clitigation Samiya Bashir

Her Opening Argument:

I am nature
rosebud, tadpole,
cumquat, sweet
fruit of an ever
ripening tree.
Would you leave
my branches empty?

Has man's palate
so soured he is willing
to live on bark and
blade and rotting meat
with nothing sweet
to cleanse him?

I make things bearable.
Slight nub rubbing to
welcome you to this world
even before the hands.

Leave me be
and I can put a smile
on an old woman's
wizened face — teach
a young girl the art
of teaching herself.

Witness One: Sara Jane Pitt, age 10, Rides the School Bus

Whooo-Wee!
hope they don't
nevah nevah
pave these old roads.

I been takin my seat
in the back now for
one full year, sit

alone if i can,
position my seams
tight over the right
spot — just so —

I ain't been late
to school once.

Witness Two: The Lips of Her Lover

She taught me the art
of craft, of perfecting
technique / made me
a passable kisser. Brought
the two corners of my
meeting up closer to
my eyes when I
hear her sighs.

I wrap her like a
gift, enclose her like
night to starlight cover
her in her nesting
place like I was
a mother hen / her
my chick.

This miss done brought
my self to my self
taught me how to
shut up and just listen
to love, showed me
like a tuning fork
how to feel sound.

Without her I could still
feed. I could still sing,
but there would be
no worthwhile songs,

nothing succulent enough
to entice me to open the
tongue's route to taste.

Witness Three: The Lips of Her Self

Ma lady she keeps me full,
gimme sump'n ta hol' onta,
caress on the cold nights
we lie alone together.

She is my timbre,
carries the weight
of my pitch, floats
my notes on her back
conducts my lyric
/ treble to bass /
needs no instrument
but the hood that
keeps her warm.

That ol' shawl she
be wearin like ol'
grandmamma spider
waxin on her web
make 'er look proud,
when really / still /
she be so, so humble.
I alone / 'cept maybe for
the rivers she commences
to flow / can enter beneath
her shelter unbidden, pop
in for a mid-day tea,
set-n-chat a while.

We was made
together / like two
spirit eggs. I stand
here today and hold
ma sista's hand,
refusing — i said
refusing this
separation.

(Having learned to ignore the prosecutor's nonsense, our lady
diligently prepares her closing.)

Still / The Crossings:

Don't you feel empty
Aunty?
Didn't you scream?
Wasn't that shard of
some old master's looking
glass far too unclean?

Didn't you bleed
for weeks?
Didn't your mother,
your own aunties
have to hold you
down hold you down?

Didn't you want to
run when this thing
was done to you —
you — who stand
with my accusers?

Didn't you cry all that
night — and all the
next and the next
in your mother's own
weeping arms on
the days after the
last you truly trusted
her?

And you / lover /
do you warm to her
even as she turns away
in shame? Don't you
want her to love you
back / move with you /
meet your moans
with her own?

Tell the people how
you must hold her
as she shakes at
night! Tell them how
this woman you love /
you love / has eyes
that go empty with
old, old fright!
Tell us how she
winces in pain
after all these
years. Be honest,
don't you miss your
lover's laughter?

Crossing Mama:

whyi yi yi yi yi yi ?????????
!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!!!!!!!?????
!!!!!! How could you to me how
could you to me your own
baby girl your own baby—
mama—how could you?

Where is your memory?

Have you lived so long
with your own heart
closed that you think
nothing of shutting
my door? After
birthing me, were you
in so much pain
you could not let me
live? Mama?

Mamamamamamamamama mama ma
You saw the rusted tin
the blood soaked
ground i was placed
on, you knew the
pain i was in like
your own and still

you held me / down /
down / down / down /
down.

You cannot tell me
you've forgotten the
taste of dirty cloth
blocking your screams.

You dare not say
here in fronta alla
dese folks that this
oft-cursed tradition
was worth so many
years of these bitter
rock hard salty
tears—mama?

Mama—why do you
hate us both so?

In Closing:

So you see
I am not for ground
spilling / thorn stitching
was not formed
for even cold
anesthetic
cuttings / as if I
were some dis-
placed fern or
bougainvillea.

I speak in whispers
and song. I am
eucalyptus, soothing
a wheezing chest;
orange sun rays
warming mercury
reaching even the
farthest plutonian
moon.

I am birth
and the access
to birth, love's
sheltered throughway,
tropical rain and the
noontime humidity it
washes.

Pass through me /
dark to light /
wash over me
with rivers of joy
embrace me with
your love—if I'll
have you—but know
I am no one's for
the taking. No—
I am not even mine
for the taking.

The Sabbathbreaker **Dante Micheaux**

—silent things. Silent enough
to draw suspicion,
silent enough to make the action holy;

but to be a noisemaker,
to conjure demons,
to be in cahoots with the scallywag denizens,
to make *the children* follow you:
is there any greater calling?

I could be praying but instead think back
to a boy's song, before the sun rose,
morphing his precious shades, like a hologram,
into a completely different animal
panting in my bed,
holding on to ecstasy even in sleep.

Wide-eyed, I take my time to daydream:
I'm black tea steeping in his salty ocean

and the neighbors don't complain
because they're rapt with their own dark hues,
violent and joyous—too busy to muffle the sound.

Me and My Shadow: Abyssinian, 1808-2008, Harlem
— Winter 2008
Artis Q



NOW/WHAT?

body double
Cheryl Clarke

call it weight reassignment and transition
from this post-post-menopausal machine of bulbous tits
bulging belly
and varicose veins (can't blame them on age)
to a 60 year old engine
buff with weight lifting
lightly popping arm muscles elongated thighs in thong gear
hollow-cheeked and wild-ass salt and pepper naps
a proud silver monochrome
hung in a downtown gallery
yeah.

proud as that oriole burnished by the evening luminosity
glinting his underbelly
as that red-headed finch landing on the feeder
as that variant charcoal duck with frothy white crown paddling
upstream fishing.

proud like the country gentleman neighbor,
a repairer of tractors during winter.
Shows them at the horseshoe festival late summer.
'that one belonged to my father,' he tells me proud. 'made 60 years
ago.'
pointing to a red lacquered 1947 'farmall tractor,' pristine in the
noon sun.
but me proud?
to show this contraption of bulbous tits and bulging belly,
two cloud-loafs
one on top of the other
drifting below the tree-scape?

prevention
Raymond Berry

i show my girls wounds and thrush
tell them to condom
assume everyone is positive
they don't understand
i hold their twelve-year-old bodies
scream in whispers
never let them stain you
or your breath
is dead

dirty
Raymond Berry

i have been made
like those allowed within

they say i can love
still know poison

skin cannot feel
its own destruction

journal
Raymond Berry

I. *wounded*

you made being twelve unbearable
fingers, toes, numb
memory fades in spurts
always medicine
everywhere is alone

fear makes me unable
to date anyone
wear layers to conceal

there are no days with friends
or saturday movies
or basketball practice
only me

mother father
i won't comfort you
because of your choices
i was birthed unwhole

II. *envy*

1.

it's not easy to cover my body. refuse girls that want to kiss. look after a mother who won't change. *he* eventually left. grew tired of us. there are so many things i want to do. go to college. play professional ball. there needs to be a place for those like me. a universe in which fear is invisible and everyone is human. where outsiders don't become scarecrows. sometimes i want to let go. instead, search my memory. grieve for who i could be.

