

**PAPER
TRAILS
OF THE
UNDYING**

POETRY BY **NIA JUNE**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KIRBY GRIFFIN**

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For the city that refuses to die.

PAPER TRAILS OF THE UNDYING

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TO THE BOY WHO ASKED ME HOW

to survive in a Baltimore,
your ears must swallow the static of a laughing semi-automatic,

45.

Your tongue must bleed a blues too black to bloom:
so sorry.

Your hands must inhale your neighbor's gabs with God.
Your eyes must gauge the gawk of gun scopes. Your nostrils
must chew on the lungs of
lilies-lavender-orchids-carnations.

Cause there is always, always, in all ways,
a funeral today
& in the ebonied offering.

There are always bones to be soaked in soil & flesh to crumb
in Earth's throat.

Flowers to flake and trees to beat into boxes of shadowy
figurines fed to
the sky.

There is always a bullet to be born in the cough of clammy wind.
In the swollen bevy of belly, blood & beef,
a bullet comes of age.

& there is always an age that forgets to frizz & fold the elbows
of clocks that count black boys &
black girls.
Time:
a tight-lipped flame.

The bit-by-bit becoming of
coffee crust crumpling to shucks
of ash
& ancestors.

You must get to know death.
The musky gust of its pus, morning breath &
bowels.
Lick its apocalyptic lips. You must gulp it
to gristle before it
eats you alive.

This is how we survive,
here.



'84

Everybody is standing in line at the clinic
and like the immortal music of all days:
these motherfuckers refuse to die.
They have no glory. No teeth.
Pawned the last of their molars for *Kools* and candy rock.
But won't lay down their gums:

Say man, lemme hold a quarter? Naw, no pennies man. No pennies.

Say man, just need .65 for the number 8. Gotta get to the clinic.

Niggas see those wide, soft gums – like raw pig ass,
baby-boo fat, a motherfucker down real bad –
and:

fuck,

dig into the slums of their pay for a dime or two.

Here you go motherfucker. And aye man! Why don't you stay off that shit!

But they all have a why:

Whores with 2 A.M. skylines swelling in their pussies.

An under-broiled fetus floating in toilet water and mustard piss.

Candied blood drops. Half-pint dicks. Fat lungs.

AIDS. Vietnam. Bad numbers. God. Rent.

White man.

Bitches.

'Cause everything want me in the mud, that's why. Listen,

say man, just need .65 for the number 8. Gotta get to the clinic.

Gotta get to the clinic.

And after the white coats at that clinic have lifted nut-sacks
and vacuumed baby mush into bags of pulp,
corner boys will call out – like a thousand church bells,
like the immortal music of all days –
the cure – finally – for a bruised, pus-filled fucking life:

Purple caps! Jellybeans! Hardball! Candy rock!

Come get it, ya junkie motherfuckers! And I ain't countin' no pennies!

With bus fare and no teeth, they crawl into the boiling glass of glory.
And if they settle into the skin of gravel – at last –
It won't be for the death sentence they were just served at the clinic.
It will only be for this.

This shit is the only death these motherfuckers can't refuse.



FOR CHARLIE

Charlie ██████████
DOC ██████████
SID ██████████
Patuxent Institution
Correctional Mental Health Center
P.O. Box 600
Jessup, MD 20794

August 4, 2018

I've stopped picking at the shards of sunsets stuck in the hours between visitation days. I'm sorry but the months have teeth now. The months have swelled into years and sink into my breasts when they're too dog-hungry to keep waiting for you. And I know you know all of this 'cause your mama keeps calling. Keeps asking me why dial-tones scuttle across the floorboards of your skull whenever you think of me. I sigh the noise of your name and tell her I stopped visiting 'cause I don't know you anymore. I know, I know. I shouldn't have said that.

You know how your mama is. She started dry-heaving at the eyes, bruising her throat on croons and huffs. I tell her I am sorry. It soothes her. Melts the footlights in her fuss. She settles in the slow lope of her pappy heart, fills her lungs with peals of 1998 and exhales all your beautiful boyhood. Starts talkin' about you and me at four years old. Braided pinkies, thumping thumbs, silly-haired, suckin' on Boston Baked Beans after Sunday sermon. I tell her I remember all of those things. And we talk and talk about the boy I used to know. The one I didn't have to char my soles for, skipping suns just to see him again. And again, she tries to convince me that you ain't really do it.





