



(not)

in

service

by Uni Q. Mical





on saturn's subway

trapped underground, forgetting your fate cradled
 between metal gates train conductor in charge of your soul

for these thirty sum-odd minutes, fourteen well planned stops
 from county to crisis mode at johns hopkins.

moving at a fraction of light speed as life bleeds
 through impenetrable depths down here, your cell phone

cannot save you, cannot cause cancerous conversation.
 sitters listen to silence, think with blinking

eyelids, throw stares across aisles like pinball,
 chomping that last crab chip, bags empty as

first cars where unhoused humans catch up on (un)rest.

we shift and wiggle as worm, rising out of earth
 and above solid ground, touching that place stevie reached,

as cold spring station lifts limbs above homes
 and tracks ancestors once built. sun's rays

shine ova west, remind us all is not lost,
 this darkness cannot consume us. see golden rays

in toddler's eyes, gazing out windows, fear of heights
 tucked behind train doors, safety encased in steel hums,

some humming hymns of hot girl summers & some holding His
 unchanging hand, heavy like history of migration,

wetting waves on scalps, brushes grind against rails,
 these black bones tryna make that white bread

stretch like loaves, stretch like train cars, stretch like lessons on repeat.



CAR 01

CAR 01

08

09



an ode to arlington

“here at arlington, we strive to reach the sun, our teachers help us be all we can beeeee...”

you were my fourth elementary school
(the first three, experiments. grandma pulled
piano strings & placed you under her watch

as she taught down hall from pre-k playmats
at alexander hamilton up poplar grove.
wasn't my zone school.) pandered off to govans,

as mommy moved in with a firefighting fiance
who couldn't contain the arson in his soul.
[he passed days ago]. passed me onto park heights,

a school sick with scarcity. i caught chickenpox
from cousins, coughed up calamine.
my mother cussed out my teachers for cutting her off.

never satisfied, she chalked up lies
about our address just so i could run
under your parachutes. so i could eat

lunch i didn't pop with plastic spork:
teriyaki nuggets, collards, & chocolate milk
building blocks to climb to top of class

pyramids, but never popular. ended up on
the “not hot” list. i wrote my first poem
in miss spencer's class, facing parking lots.

you're a poet and you don't know it,
(the first sacrosanct standardized test.)
“friends forever”: a poem too muddled for white

walls. spoilers: the protagonist's friend dies
in the end. they were only ten. so was i.
already weary of oxymorons: you live in the hood

but you're not of it you can take the people out
the ghetto, but can't take the ghetto out
the people so, i left you and never returned,

but never stopped spitting sunflower shells
on bus stops. never thanked the principal, mr. smith,
for not expelling me & my chipped front tooth

(from running down ramps, tootsie roll pop in mouth.
popped lip on pavement. splashed awkward overbites
across adolescence.) 5th grade, enter mean girl:

a black regina george ringleader, creator
of spice girls fan clubs, where sticky notes
stuck to an obese girl (once my friend).

what happens when the uncool bully the uncool?
no one wins a pizza party. learn to cuss with calamity.
potholes on skin, puddles of pimples scarred photos.

never thanked ms. richards in 3rd grade
for reading afternoon lullabies about ants
carrying sugar crystals on their back,

a metaphor for westside kids i can't begin to unpack
like pages of macmillan textbooks lies stuffing
my turkey baby brain, basted in one size fits all learning

never thanked mister briscoe for wheeling in vcr, birthing
eyes on the prize (i later realized he was too drunk
to teach class some days) but i knew about

bloody sunday before 10, so his human rights
mission complete. never thanked mrs. robertson
for molding our class into chorus

outside of mister rose, music teacher, serving
s-curls and keyboards as we rehearsed i believe
i can fly 'til il wings sprouted from our backs

before we knew robert kelly should stay
1000 feet away from our video tapes

i never thanked you for raising my expression past whisper /

my bar past impossible / my foundation into the air / and now
you are stripped / all that remains
is asbestos / plastic shields / hard hats / heavy hearts / you, the
protagonist who dies
in the end / i thought we'd be friends forever //

until 2020 / fresh off your 21st century facelift / glass eyes pulled
back / chipped teeth fixed / lawns with liposuction / i won't
even recognize you / like so many spaces i loved /

that once loved me back



(85, row me home.)

