

ONE: IN THE BEGINNING

~I AM~

i am an african-american lesbian.
beyond secrets untold,
i was black first.
chance created me female,
but my girlie-ness was constructed.
i swell in the company of my likeness,
though i don't know why.
and my thoughts are shaped by the whispers and shouts of those passing by

nigger!
bitch!
dyke!

and on occasions,
when i least expect it,

beautiful.

~GROWING UP BLACK~

i remember afros.
when they went from shoulder to shoulder.
the bigger, the better, the bad-est.
touching it meant instant death.
white folks freaked out when they saw one coming.
and the police would check 'em,
just to be sure nothing was hidden inside.

i remember the smell of burning hair.
and cosmetology students,
carelessly letting the hot iron comb slip onto my skin,
because they forgot to tell me,
to hold down my ear.

i recall not wanting to go swimming,
because i didn't want my hair to kink up again.
there was the parting of the hair to grease the scalp,
to keep it from drying out.
over and over and over incessantly

during the black revolution,
straightening your hair marked you as wanting to be white.
and black militants threatened to cut it off,
like indians scalping the white man.
i remember wishing every day
there was no reason to be afraid.

and then there's shaving

my mother told me not to shave because once you start,
the hair grows back thicker.

then my gym teacher told us to shave.
to ignore the myths of my mother's generation.
basically,
to ignore my mother.
when i started dating women,
i was informed i shouldn't shave.
to keep my hairy legs as a political statement.
a rejection of the image created by men,
to appease the male gaze.

on, off, on again.
back to off.
then on for good.
i don't shave my legs or my pits,
not because of others,
but because it's a pain in my ass.

and please, don't get me started on skin.

light skin, brown, dark skinned, tar baby.
Shit to lighten your skin.

dry, flaking skin,
also known as ashy skin.
you don't go anywhere without lotion.

funny what stays with you over time.
even as time passes over you.
the irony of it all,
i cut most of the hair off my head,
i leave the rest where it grows.
and i still have ashy skin.

~IT'S A KID'S GAME~

ali, ali ump en free,
come out, come out where ever you are.

hide and seek,
a kid's game, right?
or is it?

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.
ready or not, here I come.
anyone around my base is it.

I hide, you seek.
how much more simple can it be?
it's a kid's game, right?
or is it?

I see you behind the tree.
I see you under the porch.
I see you next to the trash can.
you can't hide from me.

stay quiet, don't move.
breathe light, don't make a sound.
get ready to run.
get ready to run.
get ready to run,
to the one safe place to be.

ali, ali ump en free,
come out, come out wherever you are.

no, it's a trick.
stay where you are.
wait.
be patient.
don't move.
stay quiet.

get ready to run.
get ready to run.
get ready to run.

come out, come out wherever you are.

get ready to run.
get ready to run.
get ready to run.
Now! RUN!

gotcha!
I see you.
I got you before you made it to base.

it's a frickin' simple child's game.
and a training exercise for survival?

TWO: FAMILY MATTERS

~MY FAMILY, A MIXED BAG OF NUTS~

my family welded my thoughts along jagged lines that became erratic circles of scribble going round and round and round and round never venturing far from the first point that started it all.

they dismantled my trust taking one vital organ after another like a poorly trained or distracted mechanic pulling out the engine discarding the steering wheel replacing new tires not even with worn out rubber but with useless rims for show.

they relinquished my being for a smudged carbon-copy piece of paper that's wrinkled from being folded into the tiniest square placed in the far back corner of a broken drawer in an unwanted dresser that has been put out on the curb destined for the dump.

they diminished my capacity to think to believe to know that snow is water that replenishes the rivers that flows downward towards reservoirs then filtered to homes where people drink the one thing that cannot be substituted like love that doesn't hurt.

after years of crying acid rain tears pelting away at my thin skin made foul with unsolicited touches and words like daggers soaked in pesticide I have reclaimed the sun and the rain and the earth and all my body parts and my beliefs and myself.

I have given back that which did not belong to me was never mine to lug around or to own up to, or to be responsible for or to cry about.

I have emptied the trunks and the suitcases and the back packs that once laid across my shoulders dragging behind me slowing me down keeping me anchored to nowhere in particular but always to nowhere I wanted to be.

I have thrown away the broken hearts and the empty promises and the fake love and all my wishes on a shooting star I have incinerated them into miniscule specks of ash that I released into the wind that swiftly carried them far, far away.

