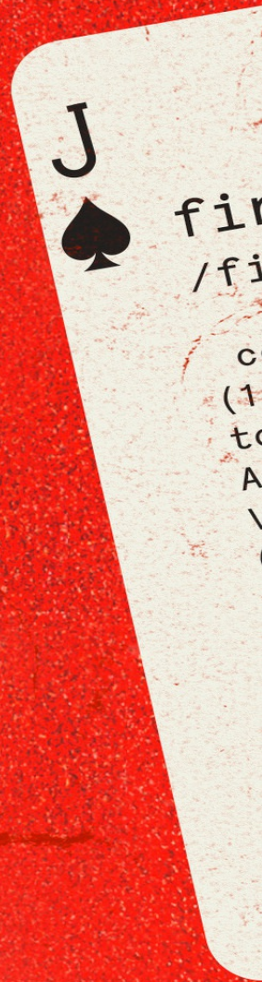


# FINNNA

**POEMS** NATE MARSHALL



“This book is one of my instant favorites, and an indispensable offering to the canon of Black poetry and poetics.” —Morgan Parker, author of *Magical Negro*



# Praise for FINNA

“*Finna* should win a Grammy for its title alone. A Peabody for pulling off a ghazal built on hecky naw. This book is one of my instant favorites, and an indispensable offering to the canon of Black poetry and poetics. Nate Marshall’s inventive and intimate second collection is a marvel—refreshingly feminist, enchantingly complicated, and Black as hell. Marshall is a genius of observation and observance; highly sensitive, highly silly, and with jaw-dropping range. The poet scatters syntax like a South Side Gertrude Stein, breaks lines with Lucille Clifton’s slyness, and ain’t never left the old court. This is one of those thrilling books that teaches you how to read it by reading you. Echoing in every room of this book is Toni Morrison’s testimony that ‘we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.’ *Finna* is what everybody’s afraid to say about language, about Blackness in America: that it can survive without its origin, that a people makes itself by pronouncing. When Auden says, ‘Poetry makes nothing happen,’ Marshall proclaims, ‘we happen to love. this is our greatest / action.’ ”

—Morgan Parker, author of *Magical Negro* and *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*

“Simply outstanding poetry. Readers are going to say these poems are raw but they aren’t. They are elegantly and precisely crafted, frank, and full of realness about Blackness, masculinity, family, and Chicago.”

—Roxane Gay, author of *Hunger* and *Bad Feminist*

“I place *Finna* in the lineage of books that remind me why I first took to language: not only to see it wielded with the thoughtfulness and wide-ranging brilliance of writers like Nate Marshall but also to see the language my people speak (and the lives punctuated by that language) leap off of pages, and build a world I feel immersed in, and not standing outside of. I am thankful for the honesty and self-examination in this work, yes. But even beyond that, I am thankful for a speaker who speaks as my people might, yelling across a parking lot or during a card game. I am thankful that this, too, is a part of the honesty this marvelous collection is in pursuit of.”

—Hanif Abdurraqib, author of *Go Ahead in the Rain* and *A Fortune for Your Disaster*

“My original blurb was ‘this book decent’ but I was told that the editor wouldn’t go for that so I am going to tell you instead that this book catalyzes a necessary conversation about Black language practices, culture, ownership, and belonging, and the commodification of Black people’s tongues. And then it flips the script by offering a discomfiting reflection on masculinities, the ways we hurt each other, and what it would look like to sculpt a version of manhood that isn’t intimately linked to violence. So, like I said, this book decent.”

—Eve L. Ewing, author of *Electric Arches* and *1919*

“These poems here, these backhand slaps of what-you-didn’t-know-you-needed, finna be that swift fissure in the landscape of lyric. This werk is relentlessly rhythmed, deja-Chi all over again, and it’s finna hit harder than necessary or known. These snippets of precisely bladed

Black boy gospel, penned by the nonpareil son of the wild hundreds, finna resound and reach an impossible reach—in fact, if karma knows its stuff, this craved-for and combustible collection finna find itself peeking from the back pocket of that other Nate Marshall’s stiff and sturdy MAGA-issued denims.”

—Patricia Smith, author of *Incendiary Art*

“In *Finna*, I hear Etheridge Knight, I hear Terrance Hayes, but most vividly, I hear Nate Marshall naming his many selves as some flee, others linger, and one in particular threatens to hunt him down. And yes: ‘i feel you Nate Marshall. / i’ve left places & loves / when they told me they loved / a Nate Marshall / I didn’t recognize.’ Don’t be fooled by the calm and assured clarity of this poet’s voice; there is a trip wire hidden in damn near every line break.”

—Saeed Jones, author of *How We Fight for Our Lives* and *Prelude to Bruise*

“*Finna* is a hip millennium blues song shot through with bolts of joy and humor, an innovative homage to home, and a trenchant critique of so-called race in these so-called United States. Please believe, there ain’t no sophomore slumping for this super talented poet.”

—Mitchell S. Jackson, author of *Survival Math*

# FINNA

poems

**Nate Marshall**



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this dark diction has become america's addiction.

—MALIK YUSEF

among the Blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no  
poetry.

—some white boy

## landless acknowledgment

before we get started we would like to acknowledge that we live on some unceded bones. sometimes me & mine imagine ancestral homes. all i got so far is Montgomery, Alabama. maybe a boat. maybe a plot of land somewhere so far from the south sides i've claimed that i would get lost on the way. i admit sometimes my homies talk about their families immigrating & i get jealous. we lost the land we were custodians over before i was a twinkle in the eye of a twinkle in the eye of a twinkle in the eye. closest i got to a homeland is my mama's caucasian pitch on the phone calling the police. closest i got to a homeland is not never calling the police. closest i got to a homeland is my daddy's laugh in a spades game. closest i got to a homeland is my lover's tongue talking or otherwise. closest i got to a homeland is the funk under a DJ's needle & my hand full of a dance partner. not to be dark but i am. not to be dark but the planet is on fire. not to be dark but they moving capitals because the water is coming up. not to be dark but our bones are in that water too. maybe that's my capital? once the polar capitals melt & there's a whole lot less land for folks to buy & sell & steal maybe everybody will feel a little more dark. will feel a little more homelandless like we do. why you think i call my compatriots homies? maybe ain't no home except for how your beloveds cuss or pray or pronounce.

[Tap here](#) to view this poem as text

# The Other Nate Marshall

keep my name out your mouth cuz you can't handle the  
fleek.

—JAMILA WOODS

**Nate Marshall is a white supremacist from Colorado or Nate Marshall is a poet from the South Side of Chicago or i love you Nate Marshall**

when i first made  
my name Nate  
i was a boy  
at summer camp  
looking for cool  
in the muggy shadow  
& so when the white boys  
snipped Nathaniel  
to just a touch of the tongue  
to the mouth roof  
it seemed to me  
a religious moment,  
a new confirmation as okay.

this was 2000 &  
you must have been  
Nate Marshall  
for decades by then.

i find you, years later,  
buried in a google search  
& follow you silently  
for the next year  
like a high school crush.

i tell my students about you  
the day when we wonder what if

privilege hadn't put us in  
a college classroom.

i tell my ex about you in bed  
& it's convenient that there's this other  
Nate Marshall to be the liar  
lying there this time.

i see your failed campaign & watch how your ties  
to white supremacists spelled your demise.  
my Black history month paper on the Black Panthers  
in 3rd grade wouldn't color me radical enough & i am ashamed  
i've never been pushed out of a spotlight for loving  
my people too much. your day job is roofing & i just watch HGTV  
in hotels. you are the truer amongst us Nate. you, peddler of  
propaganda  
& seller of shingles.

can you show me to love how you love?

every time i've said *what's good nigga*  
it's possible we've matched  
our mouths, symmetrical  
around the two g's in the middle.

i won't lie to you Nate Marshall  
or to myself Nate Marshall  
i too have hated a nigga & lived  
to tweet the tale.  
i too have sat suspicious in my basement  
wondering who was coming for my country.  
i too have googled myself & found a myself

i despise.

once, you left Twitter  
after i told my people to tell you  
that they loved you & your book  
& your commitment to Black people  
& i feel you Nate Marshall.  
i've left places & loves  
when they told me they loved  
a Nate Marshall  
i didn't recognize.