*Welcome aboard the MTA, Route 85. Destination: Milford Mill.
Stop Requested: Reisterstown Road & Druid Park Drive.*

peppered pupils see salty hands shoot frisbee, on the wrong side of druid hill park, at the back of the bus in 2019. steel plates with solar power spiked on roofs 'cross street from bulletproof rats. they sense our salty stares

won't be here much longer.

Stop Requested: Reisterstown Road & Violet Avenue.

bus inches along. weeds bend onto weary steps to nowhere, air maxes graze them, running to the nearest stop. calves turn into john carlos in '68. choir onboard shouts HOLD UP! in soprano

Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Shirley Avenue.

(vacant row.)
(church.)
(snowball stand.)
(food city.)
(ice cream mural.)
(liquor store.)
(day care.)

*Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue &
Quantico Avenue.*

(vacant row.)
(halal market.)
(church.)
(fire station.)
(vacant row.)



*Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue &
Cold Spring Lane.*

(rte aid.)
(beauty supply.)
(liquor store.)
(duke & lou's lake trout.)

constipated bus releases passengers, bloated since penn north. from here, we float. commute: a calming backdrop masking chaos. overgrown grass, bursting with possibility for populations

who sought suburban solace since the 60s. their grandchildren return, still thinking they can save us. smells like we won't be here much longer. thought makes a left turn

to ad up front, discontinuing daydreams: murrllin has a good samaritan law, protecting people who call the cops on homies who OD'ed. (vacant row.)



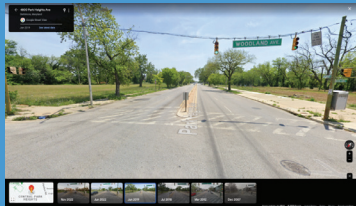


Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Cold Spring Lane.

there is no law protecting those with open warrants or other crimes.
(abandoned church.)
(vacant row.)

Stop Eliminated: Park Heights Avenue & Sumter Avenue.

where was this law in 2002? would my uncle andrae have survived his new year's speed ball drop? could we have avoided that sharp left turn on our familial fate?
we find narnia in narcan. imagination dances with ice down pants.
(funeral home.)



Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Virginia Avenue.

pass butterfly painted red & teal in open field, photogenic sunset spreading earlier, days capsized into autumn.

Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Woodland Avenue.

a ghetto pac man ate the street i grew up on,
ate my third elementary school,
ate the corner store my moms got thrown out of.
mad at the lettuce on her cold cut.
(vacant row.)

mad at living 'round here, in a raided apartment.
(vacant row.)
(vacant row.)

how am i supposed to feel when each time
i drive through, the gutted ghosts
greet me more than the people do?

Stop Eliminated: Park Heights Avenue & Oakley Avenue.

(laundromat.)
HUSTLE OR STARVE etched in pink chalk on wooden boards
our hieroglyphics with hope hidden behind the tombs

in these elder vacants, even the memories nod off.
caged in with rodenticide. rats, in truth, the freest of all.
(vacant row.)



Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Garrison Avenue.

while we were high st. vincent de paul's logo underwent a face lift, courtesy of silent board votes.

here is where park heights library

once stood, near belvedere. the next preakness is may 18th.

(harbor bank.)

(church.)

(abandoned grocery store.)

(chicken coop.)

(cinderella shoes.)

(block full of blue cops & blue tops.)

(liquor store.)

(adult day care.)

Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Belvedere Avenue.

pimlico race track: when salt boxes show sour faces up this far. now they shoot

frisbee on the wrong side of druid hill park with their only peppered companion (it's obvious) across from hip hop chicken, adjacent

to our salty stares on the 85 as we graze sickled pavement bumping into bike lanes to welcome more frisbees, more under armour shirts, more bikes with no breaks so you, so me?

so we? feel more at home. they sense our stairs
won't be here much longer. bus inches along.

(judy's island grill.)