I have moved on through thick patches of sorrow and scorching fires burning my rage through frost biting rejections frozen in denial and thick sinking mud refusing to release me holding on as haunting memories stuck to me for fucking forever.

I have moved on past the boogie-man residing in my thoughts past the sirens calling out to me past the silent deep dark void that sought to consume me.

I have moved on to the sanctuary I created in me where family heirlooms are not allowed to enter and only love that doesn't hurt has the key to get in I have made a new home and I share it with my chosen family living as I always should have from the start.

~DEAR OLD DADDY~

my father,
bricklayer by trade,
door-to-door salesman by moonlight.
he peddled more than kitchen spices
and syrup for sweet candy drinks.
he sold lovely words and empty promises.
he sold my mom a five-and-ten ring.
sold her freedom to six young kids.
and then liberated himself
by moving out and moving on
to wife number three.

my mother,
not one to forgive,
spoke lowly of him
with words that were loud
and full of spit.
he turned my mother
into a conspirator,
training her daughters to forego men
in favor of college, career, and numero uno.

my father,
not into physical discipline,
had deep penetrating eyes that froze you in time,
giving you a chance to think twice before acting.
my father, my mother, divorce, me.
still too young to understand or care.
my memory of him, vague and distorted thanks to mom.

me,
as a baby dyke,
wondering if their toxic relationship,
contaminated my future.
if his tip-toeing on mom caused what little trust I had
to hemorrhage out of me,
leaving me incapable of believing in anything
except in absolute nothingness.

myself as an adult, loving and living in healthy ways.
my companion, my medicine.
a cure to the poison that made my mind bleed.
and then, in irony, helped me to see.

my absentee father did not leave me empty handed.
in his passing through,
he sold me one thing—
how not to be like him.

THREE: AFTER BLACK AND FEMALE, CAME LESBIAN

~FESTIVAL NEWBIE OVERLOAD (ODE TO THE WOMYN'S MICHIGAN MUSIC FESTIVAL)~

holy shit!
did you see that girl's tits
and hers
and hers
and hers
in every direction
in every shape size and color
women everywhere
why is woman spelled "w-o-m-y-n"

womyn
totally dressed
not totally dressed
totally undressed
oh my goddess
did she really dye her pubic hair

this is womyn's land
no men allowed
estrogen, not testosterone
'bout cunnilingus time

workshops during the day
music all afternoon and night
food cooked on site
freezing cold showers that perk up the nipples
and potty-janes when nature calls

oh please don't tell me
is there another controversy
woman born man turned woman on the land

one side
this is womyn only land, womyn born womyn only

flip side
the man is gone, the woman is here, get over it

my thoughts
i better not see a penis
this is a penis free zone
it surrounds me
it goes wherever i go
no penises allowed in this zone

just listen to that
high pitch screams of ecstasy
sure do travel far through the woods
that's what freedom can do for you
liberate those inhibitions that keep you silent
are they still going at it
or is that someone new screaming

what the hell is that
sponges for your menstrual period
just pull it out, rinse it and stick it back up there
you have got to be kidding me
can't it at least look pretty

holy shit
just when i think i've seen it all
is that a ring dangling from your clit
i hurt just looking at you
i don't mean to stare
but it's kinda hard not to
sorry
i'll be on my way now

it can't be
is it time to leave already
write your name and number down for me
it was really a joy meeting you
are you coming back next year
what about me
maybe, i hope so
let's keep in touch

oh my goddess
traffic getting out of here sure is a bitch!

~WISE WORDS I WISHED I HAD HEARD BEFORE.... ~

...a hot summer night, tired of my plight
I went out patrolling for a wife
Someone to spend the rest of my life
Holding her hands and finding delight

I saw one girl
I thought maybe she could be my pearl
I was thinking maybe she could rock my world
But then she said,

It's nothing personal. I just don't like black people enough to waste my time.

I jumped ship quick
Because I knew she was sick
I sought someone new in the lavender mix
Who I thought for sure could be my fix

But love isn't always found with ease
It doesn't come along with a gentle breeze
Even so, I thought I found one who, for me, could appease
Until she said,

I know black people. The woman who cleans our offices is black. We say hi to each other
all the time.

No luck there
No time to spare
Would I ever find someone with-whom to share
Who could turn my oneness into a pair

It was looking pretty dim
Everything around me was kinda grim
And then I met her, the perfect gem
I thought, until...