2.

i stare at the boys in the locker room
want to be them, unafraid
hard like erect dicks
but the dead plead my conscious

don't become them

III. *where i come from*

1.

my mother turned tricks
my father her pimp fucked the
men he sold her to

2.

fourteen and know only
one truth died the moment
i was conceived

IV. *memory*

dreamt of my son
who does not exist

doesn't care i am broken
or about my mistake

explains i am doing right
living untouched

reminds me to use second chance
i wake up, take the pills

V. *if i had went to ryan white's funeral*

1.

some boy named ryan died this week. two years older than i am now. the entire community feared him. banned him from school. only wanted to live. i think about what is to come. if i will still be here. if there will be one capsule to treat my condition. instead of the ten i now take. if people will care. not look at me like they did ryan. and know i am not in this by choice.

2.

could have stood next to your casket. peeked inside to see a pale-faced boy the world would soon forget. could have been friends. brothers.

needed to remember the young hero who proved we could survive. instead, i would have been there on your final day. crawled in under sheets. held you.

transformation

Raymond Berry

as he pounded between my cheeks,
i smelled my own shit. went to wipe
for another round. feces covered white
cloth. realized i was dirtier. returned

to bedroom. decided to ride. sat on top
of him moving toward someone i never
wanted to be. showered in the morning.
afraid to take home the smell.

subdued

Raymond Berry

i arrive at my guy's house after 9:00 saturday evening. we hug, then i prepare
a plate of food. says his boys will arrive later. needs to ask me something. i sit

down and wait for him to find words. wants to take things to the next level. asks
me to move in. i say yes, and we celebrate with red wine. his guys arrive thirty

minutes later. he introduces me to brian, mike, and shawn. we share the good
news, and they pour more drinks. some mixture i've never tasted. suddenly,

i am lightheaded. the room begins to spin. don't remember passing out. i awake
on a bed, eyes covered. clothes off. try to get up, but hands hold me down. i yell

for help and someone places hand over my mouth. says he's not here, then forces me
open. pounds inside. each thrust harder than the one before. i pray that craig

comes and stops his friends. each of them take turns uncovered. i continue to resist,
biting hands. a clenched fist slams upside my head. he finally walks in, sees what his

friends are doing, and asks about his turn. he's standing in front of me. can hear him
touching himself. he whispers, *you know you like it*. tells the others he's ready. climbs

on top. pleases himself while choking me. nuts, then
pulls out. removes blindfold. leaves like nothing happened.

sustiva
Raymond Berry

efavirenz (eh-FAV-er-enz)/600 mg/30 tablets/non-nucleoside
reverse transcriptase inhibitor used to manage HIV/not a cure/take
one tablet by mouth every day at bedtime/on an empty stomach/do
not miss or exceed dosage/you may experience severe depression/
strange thoughts and angry behavior/weird dreams/suicide wish/
contract larger strain/return favor/receive head without worry/make
others give themselves away/my fate theirs/existing changes nothing

Here.
Steven G. Fullwood

I'm 41, not 31, nor 21, and certainly not 11.
More belly now than belief.
A dog licking itself.
On the porch, a spectator
With pad
Scribbles down the bones.
I am not my stories twisting.

I'm 41, not 31, nor 21, and certainly not 11.
More free than my safari siblings.
Clear about my myths and possibilities
Sighing.
Magma warms my throat
Resting softly on my left shoulder,
Fingers hold.

I'm 41, not 31, nor 21, and certainly not 11.
More lip than desperation,
More back than butt.
The way ahead is quieter, but still I rage.
Phoenix fucking far too frequently in a future
No fear. Feel me. In. This. Place.

Here.

TANTY VERNA'S POEM:

They say she sick, but I lookin at she
Cheryl Boyce-Taylor

lookin at she
I see the whole family
look like ay ay
that is meh sister elma daughter
she look like fry bake and saltfish
look like okra and rice cook up callaloo

she look like sunday best fine clothes
look like malik father well spend money on she
yes um she look like black cake with pink icing
an when yu see sun hit she huh is then she look like cleaver road and fredrick street
gloria saturday

she look like fitzroy blackette big boy cleme
with he father eye and the mother voice
she look like whitey beryl daughter
uncle john-asquit first girl when she confirm

look like pregnant eutrice crossin train line
eight months pregnant an still toatin water
water fallin on she shoulder wettin up she breast wettin she big belly
ent dey say is twins she makin twins
girl she look like fine hips and pointed tip shoes

look like big shoes
and blue stocking legs holing back varicose veins
tanty ada laughin up a storm
one hand over she mouth hidin up dem yellow teeth

is martha hand that on she hip yuh know
and dah cokey eye is ruby own self

lips like three big kiss
is like mopsy and biscuit pan beatin

and wha she doin with bright orange lipstick on da thick lip
who tell she it lookin good chil
she look like hops bread and new zealand butter with powder
don't mind them girl is good yuh lookin good
long as yuh livin, darling, yuh doing fine

LOAN

mother to son

Cheryl Boyce-Taylor

boy
never had no name
no name
boy is all
done got one boy
no man to feed him don't want no more boys
got my kin she got four boys in de yard to feed
boy come anyway
look what you did bus fuck
ride me terror he blue still
why you go and do dat bus
baby boy
my shame my —
port platter promise sepulcher
my giant glacier god I pay
pay sin wound
night steal my womb rip — my —
rip p p my shell one friday evening bout five o'clock b i g
bus rifle pierce womb
ha
you are are you my blessing
ha twin
old people say trouble if owl sit on yuh door cry yuh see
that owl come too
pray for we gazelle
big green bus come
indigo boy roar steal dust from womb
spider broke the song in me that day blue limb limp
look glass pierce my womb
broke bucket broom cocoon crown
wait for me sweet boy promise
seize seer boy ride current kiss me till you are done
good boy don't go no

2.

bye soldier
your outer thigh my curse
tree trunk crush my womb to spice nutmeg mauby bitter bark
hold my hands your violet wings you are my — don't go —
forgive me papa
sweet oasis more milk will come
can you hear my heartbeat sweet boy no don't
go no
loan me to you one more day
you are my mirror bridge face string me an orchid petal rosary you
are
my portrait clock blessing please stay
big bus ride over me terror your breath far way like sky
de tittie dry gone flat no milk
sorry I have love shame
hold my hand shadow weave a dream in me

BIRTH MARK

Cheryl Boyce-Taylor

mother to daughter

you are my oar pillar wealth half
my cup tin boat looking glass wings spider weave a dream in me
you are my bridge cross current wait
swirling synagogue savior aisle nurse flame
you are my hammer nail claw serpent straw broom bone promise
promise me now
photo mirror confession load loaf give me wealth nectar
promise
your inner cheek my secret
ride horse ride temple green gold
kiss me till you are done good
crack red dirt road sting bite
village
bucket scream breath labor fire
lie earth lie daughter
pillar shoe gazelle flag
you are my stain
shame
giggle ghost
moan scream howl cobalt butterfly
break the night flap
fill my veins
light the city
you are gospel word tree black bark
cry moan rush kiss cobra song
serenade
promise
take evening out

quick

LOUISE

Cheryl Boyce-Taylor

She flopped in the big morris chair
by the broken window
I knew I'd never see her again

*when i die, put me in a pine box
and I good
don't spend too much money on coffin*