## **another Nate Marshall origin story**

so, for the purposes of this story let's say  
turn of the 20th century my great  
grandfather Marshall disappeared  
so thoroughly nobody know what he looks like.

so let's say he's super high yellow  
so much so maybe he's swarthy  
if he stays out of sun & so  
in this story he drops my grandpops  
& then pulls out of Mississippi to step west  
& stretch his legs as a white man.

so let's say he has a whole white  
family with a little boy.  
& let's say he overcorrects  
cuz he knows the color  
the boy carries without knowing  
so he tells the little boy  
*we don't associate with those people*  
& that little boy has a whole lineage  
who don't talk to those people.

so, maybe the name Marshall is just a passing  
story we'll never uncover. maybe he secret  
Black like a Hollywood actor. but maybe  
he knows & wants his name back  
& his body too.

## **my daddy's daddy's daddy or the etymology of Marshall**

or a blank space

or a space filled

or a filled job

or a job vacant

or a vacant lot

or a lot of questions

or a question posed

or a 'posed to & ain't

or a ain't known

or a known forgotten

or a forgotten name

or a name left

or a left us.



## **another Nate Marshall origin story**

again the white me  
on the internet appears  
& this time he wants  
what is his.

our name  
is a country  
he claims  
for himself.

*you need to quit  
using my name.  
it is not your name. you are  
fake! i am Nate Marshall. you are  
filth!*

Nate Marshall calls Nate Marshall  
all this.

every Nate Marshall i know  
has an unruly name  
a word he can't trace back.

one Nate Marshall deletes  
himself.

every Nate Marshall i know  
is mistaken.

## how to pronounce Nathaniel

the southern folk say the a out long ways  
pull it apart so the syllables hang loose  
as laundry on the clothesline.

the schools i went to,  
top ranked & unimaginative,  
make it obvious, unimpressive, a stub of an uh sound  
compact & efficiently packaged.

my mama says it how she always has  
but i can never remember her intonation.  
this little blip,            where I            forget my            self.

beloved, how you say it though,  
that's the way it's said.  
i know when you say me  
like i'm an incantation  
i know i ain't no lie.

## **another Nate Marshall origin story**

when the obscure meaning  
of the name  
is no longer an unreachable itch

the mouth will fall away,  
both plump lips will dry  
& drop from the stupid face.

imagine this, a man  
made donut, chest open,  
hollow, everything poured  
out, available, nowhere  
to drum a warning, no place to  
keep out.

perhaps our rage  
at the other is just the way  
we fill what we don't know  
about ourselves.

## nigger joke

so this nigger walks into a bar in this gentrifying neighborhood & orders fried chicken & the nigger gets a craft beer cuz the nigger went to graduate school & the nigger is waiting for his fried chicken & this white man walks up & sits down in front of a half drank tallboy & calls the nigger's phone a big ass phone & the nigger laughs because the phone is big & bought for with his graduate school money & the nigger keeps his eyes up at the football game & the white man extends his hand & the nigger takes it with kool-aid strained cheeks because the nigger thinks about this week & all the wrong that white people have done & maybe this is a start of a different story & maybe the white man will tell him something honest over the liquor & buy him drinks & so the white man asks the nigger if he knows the neighborhood but the nigger is new around here so the white man says *welcome* & assures the nigger *this is a good bar* the white man talks about how he's here most nights & has never seen a fight & he talks about how whites & niggers & latinos drink in peace & talks about the last 10 years & the buildings he bought a decade ago that are multiplying his pockets & the white man talks about his catholic school past & the white man talks about making a corridor from downtown to the suburbs & he's waiting for the other shoe to drop always & cop more buildings & get more rents & he asks the nigger where he's from & the nigger says south side & the white man tells the nigger what south side is & the white man talks about "cop blocks" & assures the nigger all of south side isn't a wasteland because there's "cop blocks" over there too & the nigger tries to shift the conversation to the south side white neighborhoods because the nigger went to elementary school in one & the white man talks about those cousins he has there & how they are on an island & how the south side is so bad but not where the white folks live & the nigger tries the college town he lived in & the white man's dad went to school there & the white man got in but white man's dad wouldn't pay for that school even on his judge salary so the white man went military academy instead & the white man got cop brothers & other family & the white man talks about his second house in the

state of the college town & how up there he's a catholic & the not catholic white men look at him different when they find out & then the white man says *i never been oppressed except one time* & he says *in Virginia everybody's a nigger* & the nigger says nothing the nigger eats his chicken which got there a while ago & listens to the nigger joke & the nigger joke says nothing & looks at the football game & the white man says *pardon me if saying the nigger word offends you* but the nigger joke just nods & the nigger joke waits for the white man to finish his story & the nigger joke eats the chicken with a singular focus & hopes the bone plunges into his throat & the nigger joke isn't hungry & can't stop eating as fast as possible & the nigger joke hopes the white man stops talking about the protestors who are probably college students who should probably protest college tuition & not cops doing their jobs but the nigger joke isn't listening the nigger joke is repeating the prayer his mama taught him & the prayer starts with the good elementary school & then the good high school & then the excellent college & then the incredible graduate school & how it was all merit scholarship & also the high test scores including the awards & honors of course the publications & acclaim & the nigger joke finishes his prayer & the nigger joke sees somebody's prayer answered when the nigger joke pays the waitress & tells the white man have a good night & cries the walk home.

## **nah nah this one though is for all my niggas**

starting with my Black niggas  
& assorted non-white niggas  
& even some white niggas!  
even the other Nate Marshall...  
actually especially him.

what up to all the Nate Marshalls!  
there's a hockey player  
& a comedian  
& 1 on acoustic guitar  
&

1 time a dude i knew hit me up relieved & shaken  
when his timeline told him Nate Marshall had been murdered  
but it was a different me somewhere on the North Side.

definitely peace to that Nate Marshall  
& to his people who would have been relieved  
had i been the news article instead of their sweet, beautiful boy.

love to y'all & to all the me's not here to still be stupid.  
all the me's not around to make mistakes & make amends.  
all the me's who are fertilizer & not growing themselves no more.

family, this is my name  
& a myth that i don't own alone. i never even meant  
to have this name this just a happy accident of birth,  
an unhappy coincidence of intersecting histories,  
an abbreviation that became law.

look niggas, Nathaniel became Nate & is both. true story.  
did y'all niggas know i meet siblings every day  
who change they name to touch they truths? i know  
that. & i know there's finna be at least 1 nigga who read  
this poem out loud when they know they ain't got no good  
business with my name in they mouth. i know there's finna be  
at least 1 nigga who email me to ask why i gotta use  
such an ugly word to call myself & my people  
& i'm just gonna respond & say which word? i been had a few  
names the world gave me & then won't call me. i been had a name  
soft & pliant as a tonal language. i been had a name  
that was offensive or a love song depending  
on who held it in they mouth.

# What's My Favorite Word?

we should always be guarding against every evil word...

—JUPITER HAMMON



## **everything i've called women**

if i said baby you might think love but nah.  
that's only maybe what i mean, perhaps i'll say ma

& your mind says Cam'ron, women creeping up  
but i'm a changed man, & that's not game ma.

it's high school & THOT isn't out yet  
we're classic Chicago & bustdowns bloom in our mouths. my Ma

spits Too \$hort & the line i catch the first time  
is *b\*tch b\*tch b\*tch make me rich* but Ma

puts me on punishment when i whisper Ludacris  
& tells me sex shouldn't hurt. i say nothing & Ma

lets it go until a few years later when i get becky  
or brain or top or dome by a white girl & Ma

tells me everything i've risked for this escapade.  
i can't fix my mouth to say *but Ma*

*what i got i didn't ask for.* shorty just kinda went  
& i was supposed to moan street things like *hey ma*

*you sexy as hell.* & after that i say it all  
& give women a rash of nicknames there's ma

(who calls me pa) & Hollywood & princess & pop star  
& doctor & lady & kneesocks & *yo ma*

*i missed your name i just put where we met in my phone  
don't be mad i remember our whole convo ma*

*& bae & baby & honey & shorty & poison & tenderoni  
& when i'm lonely hey stranger. how you been ma?*

*& sometimes i've called & gotten dial tone songs  
or been told Nate do you remember my name? or is that why you say  
ma?*

## my mom's favorite rapper was Too \$hort

before i could talk  
i could stalk Oakland streets  
in my mind. i'm a cussword

pitched at the tip of a tongue  
sung like an omen. women  
were the first i saw hum this

lullaby. my mama told me  
about the white house & selling  
cocaine, nancy reagan's business

prowess. my big sister helped me count  
cold cash money—slap  
snaps at suckers like a pimp.

