

# GOLDEN AX



RIO CORTEZ



PENGUIN  
POETS

**ALSO BY RIO CORTEZ**

**CHILDREN'S**

*The ABCs of Black History (2020)*



**GOLDEN AX**

**RIO CORTEZ**

**PENGUIN POETS**

PENGUIN BOOKS

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*For the Howells, who went west*

Now note the great white expanse of the great Salt Lake, as it lies glistening in the rays of the setting sun, and think of the stories you have heard of it until the conductor brings you back to earth . . .

—**Nat Love**

## Author's Note

Much like the way Afrofuturism seeks to envision a future for Black people at the intersection of imagination and science fiction, a future that also seeks to remember the Black past, in many ways *Golden Ax* hopes to find its place and definition as a work of “Afropioneerism” or “Afrofrontierism”—terms that describe and inform my family ancestry and experience. This work is autobiographical, but it is also a work of imagined history. These terms approach my experience of girlhood in Utah, wondering how we came to be there, feeling singular in a place where I knew we had been for generations. Continuing to ask myself, “How does a story begin?,” the question became an obsession. This is a question so many ask, whose histories are cut short by the design of transatlantic slavery. I no longer wondered to myself whether aliens possibly put me on Earth, smack-dab in the Wasatch Mountains, or other systems of sci-fi that I transposed onto myself as a child. Eventually, the question became an urge to mine the hidden history of the Black West, and to tell the story of how we came to settle that frontier, both physically and spiritually. The poems in *Golden Ax* reflect the outward and earthly landscapes of the Afrofrontier, and the inner, cosmic imagination of the Afropioneer.

My family was once enslaved in Louisiana. After Reconstruction, the first generation that was free from enslavement went West, perhaps inspired by the California Gold Rush. This migration included my second and third great-grandfathers, Paul C. Howell, who became the first Black police detective in Utah, and his son, Abner Howell. Abner was an early Black convert to the Mormon church, a decision others in our family would not make. My family came to Salt Lake City around the time that the African American newspaper

*The Broad Ax* was published, which was at some odds with the LDS church. At the time, Abner's testimony to the church became an important narrative for the church in their efforts to appeal to more Black congregants. Abner's conversion created complex tensions around race and faith that remain in our family today. It wasn't until 1978 that Mormons allowed Black men to hold priesthood, before which Black Mormons were not allowed to participate in or enter some of the church's most sacred practices and spaces.

I learned much of my family's history from shared memories and a paper pamphlet published in the 1950s and 60s called *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, by Kate B. Carter, and from a self-published book written by my great-great-aunt Byrdie Langon, titled *Utah and the Early Black Settlers*. I'm grateful for these records.

My family were Afropioneers and they embodied the Afrofrontier. Over a century later, I am claiming this name and this space for them. The land where Utah exists haunts our story, but we are even more vast. And we know that because we imagine ourselves into existence.



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# **SPACE BETWEEN MOUNTAINS**

## Far Enough

Byrdie Lee Howell Langon self-published *Utah and the Early Black Settlers*, a short book about her life and the Black community in Salt Lake City, Utah, and was honored with these words by her Bethel AME pastor, Jerry Ford, in 1969:

*We say we love you  
not only for what you are  
but for what you are  
when we are with you  
we love you  
for putting your hand  
into our heaped-up hearts  
and passing over  
all the frivolous and weak things  
that you cannot help  
but see there  
and drawing out*

*all the beautiful things  
that many  
have not looked far enough  
to find*

## Covered Wagon as Spaceship

Standing unseen in the little bluestem,  
curious and not quite used to living,  
I consider whether it's aliens  
that brought Black folks to the canyons, valley.  
Standing in the great evaporation  
of a lake, holy dandelion for  
eyes, full and white and searching the landscape  
for understanding: how do you come  
to be where there are no others, except  
science fiction? I am a child feeling  
extraterrestrial; whose history, untold,  
is not enough. Anyway, it begins with abduction



## North Node

According to her, I appeared to my mother in an in utero vision and told her my name. Before I chose my mother, all day long I ran my fingertips along the slick backs of cutthroat trout and gathered water from Millcreek into a sapphire pail. I waited for her. In the distance, there was a blue bull surrounded by lilies.

She loves me, so she bore me underwater. I'm here to learn a lesson. I spent my other lives in the Nevada desert, where I only did what felt good. *What could that mean?* I reconcile the pleasure in lying naked on the hot sand of the Mojave, watching the braided muscles in a horse's hind legs with the ocean nowhere, a frying chest on the hood of an idle car. So comes a lesson, I'm here to cut the scorpion from my throat. Even though it has dragged me through sweet darkness and time. Even now, in the stillness of home, in love and full of wine, it wraps its eight legs around me. Even through the lilies, it sets its many eyes on me and, suddenly, longing

## Like a Suggestion

The antelope start dying,  
of all places, on Antelope  
Island. Our two greyhounds  
startle in their sleep and walk  
together toward the window.  
I've heard wolves are hunting  
bison, even though it's spring  
and there are easier things to kill.  
Cowbirds abandon wooden  
fences. They say Atlantic salmon  
haven't returned to their cribs  
of fresh water. The cat stands still  
before an open door to the house.  
I move to put my hand behind  
her ear and she runs.



