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**I CAN'T BE
A GOOD BLACK
WOMAN**

By

Temitope Oyinkansola Sholola

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*To my younger sisters, Tamilore Temitayo and Toulwalase Ololade Sholola.
To the memory of Oluwatoyin "Ruth" Salau: I will always be my sister's keeper.*

*“She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine.
That if they could not see it, they would not have it”*

- Toni Morrison

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Introduction

I will never be a respectable Black woman. I do not aspire for excellence or exceptionalism. I grew tired of centering my identity around being a “smart” black girl. Last fall, my English professor bobbed her head around and mimicked my voice. She showed me exactly what I’ve been running from my entire life: “the angry black women.” In a five minute interaction, all of my intellectual pursuit and creative scholarship was reduced to a Medea like caricature.

This moment taught me that knowledge cannot protect me from the pain of experiencing oppression as a marginalized person. I am intimately aware of my own suffering. I can historicize stereotypes of Black women, and recite critical race theory scholars. These skills did not protect me from the emotional damage of misogynoir. Although I have studied how my body is consumed within the context of white supremacy, I forgot I am a threat. In my softest, most gentle tone I will always be a threat. Even with a degree and a good paying job there will never be a seat at the table for me. I have no American dream.

I wrote this collection to remind my sisters our happiness is essential. I want us to remember there are no guarantees of safety within the patriarchy so we might as well talk back and ask for more. We might as well say no until we are offered everything we have ever dreamt of. I wrote this to ask who benefits from our independence? Who shoulders our weight when we need to rest? After all, why should we be good if the world isn't good to us?

Section 1: An Ode to my God Body

*"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs;
flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.*

-Toni Morrison

*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation and gets us an act
of political warfare - Audre Lorde*

Skin Bleaching Explained

An excerpt from a conversation I had with my white co-worker on skin bleaching.

Q: What do you mean by “bleach?”

A: I mean like swimming pools and white towels,
like going blonde
in the middle of a sweltering summer,
all eyes on the woman
with skin like ripe
mangos or the inside of a boiled yam.

I mean like Emeka’s mom with microbraids and dark knuckles.

Once my Uncle Tunde mistook his fiance
for a mermaid; her fresh pawpaw
skin was bruiseless and sparkling like a siren’s.

My favorite face mask is lemon juice, honey, and turmeric
four times a week. I exfoliate
in circles, dig
into my neck with a plastic net sponge.
I still have daydreams. I will one day be bright
enough to rival the sun.

My mama was a model in Nigeria,
and twenty years later I’m proud
she still has the same skin. I inherited
her sheabutter sheen, dark legs, and white teeth.

Her best friend divorced her melanin,
wading in a bathtub
of Clorox. It was a seamless disunion. The cells bunched
and rose to the surface, a dark film
cornered the body; the flesh was raw

like chicken gizzards marinating in
torn muscle and blood.

My aunts are magicians,
vanishing women.

They cover their necks with Chanel scarves
and massage aloe vera on their burn
wounds.

We just want to blush like you—strawberry rouge
in the cheeks, face twisted
with all the pinks and reds
of righteous rage
when talking about crime,
our neighborhoods or that dark
body.

I once saw an officer,
piggy pink in the face,
call me a nigger
without moving his lips,
just adjusted
the gun at his hip.

He must be magic too.

Harmful intimacies

1. I text a boy who hurt
me for confirmation I am still the sole
heiress to his guilt and spiteful
indifference. A hefty fortune,
worth its weight in silence.
2. In middle school, the deacon's son taught
me how to touch
myself
over the phone. We hummed
and shuddered until
Manna came
dripping
down
my inner thighs.

During Sunday service prayer,

I pressed two fingers to my bottom lip and averted my eyes

3. Project #17 says I'm toxic because I blocked
his number
twice

He's so dramatic.

I'm worried
we'll stop talking
forever this time. That this may as well be
the eyelash that
breaks the camel's back.

4. A man who regularly leaves
his beard clippings in
a communal bathroom sink,
tells me our friendship was joyless
months after he took me to the movies,
and I cropped a pokemon t-shirt to give him
in front of all my friends.