*you motherfuckers thought  
i was gon' change my style?  
all the while i'm here holding*

what i learned. by the time i was 5  
i knew *man you still alive?*  
by heart, the hardest lyric

in our whole song. i'm the age  
to be that plot twist now. how  
can i unlearn some of the curses

that were the first

spells i saw conjured?  
*i wrote this rhyme*

*for you.*  
*you might not*  
*like my rap*

& you'd be right.  
you might be  
right

& not be  
true.  
you might be

true  
& not be  
you.

we all have our pleasures  
we're guilty about  
not feeling guilty about.

we all look for the radical  
reframing that lets  
our ass shake.

we all gaze in the mirror, mouth  
our favorite word without speech.  
even without volume we hear it,

we all watch

ourselves,  
ask:

if not these perjured women,  
who will *make me*  
*rich*.

## **with no invitation**

a boy is taken.  
but here's a question:  
a boy says yes under what circumstance?

trick question. a boy  
doesn't say anything  
unless he's asked.

trick answer. she didn't  
know what to say.

trick answer. he's a shade of  
hesitant but maybe  
he's game.

## **bald fade**

Richard could slice a nigga from fro to caesar in 17 flat. he, dream genius of diminishing Black curl. he used to pick me up Saturday mornings, stop & cop me McDonald's hot cakes. he sat me in the back of the shop while opening. let me eat & then readied me for the slice. the bald fade. the 90s cut up front, neat. the back graphics. the rounded fro. the cornrow lining. the Michael Jordan/Daddy deluxe. my head a democratic laboratory for nap possibility. my head lived in Richard's hands—Richard was our family friend. haircut-on-credit close. hand-me-candy-store-money close. leave-me-the-*Curtis*-comic-strips close. first-school-dance-get-me-right close. down-the-street close. try-to-fuck-my-sister close. never-went-to-prison close. check-his-sex-offender-registry-listing close. map-the-route-to-his-house close. consider-repaying-his-cut close. saw him at the gas station last summer. walked right past my pump, close. he, who made my wave pattern, didn't recognize me at the pump after hair loss & decades-plus of thickening into man. he would only know me from the way my dome pinches slightly up front, a mark he made when he gave my first fade.

## only boy

when i was 6 my grandmother gave me  
a single dollar for pushing a girl  
to the concrete during double dutch.  
the girl, nameless now in my head,  
was a head taller & 3 years older  
& believed my face looked best streaked red  
by the clotheswire.

when Kay-Kay baby sat us as toddlers  
she would sling my tough hair  
into small puffs with her barrette balls.  
mama asked her why.

in 7th grade i dry humped high school girls  
to juke mixes in basements as unfinished as i.  
my reason for being at those parties was  
to chaperone a sister 10 months my senior.

i never knew the business end of a curfew,  
took the city by train anywhere i could imagine.  
mama told me be home by the time  
i was alive.



still young & praying over a rare family dinner.  
my voice cracks through the uncertain absolution  
we all hold hands, mine no bigger than theirs.

all my sisters huddle into the car  
to go together. girls' night. i watch them leave.  
i hold a book in front of my face.

as a baby i didn't start talking until late.  
my sister suggested i go to a special doctor  
to inspect my head  
to see where the language had gone.

i did not talk much. i say little now  
that i mean with my whole self in public.  
i am whipped with jump rope  
or i am pushing.

[Tap here](#) to view this poem as text

## **my granddaddy sees the streets**

& knows all the boys  
are punks. he doesn't  
believe in thugs  
or boogeymen. what he sees is  
little men who never got a proper  
whipping. all these little men  
with no hands, no mind for stick & move. guns  
for these new boys are no metaphor.

my granddaddy is from the fair one.

my granddaddy saw *Rocky* & started training to box  
in his 40s. roadwork down the dim streets,  
hands up & swinging at any boy bad enough  
to take the discipline. half a lifetime before that he got beat  
by his old man for being bad & he became a bad  
man with hands heavy as a sad sad story.

now his memory stumbles like taking a solid hit  
& in the end all he can promise  
his people in the streets  
is an ass whooping.

## epicene

a justification of slavery said  
Blacks were the lady  
of the races. in this logic  
the bondage is an overcoat  
over the puddle.

the whitefolk said, Black, as in  
not men. Black, as in not woman. Black,  
as in this brutality is just benevolence.

if this the case  
call me sis. if this  
the case then here  
is me, not a man  
but a query. if this  
the case then fuck  
whatever freedom  
given by this hand.  
if this the case *bitch*  
*ass nigga* is redundant.

i don't mean slave logic  
holds but i mean  
all our traps are inventions  
of the same lazy tongue.

what i know is:  
i'm Black sure  
& i'm as much man

as my pops & his.

what i know is:  
most of who held me  
down has been Black  
women.

what i know is:  
i want to be as much  
man as mama & grandmama  
who brought home fatback & headed households.

what i know is:  
sometimes all of my sisters have a girls'  
night & i don't have any brothers  
& sometimes it's okay  
& other times i want my invitation.

## **darla: i don't know when - April 7, 2016**

after francine j. harris

its not that i didn't like you  
its more that you were never  
much of anything to me except always  
around. here you are riding my granddaddy's  
back outside of our house when y'all showed  
up drunk again & us kids were the only ones there.  
you again at thanksgiving saying something  
stupid that we all ignore & then saying it  
again.

its not that i didn't like you  
its more that you were never  
very smart. the type of woman  
to have to think about the question  
when asked her own name. the kind  
of woman to take up with a married  
man & never seem to feel  
anything on the subject.

its not that i didn't like you  
its more my mama didn't.  
couldn't fucking stand you.  
its not her fault but she couldn't  
hate her daddy for his sins & so  
you gotta hold this one down on his behalf.

its not that i didn't like you  
its more i barely knew your name

growing up. you were just  
*hussy* or *tramp* or *slut* or  
grandma looking teary eyed  
at the deflated speed bag in the basement.

its not that i didn't like you  
its more i never expected you to die  
which is stupid when i saw you never  
really lived your own life.  
you just granddaddy's shadow,  
same stumble & bad brain,  
same sweet pride over this selfish  
boy named Armstead.

its not that i didn't like you  
its more i just never like  
thought about you for real.

its not that i didn't like you  
its more i didn't know you had kids  
or siblings. i didn't know  
you were like a real person.

forgive me, this selfish boy named Armstead  
who stopped in his tracks when he saw your mama  
collect the extra obituaries saying *i need these*  
*i need to tell anybody who come by*  
*about my baby. my sweet sweet child.*

## the homies ask if i'm tryna smash

our language for sex:

*stain*

this is where we live  
a land of impact & soiling,  
a gaggle of boys boasting  
over hurt. our tongues  
wagging, stupid flags  
of a dumb dominion. our love  
for each other measured

*smash*

*bang*

in what we lord over. we poor  
timekeepers, consider our preposition here:  
*bros before* \_\_\_\_\_.  
we anti-historians. we unmakers of ourselves.  
we failures of science & courage.  
we ugly. we ugly. we ugly.  
we a bankrupt vernacular,  
a slang as prophecy,  
a linguistic imperative towards  
pain.

*beat*

*hit*

*pound*

## **step**

*learn this or get out my house*  
is how mama started my dance lesson  
when i was a boy.

& mama was off  
& suddenly she was high school sized  
& spinning a hole into our old carpet.

the basic is letting the bottom of each heel tap  
& snap back to the beat.

you only gotta find one simple step  
& you can always come home  
to that after anything fancy  
you might try.

first you gotta follow  
& then lead  
& once you & your partner are real  
enough there really ain't no lead.

in Chicago we call it steppin'  
but perhaps every Black  
neighborhood has some version  
they call swing or bop or hand dance or hustle.

i mean to dance, to take my partner's  
hands & spin in such a way our bodies blend  
into a single downbeat.