## **I Have Learned to Define a Field as a Space between Mountains**

If I remember a field where I stroked the velvety hound's-tongue and cracked its purple mouth from stem and it is not a memory, then what were the limits of the field?

Sometimes we are driving south toward Zion in a crowded truck with my mother and we pass the same red wildflowers until someone says, "Indian paintbrush, Rio, haven't you seen them before?" And, have I?

Other times I pose in front of giant flor de maga, its soft petal saucers larger than my head. My father fixes one behind my ear and says something in Eyeri but for what photograph? I am a conjoined hibiscus-headed twin, except I'm local.

I braid the long hair of the willow and like a young warrior I swing across the canal bed by the braid. *By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the willow trees, we hung our harps. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?* I read this once in Sunday school, tripping on it.

In any field I am certain I can be seen by someone. How couldn't I? When I'm blood-divided one hundred ways, when I pray to the God called DO NOT BOARD THE SHIP, when I'm protected by so many masters of the vine. They must be in here somewhere? They must see me this far into the desert, it can't be that I am alone here. I search behind the cattails, I scramble the wood. Has it gotten darker?

A child and all I can see are houses. Every house is a rambler with a plastic snake full of sand or a well that isn't really a well. Every house is on a street

named after the Ute tribes. I'm in Ute Country, in the field to fly a cheap kite, but it gets caught in pine sap. I walk home but not without pocketfuls.

## The Idea of Ancestry

*After Etheridge Knight*

I am in a sweet place  
standing in Millcreek  
on a road  
in its canyon  
and this sweet place  
has also been the sweet place  
of my people

I am staring  
into the water  
my grandmother fished  
with a rod and a line  
I am standing  
near the head  
of a timber trail  
felled by grandfather's  
grandfather  
I am listening  
to the aspen  
its green coins  
singing in the wind  
and I know it sang  
just like this  
for them

I am standing  
right at the center

of its singing  
the same sound  
heard by black bears  
or the calf of a moose  
lying even sweeter  
in the yarrow  
showing we can be moonless  
and shining in wildflower

I know this timber  
was once a house  
my mother's grandmother's  
mother's hammer in hand  
everything  
throttling backward  
toward me  
through time  
a timber roof  
that has kept the frost  
from coming in  
and stinging my babies  
we made that  
for ourselves

I consider choosing  
there are times  
when it is a joy  
to remember  
I like to think about my people  
drinking fresh buttermilk  
from the chosen farms  
of their other people  
all of us gazing

back at the house  
framed by our future knowing  
filling up on fresh tomatoes  
and after  
maybe lying like the silk calf  
in the deerwood and the aster  
and never-ending

## Driving at Night

*For Laquan McDonald*

I think it's quails lining the road, but it's fallen birchwood.  
What look like white clouds in a grassy basin, sprinklers.  
I mistake the woman walking her retriever for a pair of fawns.

Could-be animals. Unexplained weather. Maybe they see us  
that way. Disappointed, the closer they get. Not quite ready to let it go.

## I'm Forced to Imagine There Are Two of Me Here

To fit in we practice not dancing I pull her hair against our head and burn  
the water out she sucks in the lip of our belly

I call her Rio say Rio remind them of our one white grandmother  
do what it takes to make them think we are like them

Because it is a risk to want us we close the bedroom door she  
reaches under  
the blanket It's just me Rio and The Dark  
I spit into our hand and touch her

Sometimes she bites our lips to make them smaller we refuse  
to dance we do what it takes

I let her drive Little Cottonwood Canyon It is night we hit a deer  
breath  
from its nostrils clouds the windshield It feels like there could be  
more  
of us somewhere she opens the car doors we show each other  
mercy

take the same bite of a cracked rib blood from her mouth I move to kiss the  
animal

## **I learn to shoot a bow**

It is no River Jordan that flows here  
between the railroad tracks and the back porch.  
It's a canal. Not unlike my mother:  
low as it want to be and fullest when  
it rains. Existing for however long  
without a name, and singing  
under a timber bridge that we built. We built that.  
Isn't that our story? To be denied  
the beginning. I cross the bridge to shoot  
a sapling bow my grandfather has carved.  
He helps me aim into cardboard flats stacked  
against the willow. I guess this is where  
I am Orion. With two birth stories.  
In one story I come from a sea god  
with the forest as my mother, and in  
the other, I have no mother at all



## Partum

Just as close to living as you are to disappearing knowing  
my limits you locate the tender spots without.