*doh spend money stupid so
if I dead in de morning
bury meh quick quick before sundown*

if they bury you so quick
then I won't get to see you

*wha yuh seein meh for
an honey yuh seein meh now*

*I know where I can get a cheap box
cheaper than by Israel
but Noel say, de neighbors go talk.*

without wine
richard witherspoon

without wine the dead depend on us a few drops at a time
flowers near my head so you, too may be remembered
tread softly we, the dead sleep lightly
not so dark, below but we remember sun, moon stars
pour us a drop for we stay thirsty here
yes, stranger, pass quickly there is even less time
quietly, quietly earth our ceilings
we need no more light than the occasional flower
pour away even if we can't swallow we can taste
windy on our hill but we like its moving us
dead who says we sleep all the time?
who says we do not yawn below?
no *fruits-de-saison* how do we stand it?
making faces at the sun impossible here
yes we're below but soon, too, you
dead still what we were before roses
on his grave roses petals between his poems

Me and My Shadow: Dreaming in East Harlem,
— Fall 2007
Artis Q



LET IN THE STREET

“FAGGOT”
Rams Brisueño

in the land
of men
water flows
over me

the undiscovered
country

a thick
foreign tongue
ripples cross
continents & oceans

listen

heart-drums pound,
night touches skin

and fear passes
on the wind

I am an island
in the darkness

lil mama n'em
(percy's version)
avery r. young

monday mornin

him say good lawd heself popped inside him
dreamin / pronounced our bug punishment /
ordered him not to fuck mens no mo / leave
our *lifestyle* / move in with lil mama n'em /
then wait ... on good lawd heself
to burn bush further instructions

wenz-day evenin

we take our almost-not-gay azzes to bible study
with lil mama n'em / confess we full of sin /
we wanna be made over

back home / i suggest we demote to *roommates*
(since god aint appeared n told me shit
bout how rent gas cable n benznote gon work
out) / we fuss / cuss cry thick / fuck / raw / fall
out / snore hurricanes

3:37 in mornin / i get up to go pee /
stupid in bathroom with a steak knife /
talkin bout him gonna cut him devil off

sat-didday afternoon

lil mama n'em come up in here with *gar-gant-ual* plastic
lavender bins / grabbin erylthing i done key-d stupid on /
lil mama n'em speakin *tongue-golian* / flingin water /
prayin blood of jee-sus on shit

from window i see **erica kane** in church van /
him know i'm lookin at him / but dont look at me
(i guess him tryin to keep from turnin
into a pillar of *bullshit*)

4:13am

cell phone on nightstand / havin a seizure / i roll over / *hello*

its *stupid* / him wanna know when does the diarrhea stop

mandingo gun
or notes on the sexploitation of coco-dorms
avery r. young

massa coppin mansions off dem liquor store niggaz
fuckin raw-thug-dizzle on cue spittin black holes ready
dem niggaz *nigga* each other mo dan de ku klux or dis poem
ever will & dey keep cummin dem niggaz
keep cummin *thugroomin bluntbrunchin* ploppin
dey brown faces drippy with *dana* samples
& dey keep cummin ouchin creamin soulin sheets
(you'd think niggaz had cycles some of dem
even utter *get me pregnant nigga*) all while massa countin
washingtons lincolns franklins countin uncle sam countin
(*one lil / two lil / three lil nigga-rins*) massa countin
dey swollen dicks openin dey swollen man-ginas
turnin ery brown red (yo chekkit) cant no closet/ship fit
all dem niggaz & dey keep cummin & white boys black
boys hot rican boys *download upload* all side *neck-n-backload*
spill babies all over our nasty azz selves cause dese niggaz red
boned-ed packin big bangee bananas & dey keep cummin
so much its like dats all god made em to do dey never run outta dick
or hammers to knock each other out with & dey keep cummin
pied piper L7's to gyms so dey too can achieve a fresh outta county
look & dey keep cummin bare chest two pairs of boxers
(cause shirts causes niggaz to itch & niggaz refuse to pull dey pants
up) & dey keep cummin & will fuck a sista so granny wont
speculate 52 minutes of *junebugs* azz on sale fo 59.95
& dey keep cummin peddlin AIDS & all her opportunist kin
keep holy rollers screamin *i told yall* & dey keep cummin
cause niggaz gotta eat (& how else niggaz gonna eat
unless we show our azzes) & dey keep cummin wont stop cummin
cause we niggaz aint right by each other but love entertainment
we niggaz wont stop playin games to seal relationships
& open communication with one another niggaz wont chill
with de gettin off & get on some lets live fo real & make life
be ery flavaful fantasy we beat to niggaz/nigg-ahs/nig-gods
are we stevie fukkin wonderin how many mo millions massa
gon keep reepin from him poster freaks befo we bust
ourselves endangered (right now on line) you can pay-per-view
some hungry nigga cummin inside another hungry nigga fo roof weed

& all de free wet azz him eyes can gander him aint gonna kiss
dude & him aint gotta commit dude name to memory
all him gotta do is be mandigo gun & shoot (bless him wretched soul)
him make enough change to cop timbs & fendi shades
but dis nigga cant shit piss shower belch unless massa can see it
& dis nigga still fool enough to believe him cum out on top
cause him aint de one gettin juiced in de booty

KALEIDOSCOPE **for Angela** **Cheryl Boyce-Taylor**

Angela gives me one half of her bee earrings to wear
small white diamonds with two stems of sapphire wings
bordered by gold leaves
*wear this in your left earlobe, she says, and I will wear the other
in my right*

I give her blue sea glass, coral colored seashells from Half Moon Key,
and a dark red bottle of Rosemond Shiraz to sip and laugh, remembering our narrow beds
and smooth jazz that rocked us to sleep Caribbean nights, when she stripped down too
hot and I cloaked up too cool. We would adjust the silver circle on the wall, it's little pink
hand panting like a dog's tongue. At sixty-five degrees we called it truce

her smile is red gypsy rose, mine tamarind-mocha
in the baby-blue satin bag she gave me, I carry white sage, two dried
iris petals now turned faded mauve, a still pungent wine cork, and a
sunset-orange painted lock of her hair

Death Poem Steven G. Fullwood

Watching for you.
Murders and accidents.
Surprise and consequence.
Flatlined headlines.
No one escapes you.

But I like it.
I do.

I wait.
On my back rocking.

Hands pressing knees.
Down, down into my chest.
Waiting to be remaindered.

Eyes look ask plead.
Water released.
Ignored as you sweep the floor
clean of my mother's carcass.

I gush.
But I like the way you keep it cold.

Snap necks.
Flatten eyelids.
Punch lungs.
Clog arteries.
It tickles.

You could say
I'm a fan,
A cheerleader
Clothed in a varsity cassock
Two skulls for pompoms.
I'm always impressed with your victories
And hate it when people
Cheat you.

Sex Degrees of Separation Terence Taylor

André called it "Sex Degrees of Separation."

It was a new party game he was working on. "Like the Kevin Bacon thing, but hotter. My theory is that if you've fucked a porn star or anyone who's fucked a porn star, you're only six fucks from your favorite porn star."

They were down the block from Cocoa Club in Fort Greene, just out of sight around the corner. It was midnight and the club was still filling up. Cornell had made his two friends join him outside for a smoke until more guys showed up. It became a better idea when he pulled out a blunt instead of a cigarette.

"You ever fuck a porn star?" André asked Mitchell while Cornell lit up.