5. After years of telling men
to kiss my ass, one finally did. And now my ego
is the size of pluto.

My body is inappropriate

In Sunday school Aunty Chidu says,

*You girls need to keep your legs shut.
The men in this church are watching.*

I battle my thighs, their skin thin and taut like weathered drums.
I am outgrowing the juniors section of Macy's.
My body, an elastic limitation. Men
lust after my girlish bounce, seek to harness the wind that snaps my buckled knees
home.

Aunty Chidu says,

A woman's flesh is a temptation. Men can't help themselves. You are Eve's daughter.

My hips ripen like plantain, and I awaken one morning bursting out my skin.
Counting the stretch marks staining my stomach,
I sob with Yaya's chest.
She birthed and fed eight fat, weeping babies.

My body is a question
curving to meet the tongue,
split into an oh
or a heaving sigh.

*You must not disgrace yourselves in the eyes of the
Lord.*

Uncle ___ twirls me around, wets his lips and
says, "*Wow you girls today are getting so
big.*"

Uncle ___ wishes I were his wife,
says he's joking. He calls his wife fat
while she breast feeds his children.

In the living room, there is a picture of us at my naming ceremony,
my newborn hand wrapped around his index.

Selfish

I don't want to share this body. Alone, I dance
in the mirror, hold my hips steady
as I behold my beauty.

My hips are in season, blooming to meet the
small of my waist. I
wax and massage
cinnamon and honey
into my skin, speak softly to my reflection
about the cosmos and life as a supernova
under an ever-shifting sky.

I don't always
have the courage to be perceived. Sometimes, I want
to fold my bones into a bite-sized
shadow and fade as soon the morning sun
rises to meet my lips.

Waist

My new waist trainer
came in the mail, all 24 steel bones
eager to pinch my midsection and vital organs
into a hollow rose.

Down
four inches. I measure
every day. I count the little
black ticks on the hot pink measuring tape.
It's cold and flimsy plastic molded into my side.

I hold
and I'm 30 ½ inches
after a cup of crushed ginger and green tea or
an hour on the stair master.

I once saw a woman
hold her stomach
in the space between
her two hands,
22inch waist.
She said,

"Ladies, there are no excuses. I wear mine every morning and night."

I pray to one day become a floating pair of assets.

I said so

I'm beautiful because
I said so.

My first love
refused
to hold my hand, said I shine
too much like the sun.

Yea, I'd probably burn the world
down to a golden crisp,
scatter the ruins to adorn
my flesh with the ashes of a flattened planet.

I'm selfish. She said so.
Her deep, violet bottom lip
quivers as she explains her feelings for me
to the hole in my khaki shorts.

At the 429 bus stop,
I laugh at my morning glory love.

I FEEL MOST COLORED (After Morgan Parker)

I feel most colored when I eat with my hands,
soak and circle yams in spinach stew, scoop it all into my gaping mouth.

I feel most colored when sunset shares my undertones, the White girl at the party asks me
for the name of my foundation and I giggle with the suns at my cheeks.

I feel most colored when I breathe deeply in my lungs,
hold my belly—the widest chasm
of my blackness, the pit I fill with myself.
I exhale like all this air is mine, mine, mine..

I feel most colored at the zoo, sigh about Harambe
shot down in a cage.
I want to ask the penguins if the living is easy,
the lions if they remember their roars.

I feel most colored when I forget the sky is in motion, I am in orbit
with celestial bodies, conversing with
my carbon cousins.

'07

I haven't forgiven a man
since the summer of '07,
when, at the cookout,
my uncle pulled
a bowl of vanilla bean ice cream
out of my two hands, off my sticky YMCA t-shirt,
and gave me a bottle of water instead.

Section 2: Talking Back

“Ooh, lil' nigga wanna try it. I told him, ‘Black lives matter,’ I’m a riot” - Nikki Minaj

“When I dare to be powerful— to use my strength in the service of my vision— then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”- Audre Lorde

“I keep telling this fool I ain't afraid. Fear is a stranger the same way Jesus been, and what I got to be silent for? Silence ain't never saved no one—who? “Show me a quiet stance and I’ll show you a grave.” - Porsha Olayiwola

I can't be a good Black woman pt.1

I can't be a good black woman. Toyin's
passing painted
my heart
the deepest shade
of rage: poppy and Ultraviolet.

Cain's fallacy: Black men debate
the semantics of "debt," nitpick at responsibility while
Terry Crews tweets:
"There is only one woman on earth I have to please.