To be batter and rind

maybe I've hidden my feral self even though I was certain I was  
wild

I'm now certain it was vanity

here I pace cut open drinking thistle and yolk  
expecting nothing determined to live

you Little God, Oldest Friend  
who summons milk and hair from the follicle who moves my teeth  
and makes

me bleed it is not a joy but joyful to have been brought  
this close  
to the earth

haven't we touched hands before? in the bright red towns of my youth  
in Loa or Escalante where I thought we were only passing through  
was it you at the counter serving me sarsaparilla in a cool  
brown bottle,  
remembering me?

## Marion's 1982 Chevrolet Citation

If I board her it means pulling open her heavy sails the steel  
that gravity throws shut on my calves good thing  
I'm quick to leave

She must be virtuous because there is nothing hidden in her  
going not the power in her closing doors nor the ignition  
and its triumphant refrain

even idle, she disrupts she rests in the cool shade  
of a basketball hoop I stare from my parents' living room window  
how the mulberry tree wreaks its havoc on the driveway

all my friends call her The Killing Machine how else  
could she have lived this long and look so good Marion says  
it's like she's been asleep for me

I am days from my sixteenth birthday I cover her  
hatchback in cosmic fish and press  
my foot down where do I go I wonder without them

the chrome of the dashboard reflects the canyon sun  
I see myself in fraction my wristwatch as I pull the radio knob  
eyebrow cocked as I adjust her mirrors

## A Class Distinction

I start to say

*Once,*

*I left the mountains,*

*the Wasatch and Oquirrh*

talking aloud

I question the spelling

in my head

I've never been sure

It's possible

I wasn't born from mountains at all

but a valley.

What is lower

than a valley?

*Once,*

*I left the strip malls,*

*I grew up in a long drive-thru line*

*sipping diet cola from a bent straw*

*when I talk about mountains*

I am being romantic

about the valley

I worry

you'll unmask me  
I've always been that way  
lying  
just a little  
on the Berber carpet  
squashing summer ants  
the TV telling me everything

## Salt

*This is the place!*

—Brigham Young

*Space is the place.*

—Sun Ra

I slip the silksac of my body and walk out onto the flats  
the air a machine sucking earth into fragments of white absorbing heat  
finding me

I kneel at the shore I reach into the lake it is red as a halt  
I reach into the wound of it I drag out its string of bones  
and now I am two times the dark

I crush skeletons of artemia underfoot I eat eggs in stasis the dead  
lake idles  
the city surrounds what weapons we are I fold the net of my shadow I  
hold it  
as evidence

## Emancipation Queen

“Emancipation Queen” was a historically Black beauty pageant in Utah.

It's true  
that beauty  
can be a tool  
dually wielded  
    robin's egg  
who would know  
come from a red-  
breasted bird  
    taffeta gown  
named for what  
the body made  
its blue  
    but not the maker  
or the blue  
from which come  
the robin  
    is that emancipation  
to leave beauty behind  
    a Black girl  
    on a stage  
    inside the egg  
of a robin  
    a Black girl who is  
a robin  
repeating the question

## As Cain

Until 1978, Mormons maintained that in a spiritual “preexistence,” Blacks were neutral bystanders when other spirits chose sides during a fight between God and Lucifer. For that failure of courage, they were condemned to become the accursed descendants of Cain.

I think of the earth that drank Abel’s blood  
as I uproot foxtail from the garden.  
Earth, not passive, but cursed by God, having  
accepted death, and maybe, even, hoped  
to grow from it. And Cain said to Abel,  
“Let us go to the field.” I cut my own  
thumb on a weed. I carry out a strict  
ritual of healing: cold hose water and then  
most Holy: mouth. Tell me, what mark has God  
given me? I am paraphrasing here  
when I say God told Cain to rule over  
his own longing or else restless wanderer  
shall he be on earth. First curse, then blessing.  
God’s always changing his mind about us

## To Salt Lake, Letter Regarding Genealogy

*After Charles Olson*

No shore no shore      backed against a paradox of water      where snow  
collects in valleys and we drink

what melts, I, risen from one break    in the endless  
salt flat.      I have had to build. O! how I have built for you!

See how I have come, Salt Lake, with my thousand faces of the void!

My face night with no stars,    my face waves  
in night sea.      I was born to work.

My mother, crow-headed goddess, called me dust and trusted  
I'd become.    I changed for you! I became  
a quarry in Big Cottonwood. Later, I was born  
in uniform and carried a pickax in my throat.

I stole the mountain's sandstone and it wasn't good enough  
so I took its quartz instead and told you      "pray by it." I,

Guard-thing of the White city.      How would you pray without me!

I was born with a sore head from a perm      and swaddled in pages  
from The Good Book.      I was a decoy.