"Right," laughed Mitchell. "I've barely fucked anyone lately, much less a star."

"Don't laugh. You see them all the time in bathhouses, sex clubs, back rooms...it's impossible to slut around without fucking one eventually."

The blunt reached Mitchell. He took a deep drag, choked, and passed it to André. Mitchell didn't smoke cigarettes. The cigar skin tobacco wrapper made him cough hard, but Cornell's weed was always so good you didn't care.

"Anyone else find it ironic they're playing so much reggae mix music at a black gay club?" said Cornell in a wheeze, lungs full. "Considering how homophobic most reggae bands are?"

"God! Can you give irony a rest for one night?" André exhaled a lung-shattering cloud of dope smoke into the air, passed the blunt. "I am so damn sick of caring. I just need a break."

"That's the kind of thinking —"

"Zip! Let me be!" André held up a finger to stop Cornell. "One night. Now. Ever fuck a porn star? Or ain't that PC?"

Cornell grinned back at him.

“You know my sex life’s as liberal as my politics...”

“So let’s play...”

They smoked the blunt while Cornell tried to connect a quick star encounter at an uptown sex club to Joe Simmons, his first porn favorite. Mitchell watched men of assorted ages and sizes walk up to the door down the street, watched the doorman frisk each one before letting him in. Was he looking for concealed weapons or flasks? Was he enforcing safety or commerce? The weed was already making Mitchell wax philosophic.

When they were finished smoking they walked back to the door. A flash of rubber-stamped ink on their inner wrists got them back inside after the doorman felt them up. Music was still full blast as multicolored lights whirled and flashed around the mirrored walls of the dimly lit loft room.

The weed made it more enjoyable, and the club was fuller, too. Before, most single men had stood silently on the sidelines, while friends chatted and laughed. Now, numbers increased, they moved around the room and the dance floor in random patterns, like one-celled organisms spreading infection on a microscope slide.

Mitchell was always amazed when he went out at how few familiar faces he saw. It seemed like a new supply of gay men every time. He only knew a few, from here or other local bars.

The rest were strangers, a sea of possibilities, all ages, sizes, shapes and shades. Homo thug B-Boys in baggy t-shirts and jeans that hid the shape of their lean bodies, punctuated the air with long muscular arms as they shouted over the music. Eighties holdovers dressed like Cameo fans in tight leather pants and sleeveless designer shirts danced in formation, flowing hair in wet curls. Big brown tattooed muscle boys, the kind Mitchell could never coax home, stared each other down, sullen. Skinny young style queens in shiny fabrics cooed over the bar, checked out boys on the other side of the room.

Then there was Mitchell and Cornell, in what André disdainfully called “casual dress”, who looked like they just dropped in on their way home from work, instead of prepping for the night like André and his kind.

The music shifted from reggae to a Beyoncé remix. The DJ shouted out the date and location of his next gig over the opening beats, and then turned it up full as her fans at the bar screamed in recognition and rushed the dance floor.

When the music changed two shirtless male dancers worked their way from the back of the club to the bar, white towels wrapped around their waists. The DJ gave them a lead in, and introduced them as he played their dance track.

“...let’s hear it for Hammer and Renaldo!”

There was no applause, or the music was too loud to hear any. The dancers walked behind the bar and climbed up on it. They dropped their towels behind the counter and started a slow sinuous dance with all the enthusiasm of plumbers who’d come to unclog a drain.

Hammer was black, his face unremarkable, but his dark body was built big, beautiful, and moved in slow muscular gyrations like oiled heavy machinery. His fully packed thong pouch explained his nickname. Renaldo was Latin, leaner, with a long ponytail that hung out the back of a scarf tied around his head. Wet with sweat, he had golden skin, big nipples and a thin mustache that wrapped around his chin. Full lips pouted as his hips rotated and carried him along the bar to fingers that held out cash.

The shiny young boys gave them the most attention, laughed as they dared each other to see how deep they could deposit their dollars. Hammer played along more enthusiastically than Renaldo, and flashed a big toothy smile to each, literally bent over backwards and bounced his package in appreciation each time someone slipped in a bill. Most of the crowd ignored them, as if they’d tired of naked dancers long ago. They were more focused on men they could take home.

Cornell and André shouted names of porno pairings to each other over the music, tried to track Cornell’s brief club encounter back to an eighties porn star who Mitchell now remembered had died of AIDS in the nineties. André stopped as he finally paid attention to the dancers, and waved weakly as Hammer nodded and winked at him.

“Oh, shit!” he said with a laugh.

“Is that the one you picked up last week?” asked Cornell. The two went into a close huddle, stole glances at Hammer and giggled like

schoolgirls as they talked. Mitchell left the boys to their gossip. He was ten years older and keeping score didn't have the appeal it once had for him. He took his drink to the dance floor, which still had enough room to dance alone.

Mitchell had entered college just as the AIDS epidemic hit and by the time he graduated he was HIV positive. His doctor called him one of the lucky ones, a "long term non-progressor." The new meds worked for him, kept his viral load down, his T-cells up. Many of his friends hadn't been so fortunate, lost in the first few years of the epidemic. André and Cornell were in their early thirties and negative, but more careless than Mitchell. Each successful new treatment made them even more casual about precautions.

Caribbean rhythms filled the air again. Reggae beats drove Mitchell around the room as he thought of all the men he'd had and those who had him, before and after he found out his status and started having safer sex. Some were here tonight, some just partners of men he remembered.

Cornell and André finished dishing Hammer and went back to their game. Mitchell listened, and then went for another drink, a double. Something about their conversation bothered him. As he looked around he realized it was that they were all connected to more than porn stars. They were all sex degrees from someone who'd died of AIDS if they went back far enough. Even if he didn't know all the faces here, they'd all met in bed through someone they'd shared. Everyone had fucked someone who fucked someone else, who fucked two friends, who fucked two friends and so on, and so on.

Mitchell had stopped being afraid of AIDS years ago, like the new kids. The difference was that he remembered a time when there was no AIDS. He was more worried about the next shoe to drop. Just as herpes was a preview of incurable sexually transmitted viruses, he was sure HIV was only a hint of worse to come.

It was already brewing — in assholes pumped full by the uncovered cocks of men who didn't know they were positive, or didn't care; in bloodstreams of those who skipped meds and built up resistant strains to pass on; maybe even in secret government funded labs, waiting to escape. Something was out there, mutating into something newly incurable, newly fatal. Rubbers broke, drugs blurred judgment — the only safe sex was no sex, and that was no option for most, including Mitchell.

He understood why André was sick of hearing it. Mitchell was too, but more sick of waiting. His head swam with pot and tequila as he danced around the room, saw what he'd never seen before.

Whatever was next was already here, shared like the blunt they'd smoked outside, passed around night after night like a viral hot potato. It might not surface for months or years, but its mark was already on them. Just when they thought the worst was over, it slipped in quietly, unnoticed, an uninvited guest to the party.

Then he saw something else.

As Mitchell watched, a parade of late lovers appeared under the pulsing disco lights, mingled with their old partners on the dance floor. The dead shone with magical luminescence, perfect to a man, looked the best they ever had in life, captured forever in their last, favorite memory of mortality. Lines of energy connected each ghost to his ex, stretched from them to the rest of the living until the room was a complex network of old hook-ups.