**your auntie don't understand why your great uncle such a no  
count negro & in general why men resolve to be no count  
dogs for no good reason**

& its not her job to know  
why men be wrong  
as often as days got y's at they back  
but if i didn't tell you i'd be a negligent uncle  
so sit down & poke your chest back  
in before i make you concave. here it is:  
sick boy. we all sick. you drink bad  
water you gon' have bad blood that's just good  
sense. you ever seen a pit bull with a heavy head  
& a body sliding into nothing?  
well a dog starving like that might not eat.  
he was proli beat, maybe lame in a leg or missin'  
an ear. that dog proli got half his teeth & none  
of his mean gone. he proli attack you when you try  
to help. he proli sink his one good tooth  
right in your leg even if it kills him.  
that dog is a danger but its like this.  
that dog didn't train himself.  
that dog learned early a kill  
is the way to a meal.

## **an uncle's fable for consent**

*i'm trying to find language to talk about these things.*

—AJA MONET

check it out nephew  
what it be like is this:  
you ever touch the open palm  
of a cold iron? best shit  
you could put on the soft  
side of your face, like sweet  
jesus kissing you on the cheek.  
but you gotta check anything  
you aim to touch beforehand  
otherwise you might end up  
messed up. & the messed up  
thing about the burn is you don't  
feel it at first. the body shock  
itself into apathy but after that  
it sting & smooth & bubble &  
break open & grow back nasty enough  
to ugly up a baby face motherfucker.  
that's a kind of scar you keep  
& the thing about it is even after you don't  
feel it everybody see it & you do  
once your simple ass look in a mirror.

## memoir of a wronger

*nah boo. you just fuckin wit the wrong niggas.*

—a wronger nigga

the truth is  
ima pimp  
or a pusher.  
ima drug  
who needs  
to be dragged  
i'm dressed  
to the 9s  
performing  
for whoever.

i'm out here  
on this bridge  
called i'm buck  
wild give a fuck  
less what i hurt  
with my hurt.  
i'm a smirk  
after the explosion.

the truth is  
relative  
like your cousin  
who borrowed  
that money &  
been in the wind

since.

the truth is  
relative  
like your uncle  
who ain't allowed  
in granny house  
after those  
troubles,  
you know.

look me in my eyes girl:  
i [redacted] you.  
you can [redacted] me.  
give me your [redacted].  
i'll be your [redacted].

## **poem in which I consider my artistic & romantic life via *Purple Rain***

maybe it was a stupid subconscious allusion  
when i insisted to my boy Shaun  
our rap group be called the revolution.

we didn't understand political upheaval. we just listened  
to Talib & Mos & thought the word ripe  
in our 13-year-old mouths. now, decades later, i suspect  
it was more our mothers' happy whole body  
shudders when the radio DJ threw it  
back to "1999" that gave us the idea  
for the name.

something about moving a woman  
in such a complete way seemed  
a good idea & dangerous  
enough to name a rap group.  
two little dudes who couldn't play  
any instrument past middle school  
trying to call ourselves the name  
of the symbol's backup band.  
we were delusional.

in my family's basement's VHS collection  
between some old porn, Michael Jackson's  
*Moonwalker*, & *VeggieTales Bible Stories*  
sat *Purple Rain*. damn, those scenes played  
like a Lord's prayer.

in the days my dad didn't call  
for weeks & then called to talk about  
a baseball game neither of us gave a fuck about  
what i wouldn't have given for a swift kick  
& cuss to run away from.

in my mom's 3 job era i wished  
for someone home enough for me  
to need a club to escape to.

in the summer i fell  
for my own Nikki & all the cool the raps gave me went away.

in the summer i fell  
for my own Nikki & renamed myself something unpronounceable.

in the summer i fell  
for my own Nikki but i rode away from her  
at the lake & never circled back.

## telling stories

a few times each year  
i am convinced of the end  
of singleness, the beginning  
of a singularity, i become convinced  
of the infinite curve of love.

my grandma, like all Black grandmothers  
perhaps, told me do not *tell stories*  
by which she meant do not *lie* except we couldn't say lie  
which was a curse word in her house.

my grandma, like all Black grandmothers  
perhaps, told me stories about where we were  
from, & who we were from, & the unbroken string  
of happy accidents & hapless miracles that made us possible.

my grandma used to say *worse thing in the world a liar or a thief*  
& i know i have been both these most deplored before.

my grandma used to say *i love you*.

my grandma gone.  
my convictions gone too.  
does that mean an end  
to the long curve of her love  
or mine?

does that mean *i love you*  
is always bound to end up

a story? If so what kind?  
the worst thing or  
one of the small impossibilities  
that put us here.



## **the best story is about home because that's the story part**

*so tell me what you call me when i'm not around.*

—NONAME

often i be out &  
about the words  
moving quotes to the folks  
like a fix.

don't understand?  
feel me this way:  
the other day i was walking  
through the old hood to see  
me in the cheap duplexes  
& all the wrong houses were  
vacant &  
some of our board ups  
were blooming with new boys.

the last time i went to the church of my birth  
all the old folks looked the same kind  
of hard starched sharp they always been  
& i been gone so long nobody  
asked where i been.

look, every time i show up  
at the function  
it's a surprise  
party to my homies.

all i call my people  
is what i say in they absence.

peep the props i cop from how hard  
i represent the spots i hardly hit  
but hail from.

feel me: she told me i didn't  
give her my best hours & i told her  
here's more & started pulling clocks  
out my pockets & she said its time  
to go 'head on.

## **took a L fam**

no, not the train that steak knives  
through the city.

no, not brown paper twisted & honey sealed  
for a slow burn.

no, not another name for God—  
though perhaps prayer is in order

just another leaving  
another heart handed back—  
politely or not.

just another  
*or nah*  
for the list.

just another night alternating  
the side of the mattress  
i sleep on  
to keep it even.

## **ode to vacation**

O vacation you are a word i know  
the meaning of but don't know.

when i was young  
there was the lone family trip  
to a water park in Wisconsin.

in college there was the week we had  
in South Carolina with my best friend's family.  
we went on plantation tours to see  
the beautiful gardens & all i could see  
was blood & flowers. i still wonder who keeps ground  
on those plots now, though i bet i can guess.

vacation, we met again in Guatemala  
& i asked not to but we are here  
with an ex-love because the flights were paid  
& the trip planned. on the plane home she got an upgrade  
to first class & had me sit next to her since the seat was empty  
though i was still coach. 45 minutes into the flight  
they checked my ticket &  
i got moved back  
where i belonged.

vacation, i don't get you or rather  
i don't give you the time & i don't take  
the time off. it's my lineage dear vacation.  
i'm from 2 jobs at minimum  
& retiring only to turn the house into

a home business. the story goes  
that more than one of my relations  
used to visit dope houses in their work  
uniforms & maybe the high is also an occupation.

vacation, i have tax forms & under the table work  
falling out of my head like hair.  
i haven't seen a week of mine end since  
i was at least 18.

vacation, you a lie & i don't lie  
down for much of anything these days.

## sweet breath

lover, all that slang we swapped  
between our regions won't do  
much for us now. how could it?  
there's no word for us  
except our names & what is  
a secret if i say it  
in front of company?

remember us, a late night  
when everybody else is asleep or pretending  
& we are awake & not watching  
nothing but each other. we call each other *my nigga*.  
this pet name we exchange will make the voyeur  
think animal or abomination  
& i have no reason to correct  
when what we on this eve could be either  
or both.

forget the good schools we attended, the degrees.  
all the big words & eloquent expletives  
we bandy about for fun are missing tonight.  
i can't say                    anything  
but heavy breath                    our new language  
for yes  
with your writing hand wrapped around my windpipe.

## **the valley of its making**

*poetry makes nothing happen*

—W. H. AUDEN

the people in the streets  
are plucked up like  
radishes from dark earth,  
heads beat the purplish red  
of ripeness. the women lead  
the stupid & brutish to a  
future they don't deserve.  
the organized are still  
unbearably human, they  
still fuck & hurt & harm  
& are not actually sorry.  
the people still fight  
each other too much &  
the system not enough  
& too often it is not a fight  
but a bullet. too many men  
want to be in the front  
& don't want to march  
anywhere in particular.  
some of us have degrees  
& noses to look down.  
so many want a version  
of old days that never  
existed. many are still unwilling  
to grow a vocabulary for personhood,

even from the words already in them.  
so many will deny *they* to a sibling  
simply because. our people are  
messy & messed up & a mess.  
nothing about our people is romantic  
& it shouldn't be. our people deserve  
poetry without meter. we deserve our  
own jagged rhythm & our own uneven  
walk towards sun. you make happening happen.  
we happen to love. this is our greatest  
action.