Not my mother, my sister, my daughters or co-workers. I will let their
husbands/boyfriends/partners take care of them."

I am reminded,
even while facing death, that my sisters
are owed nothing. Not a dry palm to a
searing cheek, or protection by men
from other men, simply because they
aren't fucking
me.

Off to The Races

And we are off;
 Saturday night, four niggas and a joint
 burning a hole in my back pocket.
 Security pulls up and my homies disperse like roaches,
 split into the shadows; we buck and ride
 Under Harriet Tubman's star,
 drippin in midnight. Our heels never graze concrete.

Our knees are strong enough to carry us home,
 hunched and heaving like a stallion pushing through the wind.

We are scholarship kids
 with bad habits and mother tounes.
 My uncle says
 our ancestors hid
 behind Olumo rock. That when slave catchers
 descended. They ran with their babies tucked into wrappers tied twice over,
 barefoot on burning land. So the rule is:
 no one is left behind.

We all
 take
 flight
 and
 if you running,
 I'm running.

Freeman

“As far as I’m concerned,
 they could
 burn this bitch
 to the ground. And
 it still
 wouldn’t be
 enough.”

When I was 9, my aunt
 moved into a new apartment building.
 She sat a silver, portable DVD player in the middle
 of her bare, cream living room for my sisters
 and me to watch *Lean on Me*
 on Blu-Ray. She spoke
 to the movers with a thick, careful accent
 reminiscent of my mother’s
 tone when speaking to telemarketers
 on the phone.

On my belly,
 I was watching
 Morgan Freeman close his eyes and
 refuse to turn from his backside
 while his students protested
 his arrest
 outside the barred window
 to his jail cell.

I remember the scene like this: a white superintendent demands Freeman
 collect his students and send them home. Freeman just
 lays back in his silver bunk bed and says,
 “I don’t got to do nothing but stay Black and die.”

Ever since that day I have
 been thinking about this phrase
 with a soft, satisfying
 desire for destruction
 on loop in my brain.

HER TALK ENRAGED THEM (for Mrs. Mary Turner)

On May 19th, 1918, Mary Turner was set on fire by a white mob that, only a day before, lynched her husband. She was hung by her ankles, burned alive and her fetus was severed from her abdomen. She was then shot to death and lynched.

On October 19, 2020, her lynching site was vandalized, shot beyond repair.

Sister dearest your feet are swollen
 a deep violet,
 thicker than dandelion root. I'll massage your ankles
 while you tell me a story about Valdosta,
 The city named after a plantation.

You were running
 all night, then sliced
 at the stem-like, low hanging
 fruit. Mary, I wish you
 greener pastures and a baby burping
 with laughter. Aloe heals
 burn wounds; I'll chop the plant to a
 paste and coat your blackened skin
 Mary, Lorde said death is
 a final silence, but I pray
 those white bastards
 are forever haunted by the howl
 of a pregnant wench.

Righteous back talk you had the audacity
 to mourn your love with a mouth full of rage.

Mary, I want to handpick each and every shell they shot at your shallow grave;
 they buried you with an empty bottle of whisky and a charred cigar hanging out its neck.

Interlude pt.1

I fashion myself into a switchblade
tucked into the waistline
of black, distressed fishnets,
pepper spray with a bright red nozzle.

I am bulletproof until proven otherwise.

I am the crackle,
smack, and pop
of Crisco on
dark meat. I eat, my gel polish brimming
with Frank's Red and blood.
I pray I won't be plated,
dismembered, and salted at the thighs, and breasts, and chest.
Then paired with a glass of white wine.

I Dream of Labor: a Nickel

1. I dream of labor, of updating my LinkedIn profile at my wake. My left hand rests upon the single white rose while my right types in double-spaced Garamond.

2. The morning I popped
out on the other side
of my mother's womb,
I didn't cry.
Tears are a fruitless
investment.
I simply balanced the weight of my head, straightened
my neck
and said,
"When I grow up,
I want all my time to be quantified."
I haven't known rest since.

3. Dollars don't make sense.

4. I tried to change a handful
of dirty pennies
for a sparkling new dime. I got
laughed out the bank after I applied
to buy black the block. The bank teller said,
"Lincoln lookin' a little green."