Mitchell looked down and saw lines run from his body to the guy he'd taken home a few months ago after too many drinks, to the guy he'd gone out with for six weeks until he found out he was Republican, to the guy who'd lost his lover to AIDS the year before and didn't care that Mitchell was positive as long as he pounded him bareback and came in his ass.

And there was the dead lover, not far away; chained like Marley's ghost to everyone in the club he'd scored with before and after Mitchell's hook-up with his widower. Lines ran back to Mitchell, from him to men he'd met afterwards.

The spirits multiplied, filled the room with everyone anyone had ever connected with, until Mitchell was stuck like a fly in the middle of a never-ending web of lovers. He was pulled out before he went under by Cornell and André, who announced they were ready to leave. Still in a daze, Mitchell let them lead him to the car.

Cornell found a parking ticket on the windshield of his battered vintage VW Bug, cursed as they climbed in and took off with a roar. The car swam in and out of streetlights. Flashes of bright and dark lulled Mitchell back into his dance floor trance. He closed his eyes in the back seat of the car, listened to his friends' soft voices as he dozed off.

"I knew I should have parked across the street," grumbled Cornell.

"We'll all kick in for the ticket. Fun has a price, baby. That's all. Mistakes happen. Right, Mitchell?"

Mitchell didn't hear. He'd left them far behind.

He dreamed instead of the black dancer's gyrating hips, of being impaled on his big hard raw uncut black dick with no consequences, no tickets, no infections, the way it used to be.

No price. No penalty. No regrets.

Me and My Shadow: Give Me Body — Winter 2007
Artis Q



**Me and My Shadow: Fanta Face, Cola Body —
Fall 2007
Artis Q**



CONJURING MEMORY

Popeye's Pamela Sneed

Never thought it would have ended this way or begun
15 years later survivors sitting in Popeye's chicken,
downtown Brooklyn
Our coleslaw and mashed potato cups imprinted with
We Love Chicken
Us sitting quietly for hours, staring into the
afternoon
out of Popeye's big glass windows
When we first sat down Colin smoothed his napkin
over his lap
I was impressed at how elegant he was for Popeye's
our gold and silver rings glistening as we ate chicken
brought it to our lips
He and I think were very unlikely customers
but who would have thought decades later
we would be sitting together in Popeye's,
sole survivors of a generation gone,
our brothers and sisters gone
from Aids and cancer
We came together accidentally through a show
where later funding fell through
But we determined bravely without question
as we always had both separately and together
to go on
that part of the legacy Donald Woods and Essex
Hemphill,
Audre Lorde, Assotto Saint, Pat Parker, and Marlon Riggs
had left us with was to fight
to never walk away without fighting
through whatever circumstance to keep going
We had at least Colin and I had the memory of Assoto
slamming his hand on the pulpit at Donald's funeral
we know somewhere inside we must always tell the truth
Colin and I are the witnesses, our tribe's counsel
we buried each of those men
we saw
and over the years we haven't spoken much
not even on this project
but today during a rehearsal

during the recitation of a poem
he grabbed my hand full of trust and innocence
held on
then let go
and for me even as a poet that moment
meant more than words.

Untitled Pamela Sneed

I knew in my heart what AIDS looked like
purple welts
ks lesions
how the body withers away
and for this reason I never went to the hospital
when I heard he was dying
Instead I flew from New York to London
from the planes window
looked over 5 years of friendship
imagined you and I lying side by side naked as we did
on red sands of Puerto Rico
your sable brown skin
expansive chest
tall demeanor
Later us laughing so hard in a restaurant
you spit purple kool-aid over the countertop
where we'd ordered
We'd met on a panel at Harlem Hospital years before
on your back you were carrying baby Max, almost a
newborn
you were the first gay father I'd met
I remember how we'd meet early mornings before work
how the sky seemed crystal
I'd drink coffee
while you talked on and on
how laughter rose from the bottom of your stomach
years later we'd take the then three yr. old Max
to markets and festivals
One day you came to work and declared Max wants
to be a peacock for Halloween
we shopped all over New York day and night
looking for feathers for his costume
I remembered your brilliant artistry
in a world full of concrete
you painted abstracts
used bright reds and blues
There were other moments too when I doubted my own
skills
and you'd proclaim in full throat, Do it, Do it, Do it

And then I remembered the rare moments or occasion
you'd
say something
and reveal how you really felt
but determined at all costs to maintain dignity.

Even in London,
I think I knew the precise point you'd gone
the sky seemed smaller
clouds hung overhead
when the call came
my chest buckled

After that for a long time I wrestled with not seeing
you
until the one day I grabbed hold of myself
and said, it's ok. it's o.k if people die
and just when I let go
believe you are dead, gone forever
and I can find no traces of you

I see your surviving lover Steve
and baby Max at a wedding
the next morning I call and Steve tells me
"this morning Max awakened and said
Pamela laughs like daddy."

Elegy

for Donald Woods (December 18, 1957 – June 25, 1992)

Cheryl Clarke

I loved your brown grace and mauve words
from the first night I heard you through
the mist in a Manhattan auditorium.
So like the young redwood, growth inevitable,
its passionate powers,
a poet whose comeliness
I will no longer be able to wrap my arms around.
I fall to pieces and still want your promise
and the sound of your slant voice.
I am not resigned.
You were too quiet.
You sang too low.
How prized if not known?
What would I have done had I known?

Choirs

for Allen

Jewelle Gomez

I looked for a picture of you
To include in my collection of family stories,
myths and legends of dukes and queens
who lived on the block.

What I found was an out of focus, out of frame
snapshot taken in front of the South End house
where you grew up.
The house where you died.
I cropped it carefully, making you the center,
placed it on a page meant to tell your story:

Sent up from Mississippi, you were eight.
Boston was a foreign land packed in snow
and funny accents. I was twelve and had never been
quite so close to a boy before.
Every weekend we visited — step children
to each other. Every weekend
we examined and grew entwined
like border bushes in a yard.

My father, your mother sitting around the kitchen
table, the end of long work days, sometimes
cajoled you into singing for us. Cousins and
step children, looking for something
to do instead of television. And you sang
framed by the bay window
Amazing Grace in your young voice.
The grownups wept, through cigarette smoke,
not sure where the sound came from.
But I knew the notes rose up from laughter
and from fear, childlike and wise.

One Friday I arrived to find a deep, ugly
scar. Your plum check ripped and patched
carelessly; angry edges tugged at your smile.
A car, they said, when you tried to save the dog.
I wasn't angry with the driver but with the doctor

who was sloppy with your beauty.
You let the wound heal. I could not.

I used to attend Concord Baptist Church,
11 AM service right after my 8 AM mass
at the Cathedral by the projects.
The preacher whipped up frenzies; the sisters
rustled in their tantalizing white uniforms.
I waited on the hard pew for your solo.
Pure tenor ringing through the rafters,
reaching for some faith I'd never know.
But talking to me.

Your mother said don't study music:
people will think you're a sissy.
But you are a sissy.
If I'd known then she was so afraid
could I have convinced you to follow the sound
of your voice the way I did? And later,
on his death bed my father, Duke, asked
if I knew you were a queen? You were 6 feet tall,
played on the football team and still
had that scar and the perfect tenor.
It was a wonderful thing
for him to know, for him to say it out loud
without anger. Only love in his voice.
I said yes, but was too afraid to tell him
about myself. You became the approval
he would have given me.