That was so racist of her. I can't believe she said that to you. I shoulda said something. I wish I had said something. I'm really sorry I didn't say anything. I'm sorry she said that to you.

No, no, this wasn't for me
Feeling sorry doesn't set you free
I want someone who won't flee
Who won't try to cop a plea

It's pretty obvious to me and all my friends
It's clear to see I have dark skin
So why am I exempt from my kin
Why would anyone say,

I just hate it when blacks act like that. Why they gotta be so loud?
That's why I like you. You're nothing like them.
For real, black people need to get over themselves and get with the program.

Oh my goodness, can it be true
Searching for love is worse than the flu
Why can't I find someone in the groove
Who can see the offensiveness of what they do

Why must I endure
Those determined to make sure
That their intents are sincere and pure
By saying things like,

Do you like rap? I love rap. It's like the ultimate musical statement that says, "Up yours, motherfucker. I don't give a shit about your goddamn decency codes. Go ahead, rate me explicit, 'cause I don't give a fuck." Rap music is like the ultimate political statement that says, "Fuck you man. I don't give a shit about your labels, trying to put me in some damn box so you can check me off and file me away. I don't fit any of your damn boxes and I ain't never gonna fit, motherfucker." Most people don't understand rappers and where they're coming from with the gangsta look and the baggie pants hanging off their butt and the oversized t-shirts and the baseball hats cocked to one side and all the bling and all the fuck you's. But I get them. They are like the ultimate statement of—

Hey, I get it.
You like rappers' shit
You think what you're telling me will be a hit
That you and I should be the perfect fit

You shouldn't assume I like rap
Just because I identify as black
So honestly, here's my thought on that,
Fuck that shit, 'cause that ain't where I'm at.

I'm over trying to find a lover
I'm not looking any further
Instead, I'll remember the wise words of my mothers

What's the big rush? You're bound to find someone who won't annoy the shit out of you.

So, I'm not gonna worry.
Try to find someone in a scurry.
Knowing when I find that someone to marry,
I'll thank myself for not being hurried.

FOUR: STILL BLACK AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

~THE RIOTS OF 1968~

I watched it
On television
On the news
The assassination of King
The riots
On Hough Street
In Cleveland Ohio
Rocks thrown through windows
Buildings set on fire
Stores looted
Angry black faces everywhere
Frustrated firemen
Irritated police
Neither can do their job
Make a choice
Put out fires or hose the mobs to save yourself
Make a choice
Protect the firemen or protect property or protect yourself
Make a choice
Call in the National Guard
Jeeps with mounted machine guns
Patrolling neighborhoods under curfew

Sad faces, tears flowing, wailing cries
Utter disbelief
Martin Luther King is dead
Assassinated
Riots in major cities
Where angry black people
Release pent-up frustration
Generating temporary insanity
Fueled by a collective fear
Had hope died with King at 7:05 pm on April 4
It was a tactical error
Violence was now justified
For where there is no hope
There is no reason to worry about life
No future worth fighting for
The people's opiate was gone
Withdrawal motivates the senses
There's nothing to calm the savages
No hope
So burn baby burn
Burn the whole fucking city down!

~NEVER ENDING STEPS~

Steps.

Fast steps quicken to a run.

Slow steps dragging to a crawl.

It doesn't matter.

Stand

Only to fall.

Bullets bulldoze through the bone that keeps a man upright.

Causing the body to lurch to a sudden stop,
the knees to buckle, the arms to drop,
the head to flop forward colliding with earth.

The bullet is louder than the fall
but the screams of a mother,
now one son less,
is loudest.

And her sobs.

Tears free-falling into a casket soon be lowered into the ground.
Witnessed by family and friends
who have taken one step after another to his graveside.

Steps.

Fast, slow, arms in the air,
doesn't matter.

Fear is a growing virus that kills.

The only thing we have to fear...

...is a gun in the hands of someone afraid for their life.

Steps. They never seem to stop.

~MORE DAMN STEPS~

More steps following a casket
carrying another mistaken identity.
Painful steps delivering my grieving body
to another gravesite of another one.
Of a brother, son, friend, husband.
Another person who was loved.
Doesn't matter.
Running or standing still.
Hands where they can be seen.
Doesn't matter.

Hate is a lingering disease that destroys without care.
It's an epidemic without boundaries.
Killing not the host, but who the host despises.
Creating steps...
...that never seem to stop walking towards a grave.