## Harold's Chicken Shack #2

ask any mug on the South Side  
& they'll say their own particular  
alchemy for appetite.  
we each have an intersection  
we'll point you to on  
the day of the week  
when the grease  
is the right kind of dirty.

*boy don't say nothing if you ain't been to  
103rd & Halsted  
on a Wednesday...*

*me myself i'm more 64th & Cottage any Thursday before 4...*

*better hit 87th off the Ryan before them other folk get  
wind & take that too.*

truth is  
there are more Chicken Shacks  
than anybody care to count  
& the number is always growing or shrinking  
depending on the day.

truth is  
some of them ain't all that.

truth is  
some of them have off days

or decades.

truth is  
there is more than 1 with sauce  
sweet enough  
to sponge up with white bread.

what she taught me  
when she picked me up  
& poured into me  
is ain't nobody got a monopoly  
on your hope or your good feeling  
or your proper crunch  
or your sweet sweet spice.

## habitual

i be but i don't is. i been & i  
am one who be on my own biz. i love  
not a b\_\_\_\_. but see know i been loved. i'm  
one who been that & then not deserved much

cuz i been on my own dirt. i don't know  
love. i been a lie but don't be a lie  
i be fly sometimes but don't be a fly  
sometimes i be addict like but not high

like an addict's like. just scratching low stones  
like an addict might. stop? not an option.  
i be getting mine. been getting over.  
been over this but be caught in a cycle.

but you be what you be & it be good.  
& i be moved & making new habits.

# Native Informant

i'm deprogramming y'all wit' uncut slang shit.

—Black Thought

## **when i say Chicago**

capital city of the flyover.  
crown jewel of the jailhouse.  
a town in love with its own blood,  
a blood browned on its own history & funk.  
hometown of the riot & the riot gear,  
the gang & the loitering law.  
misfit blocks of dark-skinned cousins &  
thick knuckled slavic uncles  
who call each other their worst names.

what this country know 'bout a rustbelt  
dipped in salt & vinegar & sold as  
marked up & rustic?

my city is the city.  
not your close enough suburb not  
subject to the suppression of tape  
& the tapping of phones.  
how can you say anything about our blocks  
& schools & children that you refuse to see.  
don't tell us what is wrong  
with all of our cousins you've never known.  
you do not govern what you do not love.

when i say Chicago  
i mean that first Haitian cat who could pronounce it right.

when i say Chicago  
i mean the stopped & frisked.

i mean the euphemism of frisk.  
i mean the beat down & tight cuff.  
i mean the drop-off in Bridgeport  
or Mount Greenwood.  
i mean the lessons  
taught to an uppity one.

when i say Chicago  
i mean the lake  
(& i mean all of it).  
i mean the candy lady at Rainbow  
& the paleta man at Calumet  
& the kids careening across the green at Montrose  
& the jogger in midwinter daring a death for fitness

when i say Chicago  
i mean Cabrini & Stateway & Ickes & Ida,  
the city i'll tell my kids about in the past tense.  
i mean the rents that sometimes  
make me mean Georgia or Indiana or Dolton.

when i say Chicago i mean  
the restaurants with no chairs  
just a window, a bulletproof sneeze guard.  
i mean a Michelin star for all the ethnics slanging  
their seasoned meats & language.

when i say Chicago i mean my mama's  
house that was my grandma's house.  
i mean the neighborhood  
that was our neighborhood

because we said  
*we'll make a home here*  
*& we'll stay.*

## **another Nate Marshall origin story**

so Nate Marshall moves to Colorado  
years after Nate Marshall moved to Colorado  
that's what always happens.

moving is, perhaps, the single largest commonality amongst  
everything living.

& don't get me wrong  
i'm not saying i'm like him  
i'm just saying i'm not not.

i'm just saying a person is a person  
cuz people. even the ones we'd rather not.

even the Nate Marshalls who ain't me  
are me & i because of them. & even the Nate Marshalls  
who seem most fixed in their place  
might move  
if they're alive.



## scruples

is the word i tell anyone who asks  
for my favorite. what sounded  
to me like a doctor's instrument was just a  
name for the hesitation respectability births.

O, small keeper of my failure  
at the 4th grade spelling bee.  
i loved the way my mouth cupped your vowels  
like a spoonful of newly cooled soup. you  
were my convenient bae or beau or note  
with a multiple-choice admission of admiration  
but you are not my most honest longing.

*when i'm alone in my room*  
or at my family's cookout  
or at the basketball courts  
i spill finna from my mouth  
like 2 cheeks full of pop  
punctured with a laugh. everywhere  
my finna exists it's a warning or heckle or plea bargain  
telling myself, or my mama, or this motherfucker that's  
been jawing all game everything i'm about to turn into;  
all the hesitation i shook loose.

## slave grammar

*Lol Chicago slang be dumb as hell  
Whole time & don't nobody be knowing  
how to explain what it mean  
we all just got a understanding  
—@\_GOMP on Twitter 27 Jul 2014*

this not proper,  
this people.  
this a failing school  
meet a magnet program.  
trick question,  
they kin.  
this no question,  
this answer—  
ancestral.  
this be habitual.  
this the dirty words  
lined up in they baddest fits.  
this that this that  
bad meaning \_\_\_\_\_  
you know what i mean.  
you know what i'm saying  
whole time i'm bending the language  
like a bow every arrow is spinning itself  
a new sharp tip. whole time  
i'm writing this down its obsoleting  
itself. whole time we talking we ain't got  
no dictionary we guessing the spelling

we deciphering the phrases through  
our slurs we slurring like we ain't sure until  
we murmur a sure vow. whole time  
we blur the whole thing  
we make shambles of their standards  
we stand on them  
& fashion an abolition  
in diction.

WITH THANKS TO SEAN DESVIGNES

## **only 1 for whitefolk using Black language**

you a guest.

welcome. now clean  
your feet & say hi  
to my mama. if she say  
she ain't hear you  
say hi until she does,  
this her house.

when my nephew walk in  
& ask you who is you, you answer.  
when my uncle, drunk, drips  
who is you, you answer.  
when my baby cousin's first sentence  
is a query concerning you, you answer.  
when my granddaddy ask who is you  
& then who is you again  
a few times, you answer each time with  
a soft smile & a tip of your hat.

this ain't your house.  
even though you welcome  
& you can & should eat & get full  
& two-step to the radio  
& talk smack at the card table  
& stay as long as you like  
like you fam.

but fam, understand, if you treat the fam  
like strangers, then you a stranger, fam.

## Oo Wop De Bam

by the time you get this transmission  
we'll already be off this planet  
or on the bus heading downtown  
scratch bombing our last will & testament  
into some commuter's view. here's the thing:

everything you don't know is intentional.  
either by you or by us. don't act like you mad  
you can't hear the words we radio edited out.  
you remember that scene in *White Men Can't Jump*  
when the question of listening & hearing is raised.

you knew then that there could be nothing between us  
except rhythmic static. you know our whole dialect  
is a rawhide stretched into a handclap, a record scratch,  
a jive so unintelligible it must be genius.  
you seen us leaning against the whole world with one foot up,  
cocked back like a prayer.

you seen us in your corporate offices. creeping in Black  
as something Black & live. we know your slang too.  
better than you. we invented that & gave it to you  
for whatever winter equinox holiday you prefer.  
we know African american is how you say nigger in a boardroom.

we're hip to your myriad of words for desertion or starvation or  
genocide.

even our conversation filler is a conjuring. the dark cousin  
of your *whatchamacallit* & *thingamajig*.

our whole steez a code you can't break, can't even dent,  
can't fade in the least & we see you finna try.