I pretended not to know my many names.

I did the work of believing with you.

I was born on swamp property      the woman who bore me was an  
animal.



We were both animals, then.

I covered your wagon with canvas and I found you.

# **THE NEGRO PIONEER**

## Self-Portrait in a Tanning Bed

It's February and I am the only Black girl at Future Tan Tanning Salon I laugh when I enter my private room and see an African mask above the clothes racks I am getting tired of irony naked climbing onto the plexiglass and hearing it creak I wonder like any other moment alone what if I die like this what if the plastic gives and torched by two dozen ultra-violet glass rods I gently close the canopy of the Sun Capsule Super Cyclone 350 wrapped in its purple cylinders of light I can see myself reflected back with tiny goggles at first I think I look like a reverse coon with huge black eyes but I like the way I look darker and like a time traveler how my breasts must sometimes appear like this to my lover I think I'm sad or something worry how much time has passed since I've been here

## Black Annie Hall

in a black wool hat  
and black suspenders  
in line to see *Within*  
*Our Gates* again

with khaki slacks  
and an afternoon free  
Black Annie has trouble  
hailing a cab  
after seeing her analyst

on her roof,  
Black Annie  
drinking white wine  
after tennis  
and dewy

Black Annie, living alone  
calls for help to kill  
a black widow spider  
in her bathroom

Black Annie's white  
boyfriend asks her  
not to smoke  
that marijuana cigarette  
in bed and out-  
of-body

Black Annie is bored  
so she takes adult courses  
and can't decide  
between philosophy  
and poetry

lucky today, Black Annie  
driving eighty on the West  
Side Highway with the top  
back, hair unmoved

## **An Ancestor Maybe**

Sleep drags from me. I'm living on the top floor at 176th Street & Audubon. Rain falls through the hallway roof, no matter how many times we ask to patch it, turns the marble steps slick as king snakes. The apartment is dark. Behind me the AC whirs and pigeons roost upon it, snagging their claws in its slats. Cooing in unison.

There's a man I don't know at the foot of my bed, dressed to go dancing. My body cool as a gun. His benevolence washes over me and we look, us both, at the other for some time outside time. I show him one version of my Arawak face and there are no matters. We are neither. The night pigeons settle on the vent, make sounds I'm certain of.

## Black Mary Wilkie

in *Manhattan*

we all have two-  
bedroom apartments  
on the UWS

I eat lox

on the Sabbath

I'm a Black girl

with a dachshund

I feel safe enough

to take night

walks with

my skinny lover

so many dawns

I've spent at the East

River, watching

the sun take flight

above the "watchtower"

I'm free midday

and answer

my landline

once—

I got caught

in the rain

it led to a stolen

kiss instead

of a blow-dry

the planetarium

is strangely lit

and filled

with the universe's  
few answerable  
questions  
biting my nails  
I think  
of that scene  
with the lobster



## Double Threat

The street narrows, becomes a black prism

*Do you want to fuck her?*

I am asking you at the crosswalk

I'm loose-lipped and beat-skipping

we've just come from a dinner party

we've been drinking cheap wine

it seems like we float to the corner, like

one of those moving sidewalks at the airport

we stop on Irving Pl and Eighteenth Street

faded, I'm starting to forget

weren't you looking at that pretty gap-toothed girl

in the red dress, weren't you exchanging glances?

I'm trying to prove to one of us

that you cannot want me

trying to get you to say it

you say *how pathetic* instead

I feel a red surge, it flushes my face

I spit at the sidewalk near your feet

I've never done that before, we're both stunned

a white woman with bags of groceries asks

am I alright

looking at our Black faces, further shadowed

beneath the eaves of someone's town house

I say *Yes*. Back in Millcreek my mother

is avoiding a full-length mirror, the white woman

gets a little closer, she asks again. Smaller than before

I repeat *Yes, thank you, please, yes*

## Forgetting Is to Heal

On Tenth Street  
my Aircast kicks a pink pacifier  
I grip any rail sleeve-first  
when I get home and take it off  
lean the crutches on the wall  
undo all that Velcro and peel  
the sock away  
my foot is yellowish and soft  
like no other skin on me  
after showering once  
it kept rubbing off like  
it could all just wipe away  
if I wasn't afraid of that

there is a row of single shoes  
in better condition than their pairs  
these pins when I step down  
at first I think it's pain but  
not exactly not exactly  
is how I balance now  
in my kitchen with or without you  
I wake up each morning  
and I have to remember it

is broken  
think what a cinch how I could  
place both feet over the bed  
and pull on pants one leg at a time  
but that's just something

sleep does to us for a little while

## It's Like That Scene in *Annie Hall* Where Annie Leaves Her Body

and sits beside the bed how I'm certain I'm across from me on the 1  
train and when we get into the cab how I watch myself ride shotgun  
and I think Annie starts to knit or maybe does a crossword could  
be  
I keep nodding yes what's important is that she is two  
Annie's that what reaches one not reach the other that the body  
knows indifference I ghost steady through the hole in my mouth I watch  
you struggle  
with buttons on my dress I keep nodding yes I fill in some box  
with pencil letters

## Black Fragments

I.