(vacant parking lot where pimlico carry out used to be.)

(revolving door store where Mr. K's crabs used to be.)

(blue caribbean bar & lounge.)

(pimlico chinese carry out.)

Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Rogers Avenue.

(liquor store.)

(montego bay bakery.)

(CVS.)

(check cashing.)

(crown gas station.)

(7-11.)

(middle school turned police academy.)

*Stop Requested: Park Heights Avenue & Fords Lane.
home.*



the emperor wears no clothes, the empath reads no manual.

some days being an empath feels closer to condemnation
than blessing. tears arise that ain't even mine like new mothers who
hear other children crying
whose breasts well up with milk

we are all shoving sewage by the spoonful on earth together.

i was raised in 2nd floor apartments where we cleaned
our commotion with fabuloso-filled rags before company,
but boundaries couldn't visit without calling first.

as a result, i let strangers in, who fly to refrigerators,
reach in without asking, spilling sweet tea on my rugs.
can't vacuum their voices of critique from my mind.

one voice loves me only when i'm mouse-like.
i overshadow my lovers with ambitious life paths. no pair
of air forces could compete with my flight. lost in their woods

of comparison, swallowing reassurance of reciprocity
through crazy straws. can't hear affirmations i gulped
from buddhist scriptures when six pack dissolves

in stomach, when drunk on oxytocin from tinder dates,
coupled with an engagement at my 29th birthday party.
she said yes, while stirring mac & cheese. everyone cheered.

no one ever wears out their welcome ova here.

i am the welcome mat, walked on until worn out. never been
the one to pull the plug on relationships, rather throw
toaster in the tub with both of us in it. burn us to a crisp.

one day, i'll rely on those scriptures again. one day,
i'll get out of this roundabout. one day, i'll be in a better
space to hear, but right now, saturn's rings take up space

in my soul, crushing sabotage to pulp. the one that didn't
want me to write this poem. prefers ruining my life



from the shadows. there are no shortcuts around these rings

when they cut to the core of you but you will discover
the will to climb, even if you slip. tarot tells me
there's more mountains ahead, but i don't know

how much more of my body i can sacrifice.

this the first time i took my heart off ice in 4 years, giving glimpses
in giddy profiles: ENFP, sagittarius, pisces moon, here for divine
exchanges. my mother told me not to look to relationships for comfort

for validation for awareness that we exist then goes and
stays for days on end with a man who calls her friend.
so, youtube meditations become a mentor. feel spectrum

of my feelings, even if they, too, are strangers
i was taught to never trust, but here i go, giving my heart
out like blow pops on the playground in fifth grade, again.

stomped on like spice girls tapes at recess from boys
i believed were my friends, handing family dollar headphones
over with care. clearly, being the smart one was not safe.

i buried trust in pages of books i never finished,
left in 2nd floor apartments i was evicted from.
dissociated, i can't give credence to the walls i glance at,

certain they, too, will walk away from me.

saturn, are you listening? what will this body
materialize on the other side of you?
will this decade gobble me like infants, thirsty for milk?
or may i be the one reborn?

footsteps in the dark

(daylight.)

trek towards resilience
 shatter smiles by the mile
 underneath a pity grin
 our sadness turned to madness
 in the city pen
 dandelions tryna find their mothers
 that's blowin in the wind
 what's the point of all the energy
 why we arguin' again?
 be the source of disagreements
 in the pores between ya skin
 you repeat it til it's seated
 morph into opinions
 on a myriad of factors
 your perception all depends
 call it magic - call it sin
 but you don't look like it?
 how you live all them lives
 you be hooked by it—
 ain't ashamed of my soul
 makin roses outta babies
 all the pain up in these cracks
 don't you know that you are sacred?
 you complainin' bout the lack
 but i never let it break me
 all this weight up on my back
 let the escalator take me
 MAN, I WALK SO MUCH

(exit to street)