5. *He's still sick from freeing the slaves. Give him a minute.
What? I gotta cover his ass? Spit shine
The copper? make that brown dance?*

Poem for Toyin

Oluwatoyin Salau was 19,
placed her faith in a man of God while she
protested beside her brothers,
her dark skin drenched with the sweat that comes from fighting
'til your last breath.

A Letter from the Trees of Folsom Bridge to Mrs. Mary Turner

Dear Mrs. Turner,

I've been left to contemplate the Blues. The soles of my feet swing at the briefest of glances. I feel naked eyes stick to my skin like sap, its amber illuminating my stretch marks and dark spots, all of the mossy grooves the sun has sunk its teeth into. All of me is exposed to the world. I can't bear to be this naked. I am a pantheon of scars. The last kin to gnaw and drool over Black flesh. My maternal heirloom was skinned off my mother's back, a portrait of a still-burning bridge. I will outlive time. I hold my breath and the world wets its eyes. I hold my breath and your dress is bunched around my lopsided trunk. Fresh blood curbs all my fears of ground rot. I inhale copper, lead, zinc—and the broken neck of a whisky bottle. I hold my lips taut while I sob. Flatten my tongue, stiff as a board, light as a feather. These days, I can't quell the howls that hiccup through my spine. I named your son the moment he was cut down. Adeyemi, meaning: the crown befits me. Meaning a king was born to a bed of thorns and roared with rosy gums.

Misandry

I love when I ask a man
a question and he addresses my breasts instead
of my eyes. My two favorite
conversation starters.

It fills me with the utmost joy that my cleavage is more interesting than anything that has
ever left my mouth.

This is an Exodus, or a Collapsing Star Talking Back for Once.

I was breastfed beside my own resentment.
We were born bosom buddies,
raised to shield our faces from the sun.

By my 8th rotation, I knew
I was a cursed, dark thing
forced to orbit a white man's world.

I promised my mother
I would search for a sinless soil—
Dirt that hadn't upturned, a black woman's blood.

And she laughed.
Then asked
Where I planned to take all her good china, my stomach lined with
faded black roses on pink porcelain plates.

I shrugged and said,
"My body was not built to house your love."
My departure was

a mouthful of loose teeth,
gums raw with stardust and the pain of growing up.
Akin to flight or the bridge of Nina Simone's nose,

I anointed my hips with new names:
Tubman and homecoming.

I studied God before I left, prayed with my eyes wide
and watched his panopticon.
A new planet.
I stretched out my limbs.

Tiffany

In another stream of light and carbon,
I was named Tiffany.
Last name evocative of Puritans at Plymouth
Rock, brass hat buckles, and a crisp Bible.

Strawberry
blonde and ocean-saucer eyes worthy
of Pecola Breedlove's envy,
and a subsequent, gentle sigh.

I could go to my senior writing class, and mull
over another dead black person's name
without flinching. Dissect poems
without feeling the weight of skin

Pinch and pull at my organs, discuss syntax, suggest
line edits around a dead black man's
name a day after the verdict.

Maybe I would leave the classroom

without arguing
the legitimacy of my experiences.

Maybe I wouldn't

have to ask anyone
to let a man rest after his last 8 minutes
on Earthspent with an elbow digging into his neck,
and tears streaming down his cheeks
while he cried for his
Mama.

Maybe I wouldn't take everything so personally.

Reduction

In 1999, the FBI was found
guilty of conspiracy in the assassination
of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and every year
on MLK day they Tweet “happy birthday” with
their thumbs coated in blood.

I say this because
“Good” Black people are still shot.
Their doctrines stripped, soaked
and boiled to a savory reduction. They are served as a palatable negro carved out of a
socialist
revolutionary. Their mouths are stuffed

with all the fixins of a colorblind utopia, where,
“Little black boys and black girls
will be able to join hands
with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

A Sunday dinner gospel, a seat at the table with
Massa’s children. Eventually, we all become
a light dressing to drizzle into the open
mouths of white women who buy “I have a dream”
mugs off Etsy. A light lunch.

Today, I Choose Violence

“I mean, my motto is: when they go low, we teleport to the 85th layer of hell to record their great grandmothers’ screams as they for eternity because they made furniture from the coils pulled from a young slave girl's head.” or whatever Michelle Obama said at that one DNC speech in 2016.

