

our shoulders branch across time

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Abstract

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This hybrid MFA thesis, *our shoulders branch across time*, is a nonlinear homage to intersecting lineages—familial, spiritual, and somatic. It centers the matriarchs of my family, descendants of Donita Buffalo and Irvin Hicks Sr.—living and deceased Black women whose lineage I continue.

Alongside these familial roots is an evolving spiritual practice, drawn from Buddhist traditions and grounded in mindfulness of the body. I also write from my lineage as a hands-on healer, shaped by my work as a physical therapist and bodyworker.

Through prose, poetry, and photographs, I experiment with space and structure to surface what the body, memory, and lineage hold—what’s hidden, misremembered, or in need of healing. I write through the lens of multiplicity embodied in the ouro~ensō, a merging of circular symbols from African and Buddhist traditions. I write from inside the circle, adjacent to it, or gather fragments that have bled into its periphery.

In this act of witnessing, I may be breaking chains or conjuring what resists a single narrative. From roots to body to rupture—and back to the unseen—the words stretch across time and space, branching into a form strong enough to hold the discomfort of more than one truth.

Poetic Statement for *our shoulders branch across time*

This hybrid MFA thesis, *our shoulders branch across time*, is a nonlinear homage to parallel lineages—familial, spiritual, and somatic. It centers the matriarchs of the Donita Buffalo and Irvin Hicks Sr. union, both living and deceased, Black women whose lineage I continue. Alongside these familial roots are my evolving spiritual practice, which draws from Buddhist traditions and centers mindfulness of the body, and my lineage as a hands-on healer.

The work took root during a period when I was helping my mother leave her longtime home in a predominantly Black community for a majority-white senior living facility. Most recently, it has been shaped by the death of her older sister, my aunt. Her life as a writer helped call me back to graduate school. Through prose, poetry, and photographs, I experiment with space and structure as a way to dislodge what has been entwined in the body, memory, and lineage—just as the way meditation or deep tissue bodywork can release what has long been stored and unseen. The goal is well-being, not comfort—achieved through disruption, by breaking from habitual ways of meaning-making to make space for necessary grief and the possibility of new growth.

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The matriarchs of my family are devoted to Black church traditions and have lived lives devoted to Jesus. Though we no longer practice exclusively within the same faith framework—I have incorporated Buddhism into my practice over the past ten years—the lives of the Buffalo-Hicks women have remained rooted in their spiritual traditions. Many of them, both those who have passed and those still living, are writers, poets, and artists, whether formally or informally, and this is a lineage I now continue.

As a woman without direct descendants, approaching the threshold of elderhood, I feel compelled to leave something tangible behind for my nibblings to chew on. As I sift through photographs and documents from the move—choosing what to keep while discarding thousands of others—I am discovering:

My mother's sister, Audreen Ballard, appears on the cover of the book, *The Sisterhood*. My mother, even now, still has memorized *Lochinvar*—the poem she recited to win her elementary school oratorical contest.

My father has preserved letters from both his mother and father, encased in thick plastic frames and now placed like shrines in the center of his living room.

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During the move, so much family history was discarded out of necessity. I lead a simple life with few belongings and even less storage space. The family items I chose to transport were minimal, more symbolic than practical. No family's story can ever be fully preserved.

Our memories, documents, and photographs are fading.

My mother downsized from her longtime farmhouse to a small efficiency. Her new bed lives inside the wall, pulled down at night and hidden away during the day. Not unlike her memory.

I grieve for all that my nephews, their children, cousins—Tyler Hicks, Darrian Hicks, Evey Ann Buffalo, Reuben Buffalo, Jayce Hicks, Lenox Owens, and Ka'Mari Stokes, plus those unknown to me—will never know. I grieve what has been lost to them and the ongoing losses endemic to the speed of modern life. And yet, I know I still have agency. Through our bodies, and in this work, our inheritances continue to be divined. Our ancestors empower us to create, to invoke, and to imagine through call and response, inside and at the periphery of this moment of cyclical time.

As a young woman, the gap in time between me and my elders felt like a chasm too large to leap. But time marches on; the gap shrinks. Now, I see myself in my mother—her inability to remember what she ate this morning, to take her medications, to articulate her experience of anxiety. As we travel alongside one another, we approximate—symbolic of the shifting landscape of time.

Symbols, talismans, and juju are integral to my spiritual practice.