FOR DAD

only he could make the moonshine in the morning &
put a veil over the spread of sun simpering at me &
one time, i almost caught some sunup but
there he was:

pickled-liver-lucky-limbed-slick-blooded,
slithering in the house, out the cunt somewhere between
calhoun and carey st., beneath the purple cloak of six a.m. so
all that sun-sheen seeping through the sill got
matted in a dusky-whiskey-winded-fathersome:

i'ma quit

that stuttered on my skin &
hunted for my honeyed heart as
i wondered about a heaven for heroin-addict-alcoholics.





THAT ONE TIME AT SKATEWORKS: TRUE STORY

I. [cue Gucci Mane]

Back to the Traphouse is poking out:
a fat gut farting clouds of static,
fucking sheetrock
out of its fuchsia peels.

Our soft bones melt into
foothills of bass.
Stomachs: grease pot.
Skin: ginger bark; coffee beef.

(I mean, everybody is so-very-black
and loud and metallic like
Birth of the Cool.)

The 8th grade boys
are trading slices of slimy pepperoni
for seven seconds of fumbling
harp on a holy vulva.

(Their smiles: high-pitched.
Enough to serenade the stupid stomp
of every girl's heart.)

Us girls are by the pop machine:
pink props on four ruby wheels;
waiting to become glitter, finger-food,
a zenith of frenzy.

Or maybe, we are trying to
skip seven miles on sapling ankles; *too fast*,
too grown, too hot in princess panties –
you know the kind with the satin ribbon bow?

(But, I mean, everybody bought their very first
box of pads yesterday, so, we are
for-real black women now anyway, right?)

II. [cue Chris Brown]

“Take You Down” is churning silk:
angel wings fluffing golden arm
hairs into stalks of the living,
unraveling a shroud of wonder.

(Disco-ball: a dizzy Jupiter,
washing us over
in neon flame.)

The 8th grade boys
do that smile and grab a fistful
of hip like finger-food
for hungry babies gone man.

(Their teeth: teeny moons
from a 1960-something sky
that Miles Davis held in his mouth.)

Us girls finally find our footing
on the heels of womanhood.
Couples skate is the closest we will
ever come to knowing love.

(But, I mean most of us have survived more than
most adults and we are so-very-black, so, we were
never really children to anybody anyway, right?)

III. [cue Frankie Beverly and Maze – the last song]

“Before I Let Go” (1981) is playing piano
with clock hands as we slide out
the skating rink into a licorice sky.
The night side: drooling us.

The 8th grade boys
play tackle and trickle down
the backbone of Security Blvd,
to somebody’s motherless home.

Us girls follow their footpaths
and try to steady our hopscotch-hearts
and hide the poppies sprouting in our cheeks
and the boys tease and toss and talk sweet to us.

(And did you know that coffee bark skin,
against an aurora of red and blue lights,
looks like everybody’s God?)

IV. [cue police sirens or a prayer]

*(Where you knuckleheads going? Where you coming from?
What are y'all getting into tonight? Let me see some IDs!
Hey! Don't move! Don't you fucking move!)*

Cops: a giant rubber sole
collapsing on an infant anthill.
We tuck away our underbellies
and do our best city-rat-scurry.

V. [cue God?]

The 8th grade boys snap and crumble on steel whips;
beat like men, like so-very-black men they have not yet become.
Us girls are forced to watch, like all the for-real black women before us.
I mean, we were never really children to anybody anyway, right?





TO THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS COMPLAINING ABOUT THE LINE AT BUN SHOP

And is that all you have bled?
I woke up in Babylon,
both non-white and woman
with a mouthful of force-ripe skies.
And yesterday,
when I was like twenty or so,
my father's dumb-footed pulse
ran home —
loped into the bowels of heroin meat.
And loving a black man is silly
or planning a funeral.
And tomorrow, the boy who ate my
insides behind the 8th grade stairwell,
will iron his palate with bullet steam and
become the eternal echo of violent jazz.
And next week, my mother will
fold herself up in the
place her breasts used to bow —
she lost them in a dog fight with bad cells
but it's hard to box with no hands.
And today, I do not complain because
lemon cake is still sweet
and I still wonder about things
and the sun still surprises me.