Leaning on the subway door    train rushing    between 59th street &  
    queensboro plaza    I think  
we're underwater    under roosevelt    island    or something    pitch-black  
oil over glass    window    suddenly the door disappears    I'm sucked  
    into the pitch

II.

I force my teeth into a yellow pear    pulling the flesh from my mouth  
    all but my molars  
remain  
stuck in the fruit    lined in a row like glaciers    some glossy stonehenge  
my mouth    a black gate

III.

Showering    water pours from its nozzle    into my knotted hair covers    my  
    toes their  
toeprints    impressions of my mother's deepdarkwomb    pressed into the  
    tile  
an instant    all of it familiar

## Ritual of Witness

Driving around our Harlem block to look for street parking. I'll circle a long time to get a spot on Convent, where the Callery pear trees steal a little piece of the lamplight and I get to peek into the tall windows of other people's townhomes. Limestone and terra-cotta facades with varying resuscitations.

With each revolution of the block, a figure emerges, or goes: a dog rushing toward the invisible presence of an earlier dog, a lover ringing a buzzer and checking their reflection in a glass door. I am a corner rounder. I see the man who always notices me first, arms akimbo outside of Price Dream. I think of an empty lobby. A child asleep now in a stroller at the crosswalk, whose mother is waiting for the same light to turn. I am a red light lasting. No such thing as a safe distance. Any detail to be a balm or a fever, returning a little later.

## Maternal Instinct

I can hear all the wind chimes in Harlem (from the oldest elm with no plaque on 154th Street to that weird store run by Ms. Dee where she sells her ex-husband's records and ties)

and I can hear the elaborate stream of radiator water, boiling and climbing into our most intimate spaces and warming us. My fur, in the sun, roaming our bed in blindness.

I allow it to light me up. I'm a light. Fed by an other light. The cries of a child, suddenly amplified. I can't tell whether I want to run toward them or stay right here.

## Conduction

The beginning has a sound. So that when I hear you take a gulp of breath, my hair stands on its ends. And I turn around. So carefully. I don't really want to see.

Once, while you waited for me to put on my shoes, standing a few steps down on the landing so that we could talk face-to-face, you vanished. Where do you go without me? Gripping on to your shirt to keep you from falling backward down the stairs, and failing, I cried out for the neighbors. No one heard.

In a Hollywood movie about Harriet Tubman, they depict Harriet as having protective visions from God. In one novel, in which she is a character, she time travels. It is called "conduction." A biographer says Emily Dickinson rarely left home because of her "spells"; confined to a room at her father's house, where I like to imagine she might have written "Hope is the thing with feathers."

I think of us, postcoital and sharing a glass of tap water. We are parents now. We are watching the last scenes of an intense TV show; someone is finally speaking up for themselves. I turn to you in recognition. But it's not you anymore. I fall with your falling body to the couch.

We might as well be falling into the river where Dana finds herself in *Kindred*. You are Rufus. And I'll do anything.



## Black Lead in a Nancy Meyers Film

Aging, at all. I want that. And to fall perhaps most honestly in love beside the ocean, in a home I've paid for by doing as I like: drinking good wine, dusting sugar over a croissant, or the stage play I'm writing myself into. Aging Black woman in neutral summer turtleneck. Known. And jogging. Lonesome enough. Eating homemade lavender ice cream, the moon blooming through the kitchen window. The distant sound of waves. Learning French as a second language. *Votre pâte merveilleux*, I smile back. And then, just like that! Falling, cautiously, for my busy, middle-aged lover, who needs me, but has never truly seen me until now. Our Black friends, celebrating with hors d'oeuvres. Our Black children, growing older.

## What Begets What Begets

Everything is a ring. I am working on a belief  
that starts like that: everything  
is a ring, a cycle, it has

the illusion of progress

\*

I woke up blue, so all day long I tried  
to make the world blue around me

\*

I heard in a movie once that hurt people  
hurt people. Now I always say that  
when I am comforting unhappy friends.  
I curve the ring so not even I can see it  
how it winds right back to itself, loops  
right around me when I think  
it must be going  
I say to myself: look at this sad fool

\*

I am always explaining myself to my lover  
I say to him: there are two kinds  
of knowing. Some knowing is as close  
as my own palm, I don't even know  
I know it. I love my mother and my mother

loves me. Other knowing gets submerged

\*

Beauty always strikes me when I consider it leaving and am hurt by it  
how now light enters through the curtains at dusk and I find it beautiful  
because it is about to change