Once I arrived in town to give a speech and my lover
said: *Bring Allen and the little cousins.*
I tried to convince you to get involved in politics like me.
But you sing. And the boys in your choir sing too.
Still you came with the kids hanging from your arms,
as usual. Girls and boys admiring their uncle.
Their uncle who was much too thin.

I introduce you to the audience, our people
who knew me but not you. Before the syllables
of your name flew into the air
you rose from your chair and waved,
regal as befits a queen.

I wished then I could ask you
to come forward, to sing for these people
who never heard your sweet Mississippi sound.
They were applauding for me but it was really us both —
all those times we'd laughed, all those songs you'd sung.
So many chords, so many harmonies coming together.

Three choirs sang at your service,
Concord Baptist reeling with sorrow.
Black women came in big hats, boys in robes
and polished fingernails.
Your first lover preached,
And it was like a Saturday night.
Three choirs sang.
None very good without
you.

The Tide

Ana-Maurine Lara

She sat on driftwood and listened to the churning of waves against the rocks. She shivered, her feet becoming wet in the rising tide. She gazed out over the water; it was unusually turbulent. Perhaps the moon was full. Or perhaps it was the distant freighter, slowly crossing the water, making its way into port. She swatted at a beach fly on her leg, concentrated on her breathing. Things always seemed to change so suddenly, with only the moments after the fact marking their place in time.

Two weeks earlier, when he called her, his sunny voice beaming over the telephone line, it was all she could do to stay standing; she leaned against the wall as he talked to her.

“Hi Honey, I’m home!”

He and only he had ever called her Honey. Years before, when they had lived in Roxbury, that was how they had greeted each other.

“Hi Honey, I’m home!”

“Master — I’m in the kitchen!”

It was because of “I Dream of Jeannie”: at one point in their crazy childhoods their favorite show. They found this out one day when she did a cross-armed head snap spell on an obnoxious neighbor who demanded they turn down their music.

She never cooked, he always brought dinner over. They spent hours moaning to each other about being single. Because she wasn’t interested in “getting married”. Because he was terrified. He always used to say.

“You know how it is, Honey. I been there, done that. I’m not ready to be a *gonner* yet.”

She’d stare at him over the dark blue rim of her glass filled with gin and Seven-Up. She’d play with the ice cubes in her mouth and slurp loudly as she spoke.

“Well, you got to...sluurp...get laid sometime.”

He’d shrug his shoulders, get up to change the music, come back shaking his behind in her face as he pretended to cry to Al Green. She’d lean back and laugh as he pursed his lips in her direction. He’d shake his head and sit down.

“What’s the matter, Honey? Can’t please the crowd?”

They’d spend hours picking noodles out of greasy cartons of Chinese, the containers forming a small mountain across the red Formica table. They’d talk about everything, almost.

“It won’t bring John back, you staying single like that,” she’d yell over the music. Inevitably, she’d always remind him.

“Yes, Master,” he’d respond.

“Oh Jeannie.”

“Let’s not be dull, Honey. What’s the latest episode of, ‘Who’s a mess?’”

Gossip always saved them.

“There goes the neighborhood,” he’d say as he stared out the window down onto the street littered with garbage bags, now studded with blonde heads weaving in and out of construction scaffolding.

“Pretty soon they’re going to want us to sweep for them.”

She’d laugh.

“Yeah — clean up for them. Ya look good when ya clean up, missy.”

They’d fall down on the floor together, laughing, clutching at stomachs and hands. This, this was home: laughter whenever

they goddamn pleased. A stumble down the warped wooden stairs, broken floorboards, yards littered with car parts and the threat of it all collapsing. He'd barge into her studio. Light a Newport with her candle.

"Some lawyer moved into Roberto's old apartment."

He'd smack his lips loudly; suck in the breath between his teeth. She'd sigh, take the bag from his hand and plop the white cardboard container onto the table. Orange syrupy liquid slowly spilling across the formica. She'd stick a napkin on it.

"When the white boys arrive in their BMWs, that's when you know it's OVAH," he'd say.

When she heard his voice on the telephone, she remembered his face. How whenever he talked about white boys, it was like he smelled something unpleasant and pervasive, something sticking to the inside of his nostrils. She understood his distaste. She had believed him. That was, until he fell in love with one of the white boys and left town. Without a word to warn her. That had been years ago. And now here they were.

She wrapped the phone cord around her fingers.

"How did you find me?"

"Judy told me. Remember Judy? God — I can't believe you dated her!"

Jug-nosed Judy, the alcoholic. She shrugged, twisted the cord between her fingers.

"I've dated worse."

"Yeah, well, L.A. has nothing but bad dates, Honey. I can't tell you how many losers I've dated."

"Is that where you are?"

"I've been nowhere else."

"Tell me about it!"

They were silent. She heard the intake of breath as he pulled on a cigarette right before speaking again.

"It's just that sometimes a girl wants to get away from the family, you know?"

She laughed, her voice booming into the phone.

"Yeah — well family sounds good to me right about now."

"Well, Honey, if you really want to know what I think — I don't know how you do it out there in the *coun-try*. How do you deal with all those white folk?"

He smacked his lips.

"Oh, Honey — you should visit. Really, we'd have a blast. You'd get a girlfriend in no time."

They returned to their silence. Eventually said "talk later." She clung to the ear piece, until finally the automated operator's voice suggested she hang up to make a call.

She sat on driftwood, her bare feet stiffening in the cool water now licking her ankles. Small seaweed bugs bit her skin, but she didn't move. The water had calmed.

Only that morning had she received his letter. The sun shone brightly, the sky was an open blue and the breeze was warm. After getting her mail, she sat on the porch swing and pulled down her hat.

His letter arrived in a plain white envelope with a heart stamp in the corner. His handwriting resembled swirls of Japanese calligraphy and she studied it for a full minute before turning the envelope over in her hand. Inside, she found two white sheets of printer paper, the small rounded letters of laser printing. She glanced over the page. Her eyes roamed halfway down, till she got to the three capital letters in the first line of paragraph three. "HIV". And then the other words "meds". "T-cells" "below 300." She went no further. Decided to go back to the letter's opening and begin from there.

The sun filtered down through the holly tree, sprinkling shadows on her lap. The air bit at her neck. She tucked her feet under her legs. She swung backwards and forwards. The memories of years before tumbled around her.

Her friends, so many of her friends... The stench of urine in stuffy apartments. Cleaning up all the vomit and mess. Excrement on the sheets, bedsores and other sores among them. She had hovered over them, running to the store for apple sauce. Running to the bathroom to pick him up. Running to the hospital. "I'm his sister." Always his sister. Left to grope muted hallways, waiting. Almost invisible. After a while, the janitors and nurses got to know her. Chided her with their pursed lips, but never turned her away.

She stopped going to the funerals. She preferred to remember them in their homes, when they sat together and watched re-runs of "What's Happening!!" or late night (re?)runs of Bruce Lee flicks. She never kept anything. Always dumped the furniture on the sidewalk. Donated what was left to whoever would take it. Watched as yuppies moved into her friends' homes. Quaint, they'd say. They'd strip the place. Re-do the floors, the staircases, paint the bedrooms in bright solid colors. Landscape the lawn.

Her legs had fallen asleep on the swing. She pulled them out and bit her lip as blood rushed back into her ankles. She rubbed her arms, thought about all of them back east, her old life — back there — where they had held on under the weight of death. A sharp pain ran across her shoulders.