**CHITLIN' CIRCUIT ON
PENNSYLVANIA AVE.,
1927**

Bearded brownstone/Blues
Laughing violets/for eyes
Harlem bellied/Bass
Tongues and teeth/chiseled to Ankh
Happy-haired brothas/Juke joints

Hypnotic hips/Jazz
Spanish moss pulp/for Afro
Silky sun-skinned/Sax
Titties talk/hieroglyphics
Gold goddesses/Royal sphinx



518 N DENISON ST.

My great-grandmother's backbone be a bridge
between God and men.
My grandmother's fingers fiddle and fire bend a feast out of scraps and beat
the beast that be empty bellies.
My mother's palms carry psalms.
My cousins – Dawn, Dominique, Shena, and Trina –
whittle their tongues into knives.
My cousin, Sakina, drives a spool of thread until it sputters, spins, and spills
into a gown for a goddess like
my great-great-grandmother Mattie.
My aunt Deborah hoards diamonds in the folds of her hips.
My aunt Delores got Ghana, Picasso, Frida Kahlo
sprouting from nail-bed to tip.
My cousin Toya be the epitome of maternity.
She'll mother you back to Earth.

These women of my blood are so grounded
that when bullets burrowed through my cousin Davon's body,
my cousin Joey's body,
their bosoms became a brick house with wombs woven in the walls.
So, the men in my family live forever in them.
They be God, magic, moon.
They be love, Allah, Oshun.
Asé.
Asé.
Amen.
Amen.



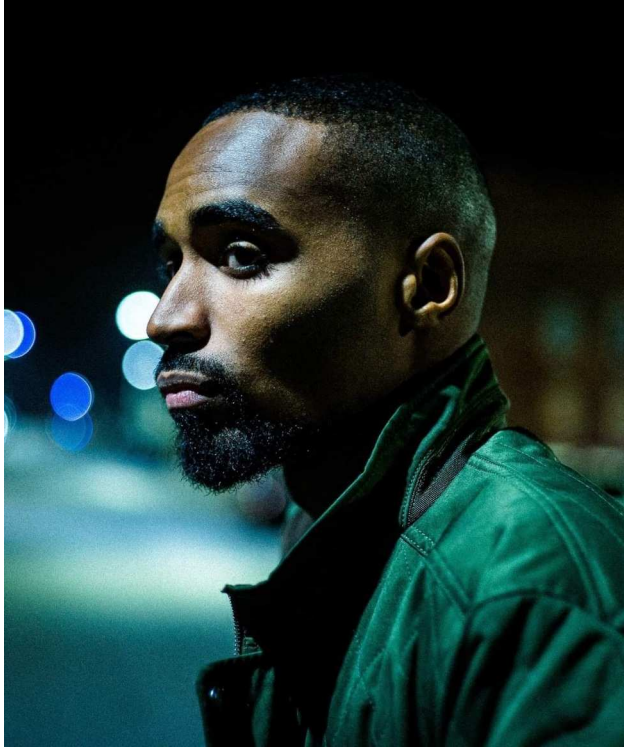
Baltimore,

you are overflowing with *life*.

Thank you for allowing us to illustrate your stories.



Nia June is a Baltimore native, published poet, spoken-word artist, arts educator, film director, and dancer. She is currently studying Writing at Towson University, where she received a full scholarship for 'Excellence in Poetry.' June has been the featured performer and guest speaker at events throughout the East Coast. When June is not studying or performing, she is teaching dance and poetry to Baltimore youth through organizations such as *Dew More Baltimore*, *Leaders of Tomorrow Youth Center*, and *Rayn Fall Dance Studio*. June's debut film, "A Black Girl's Country" featured in film festivals in Baltimore, D.C., and Detroit. Her most recent work can be found in the forthcoming issue of *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora*. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.



Kirby Griffin is a cinematographer and street photographer from the West Baltimore area of Maryland. In 2014, Kirby joined production company, *Six Point Pictures*, headed by Jamar Jones, where he landed his first feature film as director of photography in 2016. Kirby has worked for networks such as BET, Revolt TV, and HBO. He then went on to work with artists he studied rigorously, including Bradford Young, Shawn Peters, Malik Sayeed, Arthur Jafa, and Terence Nance, all by way of the amazing Elissa Blount Moorhead of *TNEG*. Despite knowing that Los Angeles is considered the home of cinema, Kirby made a conscious decision to stay in Baltimore and tell the stories of people who would otherwise have their image exploited or not recognized at all.