\*

One layer of that knowing is of the self.  
Isn't it like that for everyone? Sometimes  
the ring comes round and I feel I don't deserve a thing.  
Then I do the work of knowing. I see myself  
reflected in the bathroom mirror, it's been a long  
day and I'm alone, my hair pulled into a tight chignon,  
and I know better by looking at me next to nothing, compared  
to nothing, and I say thanks to someone out there

# **FRONTIER ELSEWHERE**

## The Creature Describes Her Own Hands

Not  
a black ladder

Not quite holding  
a painted bow

Wrapped in cotton  
and playing the piano

The way they always  
almost

I can't stop singing  
folk songs about you

And by you  
I mean  
anywhere but here

A paper map  
shaved to ligament

I remember  
engaging the bowstring

I need them

I would do anything  
to stop singing

The way you release  
And soak them in prayer

I don't know any other way  
to unlace the knot

## Questions of the Last Relative Slave

*For Paul C. Howell*

What about the trees

Would he rejoice after storms

Finding peace in their boughless husks

Butchered by the wind

Then, did he love the wind?

## Écriture Féminine

I was selfish enough  
that you were born

now you watch television  
pumped with my funny blood

I forget myself sometimes  
and look at you too long

I am underloved and braid  
your hair anyway

I copycat the way  
a mother does but

like a mother I'm mostly  
in love with the me in you



## **Black Frasier Crane**

As lonely  
in her overthinking  
and as forgiven  
Black Frasier Crane  
is a woman in a multi-  
generational household  
with more than enough  
square feet

Black Frasier has  
a small staff  
but she treats them  
“like family”  
she has a soothing  
radio voice and reserved  
parking at both her condo  
and the office

Black Frasier complains  
about little everythings  
because what is more  
important than the fine  
dusting of cinnamon  
on the perfect ratio  
of foam to espresso  
except the knowing  
that you and  
only you  
have the sense

to complain

And who else  
could understand  
but a sister  
two Black Cranes  
in custom Italian suits  
joking about Freud  
Isn't this the hardest  
work? To be happy

when you already  
have everything  
to have so much  
you give some up  
not away  
but to the beast in you  
that just takes  
and takes until  
there are no more  
brûlées and no more  
canapes just the mind's  
endless narration

# The End of Eating Everything

*After Wangechi Mutu*

I toss my colossal head back and let it roll  
open my wide mouth, it is glossed up and pussy  
pink my face is a magazine in cuts like I said  
I open my mouth after hunting and eat up  
all the birds whole bird tribes, I enter  
their murmuration and exit hemorrhage  
it's whatever at first I look like a pretty girl  
and then you see the giantess I've been I've eaten  
everything I have kept no pet to love  
my eyelids goldmelt I use my face to get  
a little closer how the coyote changes its howl  
at the canyon mouth and toward them come sweet  
pups my belly lined with woolly afghans  
from my grandmother's house and yours  
even the front porch I've eaten I am nothing  
but exhaust now I am puckered up and black  
smoke rising I smile and anything surrenders  
to this enormous don't they see me coming

## **Frasier Crane Toasts No One in Particular**

To completing one rotation on the air  
and falling into a bathtub of calendula  
and orange peel

To unzipping my squash racquet  
and hitting a volley beyond the oak tree

To shopping for a silk dressing gown, and then  
giving it as a gift

To a dinner reservation my friends  
could not have gotten

The opera, too

I've always loved a cortado  
in the afternoon

an absolute, distilled with foamy  
milk, but still, an absolute

I raise my tiny glass of sherry  
were it fino or oloroso, I could tell you  
without question

I've known just one irrepressible sound  
and it's rainfall

## My Beloved Finds Me Everywhere but Here

We are both poets  
so I ask you  
to write me into a poem  
and you say: here, this one  
is about shaping you  
into a wave  
or here  
you are a horse  
with lace reins  
and I look  
finding only music  
or what could be  
your mother so  
I ask again *where am I*  
and you say: who else  
could I mean  
when I write: sweet  
witch, write: teeth you  
say: can't you see it turn  
like you do

## Dishwashing the Mammy Salt & Pepper Shakers by Accident

two

black faces

two

housecoats

too-

red mouths

two

pairs of

too-

white eyes

two

porcelain sisters

into

forgetting

## On Injury

I break the window  
and climb into the passive

night I'm a witch  
with two broken

feet but I'm a witch so  
what matters

even if all those bones  
break the little

ones I mean the fifth ones  
the ones that look

like they belong to field  
mice and lift water

toward my mouth even them  
are witch bones

so what

I guess I mean something  
about the body's irrelevance

or the fantasy of that

# Bayuk

## *After Muddy Waters*

As if I too were in the bayou I kill a fly in my hands and stare  
into the elm blood from my cut  
lip on a bottle something moves and we call it Evenin'

rolling over in her slip of shade and nightsound as if I too  
were in the bayou sweat lit under lantern the body's tender  
meridians you close your teeth on something bucks  
in the switchgrass who else but Evenin'

shaking loose her blanket of prey as if  
I too were in the bayou how first I rip tissue from the bone  
then break its sweet horn