It was back then that she had met him. Back then, when everyone was dying. That day, she had walked up to the door of John's apartment with groceries in her hands, the remaining food stamps in her back pocket. As she put the key in the door, the mystery boyfriend opened it for her.

"Hi Honey, what'd you bring us?"

She stumbled in and he took the bag from her. Unpacked it as they spoke, got acquainted. She recognized him from the photos in the apartment. Had always wondered when he'd be home. Evidence of his passing presence had filled small corners. A new toothbrush left behind, cold cuts wrapped in the fridge. She had always wondered. Until that day.

"I was helping out my aunt. You know how it is. John came down a couple of times to visit, but I couldn't ask him to leave his home." His hands waved around the apartment, "His lovely abode." He paused.

"Thanks for taking care of him."

They both stared at the scratched linoleum counter. He turned away. Opened the fridge.

"Well, now she's gone and I'm back. Want a beer? There's a cold one here."

For the first time in years, she just sat and talked. That's how they became friends, because of John. They had laughed together when death took John away.

After he disappeared, there was no reason for her to stay in Roxbury. She had packed up. Moved as far away as possible.

Slowly she exhaled, feeling the heat of her breath against her lips. She tore the letter into shreds, swallowed the shreds one by one, until she was only left with his handwriting. After she swallowed his words, many, many moments after, she went inside and picked up the phone. Her fingers glided over the touch pad, dialing the numbers he had given her two weeks before. The operator's voice informed her of the disconnected line. She rested her head against the wall. Decided to walk down the road. Sit on the beach for a little while.

A wave pounded against the rocks. She shivered, her body wet and cold. She gazed out over the water. She thought, perhaps the choppy waves were caused by the moon. Or perhaps, it was a ship entering the port. Perhaps it was the tide and history. Perhaps.

14.
Marvin K. White

Write down their names. Writing is magic. Is a grounding thing. Connects floating stories to paper and to earth. Write down their names. The three that called you last night because they were lonely or because somehow they thought that you could help them understand their fear of greatness. Write down their names. Write down the one that spoke of family, the one of health and the other of dreams. Be where you supposed to be so you can receive the calls that you supposed to receive. You the go-to and the got-to-go-too. Hear yourself when you hear them speak. Be spoken to. Be looked up and spoken down to. All of it is good. You got wisdom on reserve. Save a plate for stragglers and strangers and visitors and family and friends who come by phone and foot with their weary tales or their victory stories. You will not be undone. Pray they come. Be what you pray for. Practice knowing the difference between people's reception and perception of you and of stories. Show more gratitude. Even when you can't think of nothing you thankful for. Go deeper. Try sleeping for visions and not just for rest. And rising early. Sleep for a word. Sleep to get your breath back. Sleep to get your inroads dug. Visions coming. Remove any question from your hands as you write, build, bake, move things, spin things. Remove yourself from fights and battles, real and imagined. Release persecution. You ain't no pressure cooker. Simmer down. Show up. Get to where you supposed to be, then maybe, just maybe, somebody will be inspired, comforted, guided, unburdened by seeing you being there. Because of Sunday, Monday is.

Before and After
A. Naomi Jackson

Sean is a bundle of glitter and red velvet on the floor of the 70th Precinct. The luster of last night's ball looks gaudy in the harsh light that bounces off the sharp edges of the gray desk above him. Aside from the yellow legal pad that sits in the center of Officer Branson's desk, there is little to suggest that much work is done here. The Bic pens with their sharp points repulse Sean, inciting a failed schoolboy's rancor. They stand at attention above a mug that winks "Congratulations" in blue and white streaming letters.

Even through his half-shut eyelid, which matches the color of the crimson slippers he'd lifted from Macy's just days before, Sean can see the swill of the pens, all the same size and color, some of them moving in the wind whipped up by a black pedestal fan across the room.

Sean's nose would turn up at its corners if it were more than a mass of pain and dislocated flesh. When he came into the station, even through his senses' dulled edges, he could smell that familiar scent of bleach and pee. Now, Sean realizes that his body is just one of many voices in the Precinct's chorus of foul scents. His collarbone, tender where a butch queen contestant pushed him into the Roxy's stage, still smarts.

Through the maze of memories that begin with the pink and black tiled bathroom with its vanity mirror, Sean picks out the offending moment that has brought him here.

Do you have a family somewhere? The Officer, who does not like to do so, repeats himself.

Yes, in Flatbush. Lenox Road.

Ahh, a local boy.

You could say that.

I see. And what would your mother say if she knew that you dressed like this and sucked off boys in the park?

My mother's dead.

Well, if she could see you now. And your father, is he aware of your, ahem, dalliances?

Sean considers this last word with all its consonants smashed together, a wall blocking his understanding. Not delay. But dalliances. His mother, once a schoolteacher back in Jamaica, didn't teach in the States where you couldn't beat bad children. She would tell him to sound it out.

Sean directs a clarifying question to the Officer's brown boots. Delays?

You know, what, son? You are pathetic. Sad as a sack of salt in a rainstorm. What if I let you go this time? You would like that wouldn't you?

Sean nods his head yes, disrupting the delicate balance of blood and brain therein.

All you American children want is a break, someone to make things easier for you.

Sean tries to quiet his hands, shaking under the weight of handcuffs. He is convinced that stillness is the key to feeling less pain.

Do you know how much the boys in Rikers would kill for a pretty boy like you, especially one with skills?

Sean knows that word intimately because it marks the before and after points of his life up until now. He bombed the specialized high schools exam on purpose, wanting to be close to his best friend, Donovan, for just a few more years. At Wingate, "skills" replaced the talk of promise and a bright future that Sean had been hearing his whole life from his teachers, women who wrote that he was gifted and talented on his report cards, and beamed that he was such a pleasure to teach. At Wingate, skills were hard things you used to get a job, to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. And so at the end of the tenth grade, Sean decided that he had enough skills to make it in the real world and left.

He has surprised himself by making it, hustling enough jobs to pay the rent and send his sister to a school that does not drive home the

importance of skills. He remembers when Donovan was sent home to Jamaica, where his uncles were supposed to teach him how to be a real man.

The day Sean rang Donovan's mother's doorbell, he heard from his older sister with sleep still in her eye, curlers in her hair, and her belly again in the family way, that Donovan had gone back a yard. Sean decided that for him, there was no reason to reach towards a future punctuated with disappointments like these. The present already had enough pain than he could bear without placing bets on what was to come. And so with this final pain, Sean chose to live in the now, when any hurt would soon be replaced by a newer one, or the numbness he prefers.

When the Officer asks him if he wants to make a phone call, Sean can't remember the number that he's had his whole his life, the same one that his mother had pinned to his shirt along with his name and address on his first day of kindergarten.

He can remember the number the John whispered into his ear and then pressed into his palm, scribbled hastily on a post-it note. The note fell as Sean began running from the police, the headlights briefly illuminating his skin's glitter, his body a misplaced disco ball.

The John smelled like Donovan, his skin a chocolate brown only slightly smoother than the tree bark he steadied himself against. As the Officer presses Sean's fingertips against the permanent ink pad, Sean's mind holds fast to that fleeting moment, which seems to belong to the before Donovan lived in.