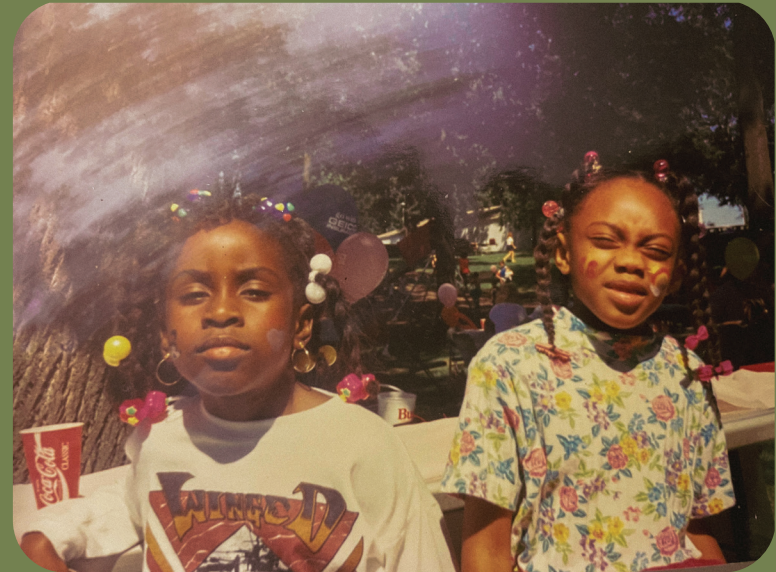


stares in black girl

with certainty of weathered lives behind me
walking in front of me, weighted in my core
waist deep in resentment:
wading ancestors, blood whipped to cream,
whites, we no longer run from.
wobble towards tables of possibility
witness future i had yet to form. play
walky-talky with winged angel, a
wacky child of 7. park heights accent
wallpapers my pallet. thick as king syrup,
waiting on westside departures, words

wilted from woods in amherst,
withering under stars.
wobbling off Q trains at 2 am,
waylaid by weirdos in peppa's jerk spot,
watching my boi-ish body wait for chicken.
whiskey breath at 4am in flatbush.
where jerk chicken died twice so i
wander into age 23, wasted.
wax figure, stuck to ikea sheets, craving
water. weaving in and out of hangover webs,
weaned off brooklyn's world weary poseur.

wings fly towards west oakland suns,
wedged down the street from crucibles.
welfare queen infiltrating mills, thriving on PLUS loans.
wash off ac transit dust from 58L on skin.
whoopin' massa with his own whip,
wet blanket of bay fog slapped blue crabs off lips.
wept homesick on BART. wrote poems to wring.
wind blew me away from family,
wrapping arms around phone calls.
whisk poems into batter, piecemeal legacies
whispered from matriarchs,
widowed twice 'til whole.



penn north platinum plaques

for a generation who refused to die

we the same blackbirds they sketched
into trees with charcoal, irrespective
of gender. regardless of who we fuck.
same charcoal they roasted our ribs
over we use for smoking slabs, falling
off the bone. scratch and sniff our summers:
old bay, a deity of living dead. look closer:
love is sprinkled here on this corner.

yes, even those with lost teeth, sunken chests
behind black ravens shirts. smiles don't need
enamel to survive. did you stay long enough
to catch his ray of sunshine, even if sniffed?
did you stay long enough to witness women
embrace, while waiting for gold to arrive?
did you hear 'em say them some baaad shades
(listen for tone & inflection: could be compliment or curse).
did you see them pass phones, snicker at pictures
of grandsons passing footballs at patterson.
they won't complain, instead they proclaim
this city tried to kill me and each time, he failed.

do you understand the power packed onto
buses of citizens who outlived voting rights acts
of policies which called them anything but their names
who cut their phones off deemed them unreachable
yet sought to call them home before the casket drops?
these same blackbirds guardian of saints
especially of sinners perched on penn north
across from library branches

pain whines from untapped vessels, putrid
ritual of forgiveness vision blurry sitting on crates,
watching bus stops swell and shrink.
they shout sentences from slobber, a language
we will never fully comprehend but don't you dare
lay eyes upon them with disdain, knowing their urge
to set fire to this corner, was tranquilized by design.