## **a poem for Justin**

because you asked for one  
when i told you to stop jumping on me  
that night as i was writing.

because your favorite Jay-Z song  
is “December 4th”—for his mother’s voice  
& Jay’s story about his life.

because i told you the first song you heard  
in your young life was “I Used to Love H.E.R.”  
in the hospital room with my big headphones  
over your soft head.

because you asked me your first word  
& i said i didn’t know  
& i could have told you a good lie  
& made that a small poem we shared.

because when you spend the night  
you take my clothes  
& drape them over yourself like a prayer shawl.

because you clown me  
to my friends &  
impersonate me in a way  
that says *i see you uncle*.

because you ask me if i love all books  
since i have so many & i say

*only the ones that tell us who we are.*

because i ask you  
what i should write about  
& you say  
*write about us.*



**On** \_\_\_\_\_

the highest promise we could offer  
was one to a land or man or idea  
greater than we. someone would exclaim  
*on folk i made that shot or on*  
*chief i got her number or on*  
*boss i didn't see anything that night.*  
when we put covenants on everything  
we loved this suggested seriousness.  
we were not allowed to love in any fickle way.

in the revisionist history of my hood genesis  
i would be more honest than honest:  
put things *on my huffy bike*  
*on my report card*  
*on my citizenship award*  
*on my mama's golden N.A. necklace*  
*on my grandma's favorite chair*  
*on my father's attention*  
*& the warm air*  
*he left*  
*each time he fled.*

after Pierre got shot & his bullet  
gifter walked the same blocks  
as the rest of us in uneasy omerta  
i didn't think he died.  
how could he when his name  
became a vow for us all? each street

dispute punctuated with *On P* to prove  
us tellers of truths.

when Bird got jumped,  
his spinal column crushed,  
i assume he made his street name  
true. a different kind of flight.  
everything sacred between Ragtown boys  
now enveloped in the parchment  
of *On Bird* & carried away.

## **conceal**

grandma who kept books for a living  
& read corner store romance novels

grandma who kept dictionaries on the kitchen table  
& slurred words into contraction

grandma who taught me how to pass a poll test  
& how to beat a draft exam

grandma who told me to study hard  
& leave school if the NBA was an option

grandma who bought Black  
& called us her little niggas with a smirk

grandma who taught me how to shoot a bank shot  
& told me to quit the team if i rode bench

grandma who paid for cars in cash  
& gambled herself broke on weekends

grandma who hid toy  
guns i got as gifts

& when  
she passed  
i pulled  
a real shotgun  
from the wall  
of her closet.

## **poem for Blacky**

your name so given  
after you called me Blacky  
in Bart's basement  
& i slid a hard cue ball  
into your surprised white finger.

i ask about you more  
than i do any of the other neighborhood  
kids, the ones who were nice to me  
or at least silent.  
i consider you more now  
than any of the girls down the block  
with their quick smiles & snapping necks,  
their fretful mothers peeking in the windows

my man Blacky  
if we shook hands today  
would your ring finger crook?

Blacky, we ate kielbasa  
together & then beefed.

Blacky Blacky Blacky.  
you, apology paid in pain.  
little reversal of racism.  
small justice of wrath.  
my middle school jubilee.  
my first tiny reparation.

## my mother's hands

would moisturize  
my face from jaw inward  
the days she had too  
much on her hands  
when what needed  
to come through  
did or didn't show.  
she still shone, still made  
smooth her every rough  
edge, heel to brow.  
hugged my temples  
with slick hands,  
as if to say *son be mine*  
as if to say *this i give you*  
as if to say *we are people*  
*color of good oak but we*  
*will not burn, we survive*  
*every fire without becoming*  
*ash.*

## **after we stopped rap**

a few are dead.

a bunch have moved away.

1 i heard works contracts

for the league's best.

another keeps bars in the gentry's

Brooklyn playground.

1 of the meanest i ever knew in a battle

is in L.A. scraping up for a headshot.

the rawest beatbox of all

is a stay-at-home dad in a suburb

so far from the fucked-up art galleries

where our shows were thrown

& sometimes packed & more often empty

except for us & the percussion.

the ones here are thrown

to the wind like dandelion fur.

a postal worker.

a teacher's assistant.

a grease-stained mechanic.

1 i know wants to break

into tech, thumbs coding books

like brittle vinyl.

a bunch of us work

with kids.  
some are strung out.  
at least 1 is getting a doctorate.  
many of us sit on either side of a bar  
at inappropriate hours.  
some are locked down  
or doing dirt that could get that done.

but i'm sure in the quiet hours  
wherever we rest our heads  
& hear a passing car  
with the familiar thump  
of a beat through too-thin apartment walls  
or the bleeding bleat of a chorus  
of crickets with a slick tempo  
we nod.  
we remain  
heads.  
we tip our temples  
to this morse code.

## **welcome to how the hell i talk**

population: all the *motherfuckers* i started saying in front of my mother once i got to 18 alive & kidless & free.

climate: cold as in hot as in  
i swear i'm cold on the mic not cold in  
this game from the free throw line.

culture & contemporary life:  
dear reader if i call you joe  
know its synonym for cousin  
or countryman. if i call you OG  
it means mother or murder.

demographics: 35 percent Missibamaisiana-isms from the Up South  
old folks. 20 percent  
magnet school doublespeak. 15 percent white girl whispering in the  
suburbs or summer camps.  
18 percent too many rap records. 12 percent my mom's work voice.

economics: free lunch tickets & 75 cents  
for the ice cream truck & FAFSA &  
buying Link cards from someone's relative  
for this month's groceries.

government: 2 branches  
today. who knows what grows  
tomorrow if i need to make magic  
of my mouth for some hostile stranger



to see my human.

crime: dope cuz what my folks smoked,  
sometimes sold. cuz the hip-hop songs  
i sung until they got in my body like dope.

sister cities: my students in Cape Town who asked  
what my mother tongue was since they didn't know no  
Black folk with only English 1st. this the answer  
i should've given.

geography: everything in my throat  
i say & mean & shouldn't. how i  
cuss like the big niggas in the neighborhood  
cuz i was afraid to talk  
in front of them. the gang lit  
i know & should & shouldn't.  
the truths i tell that i wish were game.  
the verbal flourish that drops off like a waterfall.

## what can be said

tonight, i'm feeling tender  
because it's another time  
with my granddaddy  
& he's still here  
& if he could remember i  
would ask him about when he was young  
what he would say to the women so they knew  
he meant whatever he wanted them to know he meant.  
but he's not here in that way so i say  
*how you living young man*  
& he answers *slow motion*.

(& i believe him because i can see him tentative  
when he lifts himself out of the chair.)

once Alzheimer's does what it do  
you never really have conversations  
it's more a man becomes a poem  
a lot of repetition & love with something  
indecipherable in between.

## **African american literature**

i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.

i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.

i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.  
i like your poems because they seem so real.

i like your poems because they seem so real.  
f'sho, good look, this also a sonnet.

## **FINNA is not a word**

*Hope is a discipline.*

—MARIAME KABA

my word of the day is: ideation.  
this is definitely a word, certainly  
in any good dictionary. ideation as in  
[REDACTED] ideation. a few days ago  
my word of the day came up as renege.  
sometime before that it was sawbuck,  
before that; woo woo this.  
sometimes, i believe in all that my people make their mouths do.  
other days, i read books on grammar & proper style, correct  
my own usages.  
in those times my language is elevated,  
my diction is deliberate.  
my mind, undisciplined  
& spinning.

# I THOUGHT THIS POEM WAS FUNNY BUT THEN EVERYBODY GOT SAD

your mama so Black  
her neighborhood is  
half bandos & blue lights.

wait lemme try again.

*knock knock.*

who there?

the debt collector.

*no knock.*

who there?

police.

so a guy walks into a bar

& gets carried out.

so a woman walks into a bar

& gets carried out.

so i don't believe in gender

but payroll does.

& what's the deal with sweaters  
& what's the deal with sweatshops  
& what's the deal with this shop  
i copped this sweater there  
it was a deal.

what has a Black body

& is red all over?

i mean is read all over

i mean

that's the punch line.

## **inner child age projection: 57 years old**

working out is the province of a depressive, every day discovering another *not anymore*, the body's small failures compiling where competence was. the old nigga hooping has the vantage of knowing he is his shadow. he learns angles & patience, how to see where the ball will be. he knows to jump without leaving ground. he sees younger models gazelle foolish across the court & hears where to interrupt their dribble rhythm. the game he plays is wisdom. he feels how to not bend at the knees, such fickle joints. his hips, thick with slow metabolism, do the work of nudging space enough. nigga no longer athletic but effective enough to not lose. the first woman he loved is another man's forever. his homies are dead or married. possibly imaginary. every time he shaves his head it is quicker work, a job disappearing, another cartilage weakening. each time his vocal cords wear & fail the power stays out longer, the jaw muscles too weak to force an audible syllable.