During the transition, I discovered a booklet: *A History of The Tribble Family, 1926–1986*, written by my second cousin, Othello Vaughn. On its cover, the Sankofa bird is perched, clutching a branch, with the words *Go Back and Fetch It* inscribed below. I had seen the Sankofa symbol many times before, but finding it here—holding part of my family's story—opened a portal. It propelled this project into a work of gathering and rearranging fragments, a way to reach back and move forward at once. The Sankofa turns its head, glancing back and forth, reading both past and future as if they belong to each other. I am imagining a future co-shaped by my ancestors and me, born through an opening in what once appeared fixed.

In my vision, the bird takes flight, carrying the branch with it—toggling between past and future, never choosing just one.

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My first spiritual teacher, Godfred Amereka, was a Ghanaian man hired as the daytime guard of our home in Lomé, Togo. He had spent years in a Ghanaian prison for his role in a coup d'état sponsored by the American government. After his release, he was hired by the American Embassy in Lomé.

Amereka and I spent countless hours together studying the Bible, which he had devoted himself to during his incarceration. Yet, when disputes arose with locals, he turned to his traditional ways of mediating—calling on the natural world and ancestral spirits. It was through Amereka's fluid movement between traditions that I first learned to embrace spiritual multiplicity. Another of my teachers, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel—whose book *The Shamanic Bones of Zen* explores the deep overlap between Indigenous spirituality and Zen Buddhism—supported spiritual inclusivity. Her work affirmed what Amereka had already embodied: that the integration of spiritual practices is not only possible, but an essential evolution of wisdom lineages.

Another symbol, the Zen circle called an *ensō*, drawn in calligraphy by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, represents the idea of interbeing. It suggests that all things are interconnected and co-exist—each thing relying on others, never existing in isolation. The *ensō* can be drawn with a deliberate gap, and here I lean into poetic leaps to engage with the space left open between the circle's unclosed ends.

Our lineage a line whose ends don't meet is fissured but not broken

I'd like to bring three aspects of the *ensō* into conversation: the space inside the circle, the space outside, and the gap as a portal or threshold. The space outside represents what lies beyond the body—auras, homes, neighborhoods, and communities. The inside is the body's inner terrain—feelings, thoughts, and dreams. The thick line itself is a collection of 12.5 million Black dots—the body itself. One of them survived the transatlantic crossing: the woman from whom I am descended.

At times, I write from inside the line, adjacent to it, or gather fragments that have bled into the periphery. In this act of witnessing, I may be braiding strands, breaking chains, or conjuring a snake. The *ensō* transmutes into an *ouroboros* as my Buddhist lineage and African heritage meet. The circle grows scales, becoming a snake reaching for its tail. In the gap and the overlap, the four directions of time and space are implicated. The tail feels the pull of the encroaching head—the ends of the circle morph dynamic. Our ancestors encircle us, offering support, wisdom, and breath. Their energy influences us—and ours influences them.

As Zenju Earthlyn Manuel writes in *The Shamanic Bones of Zen*, “There is nothing pure in a world of interrelationship and history. It is said that even the ancestors are in the womb of Mother Earth, still giving birth. We are them.” Her words name what I’ve felt in my own cells. What we create together is how we heal together, as time flows both forward and backward. What was endured turns forward; what is healed spirals backward. We learn to look and feel for them—staying receptive to their messages, even in the smallest synchronicities.

This ongoing birthing from the Earth’s womb is the terrain of the afterbreath—not as aftermath, but as compost, nourishing the next generation.

Just as we can look, listen, and feel for guideposts from our ancestors, we can also attune to our own bodies—and to the bodies around us. Self to self. Self to others. Self through others. We learn to belong without merging, to touch without losing our own shape. We begin to feel our edges, our connections, and the gaps within our circle.

How does healing happen? By moving between personal and collective branches—forward and backward through time. This back-and-forth stroke polishes, bringing new shine to ancestral wisdom forgotten in the twine.

Our stories are not only inherited—they are co-authored across an intertwined span of horizontal and vertical time. The full story is never fully contained in a single line.

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I begin by observing your walk, tracing how areas of tension shape motion, how your weight shifts between steps. Is the movement even, fluid? When the heel meets the floor, what part of the body absorbs the force?

Does the momentum of energy travel smoothly up and out of the body? Does the upper body respond in kind to the lower body? If so, how?