the death of the mall

oh, owings mills, you gaping crater,
 where miss fields chocolate chip enticed
 where j.c. penney guarded its jewelry
 from us woodland avenue residents
 where we shuffled thru cds splayed
 in sam goody: dark man x, flesh

of my flesh,
 white boys croon tweens who jumped til craters
 form, candies shoes & gummy bear perfume splayed
 through arenas in concert tapes bourbon chicken enticed
 on toothpick & tray, disguised as county residents
 who kissed in front of kay, & shook zirconia out our jewelry.

washed hands in food court bathrooms, rinse jewelry
 til copper circulated, marking mood rings of flesh.
 i hid hands in pockets, yearning for hecht's as residence.
 these visions waft while waiting for 89, bus stop collapsed to
 crater. buses headed to glyndon approach & entice,
 not back to city, nor subway. steam whistles from ears, splayed

across cheekbones, teeth grip lip again. grinding splayed
 across culture & pavement back patio views adorned jewelry,
 "the met" at metro centre: selling point to entice.
 mall morphed into lowe's, amc movie theater, remnants of flesh.
 red lobster too, dumped cheddar biscuits into crater.
 down the road, red robin refuses to fly away, faithful resident.

from ruby tuesdays to phillips' shrimp scampi on sunday, you
 enticed paychecks right out our pants,
 shoplifted from your residence.
 don't they look good on our hips, hugging this nebulous flesh?
 dreary when dark, your silhouette attacks sky and dreams, splayed
 records of running through your empty corridors, catching jewelry
 from ceilings and satellites. my memory of you, a moonlit crater.

metro centre built with straw, on (dis)play,
 milky lights entice on highway.
 can't hold a karat to you, jeweled on all ten of our fingers,
 a 30 year affair. your absence leaves a crater
 in our flesh, alleviated from adding to our wish cart.

drunk unc

"And the people hide their faces, and they hide their eyes, cuz the city's dying,
 and they don't know why..."

yellow buses act as shuttle for two weeks
 emergency shutdown of subway add 30 minutes
 to commute. for 34 years, tracks scraped north
 & southbound for mason dixon patrons.
 overnight, reputation shattered of trustworthy transit.
 your last great invention left. we pack onto short buses
 give a dollar to OG sellin waters, sweat bullets under
 purple BMORE cap, parched from his own howl:
 !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!ICE COOOOOOOLLLLLLLDDDDDDDDDD!!!!!!!
 cooler, empty in 7 minutes. 22 black bodies pile in on field trip
 to next subway stop. what better place to hustle
 while we stare out plexi glass at a city who became
 the drunk uncle you never dreamt of losing
 to cirrhosis you saw comin down assembly lines
 while he drank himself under tables
 and snuck you a sip of wine cooler
 activated your inner alkie in the name of delight

hey unc,
 why you in the news again?
 why your houses turned to grass?
 why you all up in my pockets
 when you hoardin all that cash?
 when did you trade porsche for moped
 and moped for all day pass?
 why you been locked up so long?
 when yo' fendi turn to forman mills?
 why you think the babies round
 your way is born to kill?
 why the supermarkets full
 but we eatin air for meals?
 why her house ain't got no lights
 while they shine on TV hill?
 why you got nothing to say?
 why the subject gotta change?
 ah, but never the conditions,
 you got nothing to explain?



forgive yourself

for all the hurts you inhaled
 for all the wounds that still swell
 for all the footprints leaving trails
 of mud at your door;
 for all the tears you offered eyes
 trying to find you in the dark,
 bay bridge of gaping differences
 drifting you apart.

for all the thoughts that travel
 to a place where you married
 insignificant others
 who then moved in with another
 and forgot you held their hearts
 when others kicked them to rubble
 for all the times your name was
 scrambled to trouble

for all the hurts you inhaled
 by white grams undercover
 for the times you were blackmailed
 by friends, foes and lovers
 for all the times you and they
 tied control around your waste
 and played tug of war
 til every hip and friendship was displaced

you would never mince words
 except for those in back of throats
 becoming ball pits you play in
 and sliding board sundaes which double
 dared you to write this poem

for all the hurts you exhaled
 back to air, a welcomed spark
 for now you walk the light
 from gaining vision in the dark