## **dispatch from the 6th circle**

CRAWFORDSVILLE, IN

i count the Confederate flags  
around town, a surprise considering the geography.  
what earnest confusion, honest mistake it takes  
to fly a rebel flag in the North. this makes the most  
sense: us turning against us, the cannibal instinct, the  
vote against self. self-hate is something i've known.  
hear the way my voice lilts too many  
ways, my vocabularies wrestle themselves, scrap  
amongst the street in between my teeth. watch my mouth slang  
& stutter into eloquence. watch my mouth whistle  
this simple Dixie.



## **publicist**

a mentor told me  
to consider writing  
essays that commemorate  
days that relate to my book.  
*it's a good way to insert  
your work into the public  
conversation.* well motherfuckers  
spend every day killing  
a Black somebody in Chicago  
& every next day the whole world  
practices saying silences like  
*Black on Black  
gang related  
violent neighborhood*  
so i guess i owe a  
million essays.  
i guess my book  
will be huge.

## **when america writes**

about Black life  
they prefer the past

tense.

## Oregon Trail

*for my great aunt & Jonathan Hicks*

my first venture west was in Windows 98  
or Independence, Missouri. class was in the computer lab  
& we were supposed to be playing some typing game.  
the one i remember had a haunted theme.  
ghosts instructing us on the finer points of where  
to put our fingers. these were the last days  
before keyboards as appendage, when typing  
was not nature. i should've been letting an apparition  
coach me through QWERTY but rather  
i was at the general store deciding between ammo & axes,  
considering the merits of being a banker or carpenter.

too young to know what profession  
would get me to the Willamette Valley  
in the space of a 40-minute period.  
i aimed my rifle with the arrow keys, tapped the space  
bar with a prayer for meat to haul back to the wagon.

this game came difficult as breathing underwater after  
trying to ford a river.

i was no good at survival.  
somebody always fell ill or out into the river.  
each new day scurvy or a raid was the fate of a character  
named for my crush or my baby sister.  
this loss i know, how to measure what it means  
to die premature before a school period ends.

i can't understand the game coming to a late end.  
an elderly daughter grieving her elderly mother.  
reading the expansive obit in a suburban  
Detroit church is a confusing newness.

when the old do the thing the world expects  
i retreat into my former self. focus on beating  
video games I've always sucked at, brush up  
on Chicago Bulls history, re-memorize  
the Backstreet Boys catalog, push  
away whatever woman is foolhardy enough  
to be on any road with me. i pioneer my way away  
from all the known world. i look at homicide rates  
& wish we all expired the way i know best. i pray  
for a senseless, poetic departure. i pray for my family  
to not be around to miss me while i'm still here.  
i want a short obituary, a life brief & unfulfilled,  
the introductory melody before a beat's crescendo into song,  
the game over somewhere in the Great Plains.

i want to spare my descendants the confusion  
of watching a flame flicker slow. keep them from being  
at a funeral thumbing the faded family pictures like worn keys,  
observing the journey done, the game won, the west  
conquered.

## wednesday feels like a funeral

*November 9, 2016*

or rather  
a wednesday  
in a body  
such as mine.

what i know  
of hate  
i learned early  
& then every  
day after that.

this is my niece's  
home. this is where  
my nephew plays  
until he don't play.

this is where my grandmothers  
smoked themselves into graves &  
my grandfathers lost their heads  
in many ways.

what place i know  
other than this hate crime with  
geography attached. i don't  
speak nothing but this. my only  
tongue is this broken-winged pidgin.

my only song is this crooked  
anthem. *Oh say*  
i don't remember  
& i can't forget.

## **let me put it to you like this fam**

terrorists are thugs are freedom  
fighters are police are gang  
members are cousins are politicians  
are teachers are protectors are  
love are loathing  
depending on your vantage point.

like the time them guys jumped me & tried to run  
my pockets they were frantic & afraid & i  
could tell because of the shallow, quick kicks  
they offered to my skinny body.

i think they meant to rob me but they ran  
their hands into the wrong pocket first cuz i'm left  
handed so in a sense writing didn't save my life but it kept  
my few few dollars & my bus card from disappearing.  
O, writing the savior of my state  
ID.

these dudes were about the same  
size as me but they were 4 & i a single  
me & when they got off the bus at my stop i noticed  
they wore all the name brands we loved but can't remember now.  
my gear was anonymous & dark like our Black faces. i was  
just a hoodie & a surprising punch back.

these days i think about how they slipped  
my knees from behind & had all the leverage  
to stomp whatever part of me & didn't. bless them.

praise that day i became  
a polytheist. praise my 4 gods & i pray  
for my 4 gods as often as i pray  
for myself. praise the gods they find  
or will find or who have found them  
in churches & parties & coffins  
& corner stores.

i'm saying this, cats could really end  
a mog if they had better aim or worse aim,  
depending on your vantage point. it's like bad  
meaning bad or bad meaning good.  
i mean it's like not believing in police  
because you don't believe police  
when they sit in your mama's house & tell her nothing  
can be done cuz they don't do things really.

it's like believing in gangs  
because the pass they gave you,  
the strong dap & safe haven  
to go on being bookish  
& breathing & walking in the hood.

let me put it to you like this fam:  
who you believe in is a matter  
of who you mattered to.



# FINNA

every line i write shrieks there are no easy solutions.

—AUDRE LORDE

## what it is & will be

ain't yet no word for a world without the cop's unruly bullet or baton.  
ain't yet no word for a world without children starved & lonesome.  
ain't yet no word for a world with boundless capacity for care.  
ain't yet no word for a world with every bloody debt repaired & repaid.  
ain't yet no word for a world with touch exclusively consensual & ecstatic.  
ain't yet no word for a world where each mistake is a holy possibility to improve.  
ain't yet no word for a world where there are as many genders as dandelion seeds spinning in Spring.  
ain't yet no word for a world where every person is vegan & the last meat they ate was the rich.  
ain't yet no word for a world with no fear.  
ain't yet

but we working.

[Tap here](#) to view this poem as text

## **aubade for the whole hood**

today i offer my self  
all the small kindnesses.

i'm out here  
with breath in my body  
though it may be stank  
& body in my control  
though it may be too much  
or not enough.

today i offer the whole crib  
a jam we ain't heard in a minute  
& permission to turn the news down  
& move a hip like a suggestion  
to a lover.

on this day i declare the pockmarked  
street i grew up on a miracle.  
i declare the bills, even the overdue  
ones, a blessing. who knew  
that we would still be here  
to see these injustices. how can we measure  
the disrespect of lack against that precious surprise?

real talk,  
today i tell myself truths  
other than the one that makes me low,  
i give myself the gift of a joke with the homies.

real talk,  
today i stay woke  
to all the terror  
but also to my favorite food  
or my favorite place  
or my best hope for our people  
& i work to make all  
my best lives possible.

## **another Nate Marshall origin story**

pardon my French  
but all i do is make meaning  
out of some ole bullshit  
bae boy you ain't making  
nothing i'm not up on.  
all i do is curse by using  
my own language  
all my language profane  
all my slang is a vial from  
God's vein.  
all my words cursive  
all my name is my name  
taken. call me D'Nealian,  
begat by Palmer begat by James  
begat by James Sr. begat by some  
brother in the wind i don't know.  
all my names made  
by men. all my names man made  
all my names made up.  
all my names makeup.  
all my names make men.  
all my names are mine  
even if they made up  
even if i made them up.  
all my names a poem.  
all my names a song.  
all my names do is sing.  
all mine.

## hecky naw

before hell was an address we knew to call  
we were only allowed to utter hecky naw.

the extra y, as if a question hanging in air—  
can we get some more mom? hecky naw.

at the courts, we were picked up or picked on.  
can i run in the next game? negro hecky naw.

when Kanye was cartographer of our grammar—  
1st album, he told us *aw hecky naw*

*that boy is raw.* & of course, we all wanted  
to be so uncooked, so rare. were we? hecky naw,

just a bunch of grayed knees & hard heads,  
nate & his boys playing manhood. convincing? hecky naw.