## **Bellum**

If I take up the bow

What should we kill

How will we disappear

Behind the cypress

How will we

Convince them

We are gone

What will we call mercy

Is it the arrow

To the bloodline

Do we keep

Their names

Or call them

By our own

## **Pre-Earth and Post-Earth Life**

Pre-earth was covered in snow. I told fibs. I wanted my co-eternal God to love me more than they loved everyone else. My ancestors are imperfect. They don't always look upon me in wonder. They were here too, engaging in little vanities. Who then, do I turn to when I want applause? When God knows the truth already. What is it that they say God is subject to? Continuous Revelation. It feels like a loophole, but, it takes a lot to admit when you're wrong.

## Ars Poetica with Mother and Dogs

I turn and don't expect my mother's face

I ask *how did you enter this poem*

she says it wasn't easy

she is dressed in my favorite horse-print silk sheath

and dripping lake water

says she wore it to trick my lover

I want to ask *How could you* but instead

I reach behind her and break a vase

she used to love but we are surrounded

by dogs some of them used to sleep

at our bedsides but don't

anymore she grabs my hand and who am I anyway

to keep asking

her to leave why not take her face

and explain the damned line

## **Fear of Motherhood**

Lucky, I've seen sea turtles slowly crawl out of a moonlit ocean  
on their way to lay their eggs in the sand.

But I didn't feel a thing until, moved, I heard a stranger gasp.

Standing at the Sacré-Coeur—the one in Paris, and not in Idaho—  
I've gazed upon La Ville Lumière under rain  
and fretted about my long walk home.

I worry that when you're born I'll look at you like that.  
Hoping you'll say OK, we can leave the concert before the last set,  
just so that we don't get lost in the overwhelming crowd.

## Visiting Whitney Plantation

Clouds hanging so low they almost touch  
the wooden colonnettes of the big house  
the brick, held together by animal  
fur and mud, *bousillage*, the hands  
that formed it. I raise my arm and rub  
the belly of a cloud  
our tour guide is Black and doesn't remark  
on architectural flourishes. I am grateful  
and still wiping sweat from my brow

We are in Wallace, Louisiana  
looking for our people's names  
now upon a marble wall of seventy thousand  
first names in no particular order

I sidestep a white man with a camera  
so that I can take my mother's  
hand from her mouth and hold it

On the way to New Orleans we stop  
to gather Spanish moss  
A groundsman opens the gate after hours  
he looks softly after my mother and me  
could it be that he is one of us  
I fill my purse with moss and unlock  
the rental car

How cruel the sun must've been  
to the slave, I think, when I get back

to our French Quarter hotel and lie  
poolside in a two-piece  
desperate, almost

## Family Tree at Earth's Surface

After looking, and not looking without  
using all the tools on the table:  
expert, archive, attic, passed word, hunch, self  
I come to Nameless mother and her son.  
in one matter of seeing, they lived not  
long ago, but for me, Unnamed  
mother is just as well the moon, tidemaker.  
Blackness does not begin there but first breaks  
into a boy they call Jackson, leaver  
of his last name, farmer, coffin builder.  
Of course, we know there is another tool,  
another knowing that we arc forever  
an arc in which the moon herself  
is affectionately mothered, and so  
comforted, I lose the impulse to keep  
counting, recording their names at all

## Eden

I'm home, you could see me through  
the kitchen window washing my daughter's dishes  
my hands are busy but I'm looking at the elk  
on the face of the mountain

I know nothing about elk, but here  
we are, at any given moment  
there must be countless allegories  
but I'm only interested in one

am I home or am I only visiting? I am through  
with asking, I'm at the center of a cul-de-sac  
wind sweeps through the aspen like a hiss  
we are in our own snow cup

melted to the summer people we really are  
I am answering for myself  
Hisssssssss of the aspen, at the beginning  
of which could, I suppose, be anything

cul-de-sac, just as well, a saucer, rising up,  
up to the summit, it's possible I've never been  
higher, I feel it, I'm really leaving now  
moving through the told story



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*Huizache*: “I’m Forced to Imagine There Are Two of Me Here”

*Jai-Alai Magazine*: “I Have Learned to Define a Field as a Space between Mountains,” “Like a Suggestion,” and “Writing Lately,” an earlier version of “Ars Poetica with Mother and Dogs”

*The Miami Rail*: “Black Annie Hall” (annotated version)

*The Offing*: “Bellum” and “To Salt Lake, Letter Regarding Genealogy”

*Poem-a-Day, Academy of American Poets*: “Driving at Night”