1.

Today when I woke up, I chose violence.

I spent my unemployment
to rent out an 8-pound gold chain,
then I twerked out the jewelry
store just to piss off the Obamas.

2.

Tired of being the bigger person, I lost a few pounds,
then proceeded to elbow everyone.

3.

Skinny off pride and hard seltzer, I want to moisturize
my face with the sobs of white women who call me sis —
I got time today.

4.

I swing below the belt. I relish
in the after-breath of a wince
or the darkening of a fresh bruise.

5.

I swing below the belt
and knock a buckle loose.

I do not wish to take the high ground.

I crave the Earth's magma core. See,

I still think I can scream myself into a blade—
a smooth, silver tongue with a thick, mahogany handle.

6.

I still dream of a weapon.

Erasure of Michelle Obama's 2016 DNC Speech

[REDACTED] You know, [REDACTED] it has been eight years since [REDACTED] my husband [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] served [REDACTED] the White House [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the heart of our hearts, the center of our world. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I will never forget [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

all those big men with guns.

[REDACTED] their [REDACTED] faces pressed [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] at [REDACTED] time [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Barack and I [REDACTED] try to

guide and protect [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the hateful [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] spirit of this country.

[REDACTED] a bully, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED], we know our children are watching
[REDACTED] their most important role models. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] on TV, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] trust [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Hillary Clinton.¹

That's right.

¹ " They are often the kinds of kids that are called superpredators — no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first, we have to bring them to heel."

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] every child [REDACTED] needs [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] parents [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] who look to us to determine who
and what they can be.

You see, [REDACTED] thankless work [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] is so much bigger than [REDACTED] disappointments.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] this work

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] never buckles under pressure.

[REDACTED]. And [REDACTED] never quits [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

And when I think about the kind of president that I want for my girls and all our children [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I [REDACTED] know [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] someone [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] with nuclear codes [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] can't make snap decisions. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I want [REDACTED], someone to [REDACTED] show our
children [REDACTED], we fight to give [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] grace [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to everyone in this country [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the vision that our Founders put forth all those years ago
[REDACTED] each [REDACTED] beloved part of the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] greatest country on earth!

Ala the Python

I smoked marijuana out of God's mouth.

I sinned
with honey underneath my finger-
tips to sweeten the smoke
trapped at the back of my throat.

In my defense, we didn't have any woods,
7-Eleven was closed, 1.3 miles from
the Marriott.

Simone handpicked the eighth with acrylic nails,

so it's not like we had a choice. And even if we did,
we would have still ended up smoking
scripture.

Drunk on spiked mango Lassi, fingers greasy with beef
empanadas,
we chose Deuteronomy... or—no, Leviticus.

All I remember is the word “salvation” burning.

Questions for Audre Lorde

“Pain will either change or end.”

When will fear stop gripping my right hand every time I speak?

What is a small silence? What is its shape?

How can I hold the peace without
biting my tongue?

Is there ever a perfect time to step forward?

Can I dance with my demons whilst
dreaming of better days?

Which ginger chest balm can soothe my heartache?

If I decide to cough out each and every tyranny I have swallowed over the years,
cocooned in my stomach, what will happen to my body?

Am I still hurting if I can't hear myself scream?

Mary Turner pt.3

When the world wrings me dry,
I sigh with a thousand butterflies
fluttering on my chest.

Mary, I am tired of running from my own silence.

Where can I hide when my mouth cracks open,
and my words are braver than my spirit?

Section 3: A Return to Love

"In the flush of love's light / we dare be brave / and suddenly we see / that love costs all we are / and will ever be. / Yet it is only love which sets us free,"- Dr. Maya Angelou

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard."- Toni Morrison

"I am deliberate / and afraid / of nothing"- Audre Lorde

To honor a King (For Chadwick Boseman)

We heave, hitch forth the heat
mounted in the lining of our stomachs,
sob like we remember God spun
our muscles from the earth.
Lazy macrame, our flesh was exhumed
and woven from pebbles. We give thanks,
our loose strings are forever caught in the winds of circumstance.

We gift him an indigo blue lunch table seated
with every middle school friend he's laid to rest.
We smile knowing there are Black boys in the afterlife, cackling
and slapping beats on tabletops.