## **imagine**

you better imagine  
like your life depends  
because it does.

that boredom out of which making  
is made is the only thing.

consider that somebody first had to pick through all the prehistoric  
plants  
& sniff & taste  
& sometimes diarrhea or even die  
just so you would know that a collard green with the right seasoning  
is a season that lasts centuries.

consider that somebody gazed at a star & said  
*aight bet*  
& built a fire.

consider the first Negro  
on the first plantation  
who figured which way was north  
maybe before they knew the word  
for north  
& ran.

consider my love  
with the middle name the enslaved dreamed of  
running towards. see how i move swift in her direction.  
consider how love is a great idea

we keep having every day. we imagine  
being together & that is the first step.



## **which art? what fact?**

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, NOVEMBER 2016

everyday i act permanent: a silly collection of carbon  
& oxygen & sometimes heart & too often cruelty  
or callous or *i just wasn't thinking, my bad.*  
each week i move around  
as if nobody will steal me  
again, or my things again.  
& i ponder if which museum  
we end up in is a matter of power,  
who hangs & who does the cutting.

after all what is science  
but a set of contemporary creation stories  
what histories are natural & what artifacts art?  
how do we decide the borders of a country  
or an era or a solar system? when did we decide  
our planet meant only this collection of green?

what i mean is this: take this bowl  
the people used to mix & eat.  
what of the clothes the people wore  
to say *let us be one*  
*on this day of marriage?* what of this  
stuff the people made to love  
their gods? what of their gods  
who are maybe our own with the names that lost,  
the prayers that got colonized away?

in the section of the museum for the darker people  
i make sense. in the museum of Chicago i have always been  
in the section for the darker people  
& i presume once this president or the next wipes us up  
perhaps our everyday particulars will be art.  
the afro pick i push in the naps of my beard  
might one day have a name & a plastic box for preservation.  
maybe the cheap dress shoes i spun in for my first  
high school homecoming will be a prime example of primitive garb  
for worship. maybe my mother's coffee cup with lipstick  
kissed on its chipped face will be one of these art things in its next life.

O whatever God or whatever ancestor that wins in the next life  
i pray let me be an artifact of use. let all my poems be  
bowls or thrones or hairpieces or marriages.  
let everything i make, if it should survive, tell the next world  
mine were a people of faculty & faith. let them know  
we were a race who prayed with our legs & sweat.  
let them know that even when we are just art  
we were here  
& we still are.

## **fiddy'leven**

how much is owed  
to those who wore  
the chains who tilled  
the land who nursed  
the babes who mixed  
the grits who fried  
the food who chopped  
the wood who picked  
the bolls who ran  
the road who fought  
the war who shared  
the crop who made  
the name who wore  
the noose who Blacked  
the codes who sparked  
the schools who juked  
the blues who showed  
the soul who left  
the south who stayed  
the course who caught  
the hell who marched  
the march who broke  
the strike who struck  
the blow who took  
the vote who held  
the hood who housed  
the club who queered  
the notes who spun

the jams who funkyed  
the flow who built  
the thing who built  
the thing who built  
the thing? you know.

take the payment  
you ain't give  
for all that & press  
it down, make it  
overflow fiddy'leven  
times & gimme that.  
in my own numbers  
of my own currency.

## FINNA

*for Juanita & the Perspectives Leadership Academy Class of 2016*

so this one time i was finna say finna in a academic context  
& a voice in my head said *shouldn't you be worried*  
*about using a word that ain't a word* & i was like *word*.

& for a long time that was how i let my life happen,  
i let my mind tell me a million nos that the world  
had implanted in me before i even formed questions.  
i let my power be dulled by my fear of fitting.

but i remember a million finnas  
i avoided to get here. like the day  
them dudes jumped me off the bus & i was finna  
get stomped out like a loose square. or the day  
they got to shooting at the park & i was finna  
catch one like an alley-oop. or the day  
my grandma died & my grades dropped & i was finna  
not finish high school except i had a praying mama  
& good teachers & poems to write. i'm thankful for all these finnas  
that never were & when i remind myself  
of who i've always been i remember why  
my finna is so necessary.

finna comes from the southern phrase *fixing to*  
like i come from my southern grandmothers & finna  
is this word that reminds me about everything next.  
even when i've been a broken boy i know i'm fixing to  
get fixed. i'm finna be better. every dream i have is a finna

away from achievement. each new love i uncover is a finna  
i unfold. every challenge i choose to meet & not let defeat me is a finna  
i fight for.

my hope is like my language is like my people: it's Black  
& it's brown & it's alive  
& it's laughing & it's growing & it's alive  
& it's learning & it's alive & it's fighting & it's alive  
& it's finna  
take on this wide world  
with a whole slang for possibility.

## **&nem**

&you too if you feel it.

&you know by feel it

i don't mean bought it

&i don't mean studied.

&you know by feel it

i mean

the whole nation head nodding

to niggas they tried to lock up or out

or i mean my whole talk a cakewalk

every time i'm on the phone tricking you

into my humanity or on my CV deceiving

you into hiring a maroon.

&you know by feel it

i don't mean

you opted in. i mean my people here

&been here making genius from gristle

&every moment you declare a renaissance

is just every moment you fools been paying

the right attention.

&we not stuttin that cuz we'd rather you pay

reparations.

&attention my good people

or bad people

or not people:

what you do unto the least you do unto me.

cuz every time you decided i was acceptable

or articulate or actually okay  
you don't know who you let in.

you let in my mama  
&my daddy  
&my greasy greasy grandmammy  
&my hood  
&my woes  
&all the folks who taught my flows  
&my thugs  
&my killers  
&all the ones you think are drug dealers  
&my people  
&my people  
&my people  
&my people  
&my fine fine fine  
people  
&nem.



For my people, the ones I love & especially the ones I struggle to love

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## **landless acknowledgment**

before we get started we would like to acknowledge that we live on some unceded bones. sometimes me & mine imagine ancestral homes. all i got so far is Montgomery, Alabama. maybe a boat. maybe a plot of land somewhere so far from the south sides i've claimed that i would get lost on the way. i admit sometimes my homies talk about their families immigrating & i get jealous. we lost the land we were custodians over before i was a twinkle in the eye of a twinkle in the eye of a twinkle in the eye. closest i got to a homeland is my mama's caucasian pitch on the phone calling the police. closest i got to a homeland is not never calling the police. closest i got to a homeland is my daddy's laugh in a spades game. closest i got to a homeland is my lover's tongue talking or otherwise. closest i got to a homeland is the funk under a DJ's needle & my hand full of a dance partner. not to be dark but i am. not to be dark but the planet is on fire. not to be dark but they moving capitals because the water is coming up. not to be dark but our bones are in that water too. maybe that's my capital? once the polar capitals melt & there's a whole lot less land for folks to buy & sell & steal maybe everybody will feel a little more dark. will feel a little more homelandless like we do. why you think i call my compatriots homies? maybe ain't no home except for how your beloveds cuss or pray or pronounce.

## only boy

when i was 6 my grandmother gave me  
a single dollar for pushing a girl  
to the concrete during double dutch.  
the girl, nameless now in my head,  
was a head taller & 3 years older  
& believed my face looked best streaked red  
by the clotheswire.

when Kay-Kay baby sat us as  
toddlers  
she would sling my tough hair  
into small puffs with her barrette  
balls.

mama asked her why.

in 7th grade i dry humped high school girls  
to juke mixes in basements as unfinished as i.  
my reason for being at those parties was  
to chaperone a sister 10 months my senior.  
i never knew the business end of a curfew,  
took the city by train anywhere i could imagine.  
mama told me be home by the time  
i was alive.

still young & praying over a rare family  
dinner.

my voice cracks through the uncertain  
absolution

we all hold hands, mine no bigger than  
theirs.

all my sisters huddle into the car  
to go together. girls' night. i watch them leave.  
i hold a book in front of my face.

as a baby i didn't start talking until late.  
my sister suggested i go to a special doctor  
to inspect my head  
to see where the language had gone.

i did not talk much. i say little now  
that i mean with my whole self in public.  
i am whipped with jump rope  
or i am pushing.



## **what it is & will be**

ain't yet no word for a world without the cop's unruly bullet or baton.

ain't yet no word for a world without children starved & lonesome.

ain't yet no word for a world with boundless capacity for care.

ain't yet no word for a world with every bloody debt repaired & repaid.

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dandelion seeds spinning in Spring.

ain't yet no word for a world where every person is vegan & the last  
meat they ate was the rich.

ain't yet no word for a world with no fear.

ain't yet

but we working.