*Poetry Society of America*: “UFO, for Instance”

*Prairie Schooner*: “Black Annie Hall”

*Sugar House Review*: “It’s Like That Scene in *Annie Hall* Where Annie Leaves Her Body” and “Salt”

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“North Node” also appeared in *Bettering American Poetry 2015*, edited by Kenzie Allen, Eunsong Kim, Amy King, Jason Koo, Héctor Ramírez, Metta Sáma, Vanessa Angelica Villarreal, and Nikki Wallschlaeger, Bettering Books (2017)

\*

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# Notes

**“Far Enough”**: These words used by Bethel AME pastor Jerry Ford to honor Byrdie Lee Howell Langon are likely a rough quotation of a poem often attributed to Roy Croft, “Love,” published in 1936. Byrdie Lee Howell Langon was the great-aunt of the author.

**“North Node”**: “North node” is an astrological term, a lunar node, that represents the path one grows toward through life; it has also been referred to as a “north star.”

**“Like a Suggestion”**: Antelope Island is the largest of ten islands located within the Great Salt Lake in the state of Utah. It is well-known for its significant population of American bison, which were introduced to the island in 1893.

**“Driving at Night”**: This poem is dedicated to Laquan McDonald. On October 20, 2014, Laquan McDonald, a seventeen-year-old Black teenager, was shot sixteen times within fourteen seconds by Jason Van Dyke, a thirty-six-year-old white officer with the Chicago Police Department.

**“Salt”**: Brigham Young was a religious leader in the Mormon Church and the first governor of Utah. Latter-day Saints consider him to have been a prophet of God. In 1847 he conducted a pioneer company to the Rocky Mountains; when they arrived at the vista above Emigration Canyon, he is said to have proclaimed, “It is enough. This is the right place; drive on.” Today, this location is memorialized as This Is the Place Heritage Park.

Sun Ra was an Afrofuturist jazz musician and poet who cowrote an eighty-five-minute science fiction film titled *Space Is the Place*, based, in part, on Sun Ra's lectures at UC Berkeley.

**“Black Annie Hall”**: *Annie Hall* is a 1977 romantic comedy directed by disgraced predatory filmmaker Woody Allen and cowritten by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman. *Annie Hall* was the name of the lead character in the film, played by actor Diane Keaton.

This poem subverts a scene from *Annie Hall* where the character Annie sees a theatrical showing of the film *The Sorrow and the Pity*, a two-part documentary about the collaboration of the Vichy government and Nazi Germany during World War II, by referencing a film called *Within Our Gates*, a 1920 silent film directed by Oscar Micheaux that portrays racial violence under white supremacy in the United States during the early twentieth century. *Within Our Gates* is the oldest known surviving film made by a Black director.

**“Black Mary Wilkie”**: Mary Wilkie is the lead character in the 1979 romantic comedy film *Manhattan*, directed by Woody Allen and cowritten by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman.

This poem references the “watchtower,” which refers to the large fluorescent sign at the former Brooklyn Heights headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses, visible across Manhattan's East River. The “watchtower” sign was visible from 1970 to 2017.

**“Black Lead in a Nancy Meyers Film”**: Nancy Meyers is an American writer, director, and producer who is best known for her romantic comedies.

**“Questions of the Last Relative Slave”**: This poem is dedicated to Paul Cephas Howell, born in 1855 and enslaved in DeSoto Parish, Louisiana. Paul later became the first Black police officer in the state of Utah and one of the

first Black detectives in the United States. He is the second great-grandfather of the author.

**“Écriture Féminine”**: “Écriture féminine,” or “women’s writing,” is a term coined by French feminist and literary theorist Hélène Cixous in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa.”

**“Black Frasier Crane”**: Frasier Crane was the lead character in an American sitcom called *Frasier*, set in Seattle, Washington, and centering the life of a radio psychiatrist. The show was broadcast for eleven seasons between 1993 and 2004.

**“The End of Eating Everything”**: *The End of Eating Everything* is an animated video by Afrofuturist visual artist Wangechi Mutu.



PAUL TRAN

Born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah, Rio Cortez is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The ABCs of Black History* (2020) and *I Have Learned to Define a Field As a Space Between Mountains*, winner of the 2015 Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize. Her honors include a *Poets & Writers* Amy Award as well as fellowships from Cave Canem, CantoMundo, the Jerome Foundation, and Poets House. Rio holds an MFA in creative writing from New York University.

## PENGUIN POETS

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GAROUS ABDOLMALEKIAN

*Lean Against This Late Hour*

PAIGE ACKERSON-KIELY

*Dolefully, A Rampart Stands*

JOHN ASHBERY

*Selected Poems*

*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

PAUL BEATTY

*Joker, Joker, Deuce*

JOSHUA BENNETT

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*The Sobbing School*

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*The Sonnets*

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*O*

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