We chant "Wakanda" forever.
We are an Atlantic of dashiki and headwraps
as we cross our arms
against our chests and dream
of a land that does not thirst for blood, battle,
precious stones or the oil down our throats.

Interlude pt.2

I love you with all of this Godbody,
wide hips and shea butter-soaked skin.
My arms are blessed with stretch marks,
cellulite spread like a web to catch
my kin.

I need a world where we live forever, black girls
with magnolia flowers in our hair, and laughter
that is neverending.

Born on a Friday

We began in the back of a blue-grey Honda Civic.
After the poetry performance,
we argued about jollof rice,
and the best track on Capital Steez's *Amerikkkan Korruption*.
Late at night, both of our African mothers are anxious and awaiting our arrival home.

You recite lines from *The Boondocks*,
freestyle to the beat of your own two hands.
Born on a Friday, the gap in your teeth is glorious.

You play the bass on FaceTime,
develop calluses while I doze and dream
of taking over the world with our words.

Lady (after Fela Kuti)

On the days, I search for proof
that I am in fact
my mother's daughter.
I dance to Fela Kuti, and apply
Shea butter to my bottom lip. I be lady or
a silver blade tucked into a Chanel wallet. I
only acknowledge men
who bow down and offer me the crowns
of their heads.

I fire dance, a quick two-step,
swing my hips wide, get low like my mother
during church service, her body praising
the Lord.

I scoop the juiciest
piece of meat from the pot of peppa
soup then crack open chicken
bones with the back of my molars,
scrape out their marrow until the spongy purple tissue
lightens my load and lifts me off the balls of my feet.

Ade

My mother said my name came
to her during the eighth hour of labor. After I
arrived, all she could say was,
“Praise be to the most high,”
or “Temitope,” mine is worthy of praise.

I know

I know, I know, I know there is no evil.
only the gruff of one circumstance clashing
against another. I know I am alive, to feel
and be heard crying or gasping for air. The most perfect
sign of life. The world sits on my chest, daring
me to inflate underneath its weight. I know, I know
I'll be okay. I have feet to take me where I please, and my legs
still quiver at the wind, and burn in the heat.

I know, I know there are daffodils all around me.

Red Rover

“We get hurt so often we mistake pain for our nickname.”

I was once a YMCA baby
screaming, “John Cena you can’t see meee!”
in the back row
of a yellow school bus to Summer camp.
I would peel
off the crust to my peanut butter and fluff
sandwiches and then trade
chlorine-soaked Pokémon cards
at lunch, my bottom lip
tasting like sunscreen and Blistex.

That summer,
Red Rover was a fever dream,
a stampede of giggles, silence,
then a sharp push to the stomach,
my arms ablaze
with the weight
of holding back bodies.

We went hiking one morning and I rolled
my ankle down a slope of rocks.
Bursting out my flesh: pink, purple, and red—St. Valentine’s tissues.
A thick line of blood
came sprinting down past my calf
on the outside of my knee,
soaking my white sock.

I tried to scream but my mouth was heavy.

“We get hurt so often we never think to run.”

Youth

My church elders complain, say the youth
known nothing of strife,
of walking miles to school on weathered, sandal soles, or
the pain of fleeing into an uncertain night.

Burna Boy says “Africans no go tire,”
that we are built to last beyond the brute,
the force of time. Divided into nation-states,
I embody matrilineage wounds birthed
through muddled blood ties.

Bag Lady

“Bag lady you goin' hurt your back

Draggin' all 'em bags like that.

I guess nobody ever told you

All you must hold on to

Is you, is you, is you.”

Bag lady,

His voice makes me warm
in my chest and thighs. He said
he likes my gold, the way my hoops
shine when they touch my skin. He told
me I was beautiful once,
took out his phone to take
pictures of my smile.
He only dates white girls.
He took me to the movies once,
told the people sitting in our seats to move even
when I told him it was cool.
I didn't mind sitting elsewhere.
He said “No, we are sitting where I paid for.”
And that made me wet.
I crave protection.
I miss smoking in the front seat of his whip.

I can't be a good Black woman pt.2

I want to live
long enough to witness
the magnolias in season. I ache
for time to take its shape, quake
then dissipate between my brown
fingers. For each steel petal to breathe,
bloom, and happily return to a deep,
ebony Earth.

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