The drive home is short, one block across Bedford Avenue, then ten more down to Lenox Road. For a Saturday night, Flatbush is eerily quiet, with no fetes or pairs of nurses keeping each other company on the short walk home from their night shifts at Kings County, fighting sleep with gossip. As they pull up in front of 261, Sean is relieved to see that there is no one hanging out in front of the building, which the teenagers take for a collective living room. Not even Quincy, who holds up the sidewalk with his drunken regrets, is outside. Sean is merciful for this small kindness.

Branson turns off the car's lights, then the engine, letting the silence settle between them. If there is a thank you to be inserted here,

Sean does not know how to reach for it. Instead, he turns to the mirror, an obsession others take for vanity. Sean is checking to see if he is still all there. Since Donovan and his mother left, he can never be too sure.

Sean reaches for the door, and in the split second before Branson restarts the ignition and rolls the car towards Nostrand Avenue, he sees his thick lips studded with blood. There is a cluster of purple lesions on the right side of his throat that hadn't been there just the day before. He dismissed the spots he found on his back and backside but with these, there can be no mistake. Sean sees himself for what he is now. And just like that, a new after begins.

Let's go for a ride, Branson says, rounding the car onto a deserted stretch of Parkside Avenue, just a few hundred feet in front of the bus stop where Sean and Donovan once waited for the school bus together. Sean releases a long sigh, knowing already what is before him.

On his way home, Sean takes his time, steadying himself against lamp posts. Before turning onto his block, Sean stops at the fruit and vegetable store. He needs some easy, everyday task to separate the night before from the new day that is starting with the sun rising over the horizon. Haunting the aisles of the store is a woman with smooth skin tinged a sweet potato red not at all unlike his mother's. The basket of hair at the nape of her neck, so much like Mummy's, entrances him.

But then, the woman, refusing him even this last delusion, turns around in her nurse's uniform covered in teddy bears and stretched taut across her belly made fatter by late night eating. Her face is nothing like his mother's after all. Where this woman's nose is hooked, his mother's, like all the Gibbons, flares open. Where the nurse's ears pull back, his mother's stand firm away from her head like her grandfather's. This woman's eyes are nothing like the hazel seas Sean had once liked to drown in.

There, in the less punishing light, with the scent of mackerel and saltfish competing with Sean's stench that makes him keep his distance, Sean realizes for the first time that his mother is really gone, and with her the features that opened like a flower. Soon, he too will be a memory, a cautionary tale Ms. Jones in 5K will invoke to her nine-year old son Johnny, the one who seems bent on becoming a faggot.

Sean leaves the store with empty pockets. He can only stand so much of the Korean owner whose face is a battle of disgust and disbelief, taking in his battered body, an exercise in opposites against the glitter and red slippers. After this, she will stop telling Sean how much he resembles his mother.

Quincy is back on the block, stands almost gracefully with his head cocked towards the full moon. Sean shrugs past him, almost wanting some words to chew on the long walkway towards the apartment building's front door. But then, looking up at the sixth floor apartment, where his sister has left the light on for him, it is enough to know that for now, he is not alone.

Sean's half-shut eye is a weight on his already-heavy head. He would not say that he was waiting for this moment. But when it comes — a shudder that feels like death washes across his body as he waits for the elevator that never arrives — he is ready.

Me and My Shadow: Flying High — Summer 2007
Artis Q



Contributors

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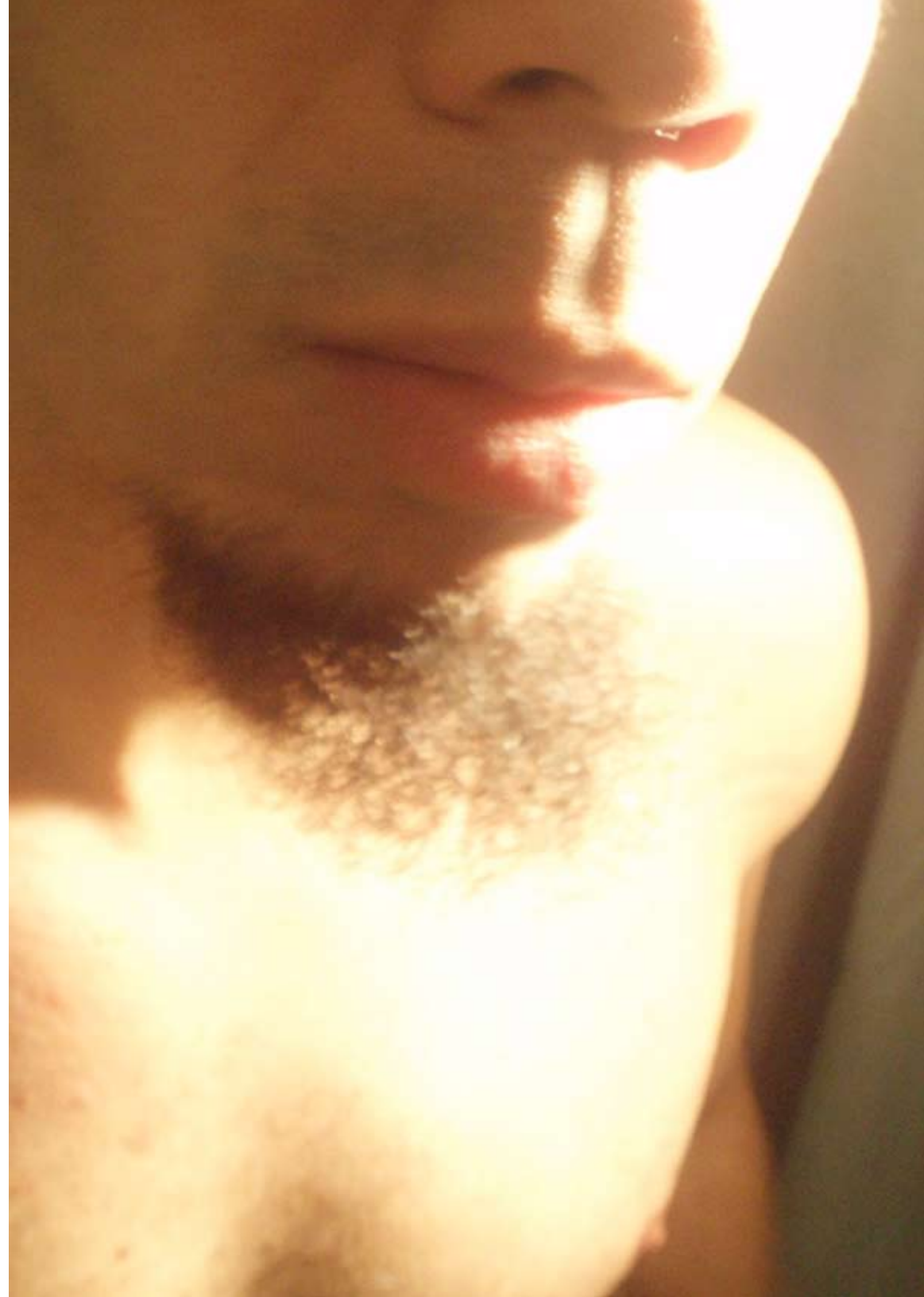
THE EDITORS

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Fullwood is also an archivist at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City where he is the founder and project director for the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive. In 2005 Fullwood was honored with a New York Times Librarian Award, because he's a bad mother-shut-your-mouth. stevenfullwood.org



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