Now, I place my open palm on your head and apply slow, downward pressure to what was once your soft spot. I wait and listen for the body to respond. In my imagination, a signal passes through the network of your fascia. With the pressure, I convey to every cell: *I am listening*.

The body responds; finally, someone is listening. It speaks back in a shimmering language unique to that moment. I must decode the message. I gather more information

from the body—standing with eyes closed, then sitting, and finally lying down. With the body face-up, I place my hands on its front and back, cradling it section by section. The language of tissue layers—push, pull, spiral, puddle, flash, vibrate, splash, ripple, swirl—moves around my hands.

My hands listen for texture, rhythms, patterns, temperatures, and tensions. I respond in kind with pressure, nudges, tethering, pumping, and approximation to invite tissues into a healthier relationship with bones, joints, nerves, and the mind.

The exchange begins the moment we take root in mutual space. Our ancestral and somatic lineages intersect. Time and space curve. A possibility opens—to co-create more integration in the body by tending to what is carried across generations.

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I used to take my Aunt Sis—the woman who raised my father—grocery shopping. Her grocery list, written in the same black ink each time, was paperclipped to her lotto numbers and the coupons she'd collected over the past week. I often felt guilty during these shopping trips.

Recently, I was drawn into a newly opened super-saver-type grocery store in my neighborhood. Inside the store, I realized I had been pulled in by memories of my Aunt Sis. The ritual of shopping for cheaply made things at low prices—one that most Americans participate in. Conventionally grown fruits and vegetables artificially brightened and stacked in pyramids.

I taste polish and pesticides.

Still, I push the cart.

I love my family but wanted—and built—a life different from theirs. To live somewhere green, consume mindfully, and honor the earth. No television, no chemicals, no long commutes. Yes, recycle. Yes, reverence for land and body.

Respecting my physical body as a gift from the generative powers of the universe—call it God, evolution, or the Mystery—I recognize how slim the chances are for me to be alive at all. From my ancestor who survived the crossing and enslavement, to the one lucky egg in my mother's uterus that met my father's sperm, my existence is improbable. I am grateful for those who made my way possible. And I have chosen my own way, different from theirs, yet in their wake.

I became a physical therapist, not a doctor. I prioritized adventuring and traveling. As a person with high sensitivity and an individual with natural caregiving tendencies, it would have been easier to stay close. Instead, I broke off my branch and carried it away. At times, especially now with aging parents, I feel guilty about my choices. Not guilty enough to uproot my life and move back towards theirs.

When I began to feel the pressure of guilt flaming up my legs, I understood that it was related to moving away from my family both literally and figuratively.

My love of backpacking alone and rock climbing, my zest for health and fitness, and my reverence for the natural world have sometimes left me feeling at the margins of conventional expectations of Blackness.

As a Black child growing up overseas, I struggled to fit in. That feeling continued into my teenage years after returning to the U.S. Moving back to the states for high school, I was an outsider who had not experienced the traditional aspects of American culture and had little in common with my classmates. I was outgoing, funny and smart and because I had lived in Africa, my classmates nicknamed me “Uganda.” I did not complain; I took it in. As a young adult, I began my career as a travel therapist to pay off my student loans. I took high-paying assignments in remote areas of this country with shortages of physical therapists where some residents were conservative and bigoted. The survival skills I cultivated as a child came in handy—infiltrating communities quickly and not making waves. Never fully belonging. Blending just enough to provide good care and stay safe.

This is a pattern that repeats throughout my life.

In my hospital work, I often feel like an outsider. I don't automatically don gloves at the threshold of every room. I believe one of the most therapeutic acts I offer a patient who has been confined to a hospital bed—is skin-to-skin contact. Thus I routinely offer brief back rubs to my patients when they are sitting up. Even now, in sterile spaces, I try to keep human touch alive.

This Black body and mind—never fully belonging. To the Black community, to the healthcare community, to my family bloc, to my spiritual community. This sense of estrangement is still braided into the fabric of my everyday life.

In the past, I avoided uncomfortable feelings like guilt and disconnection. Now, I'm learning to stay connected to these stinging emotions—not as burdens but as threads of something I'm part of, a belonging that stretches and shifts.

This is why, when I wear my mother's wooden bracelet or my grandmother's ring, I feel connected to my ouro~ensō.

These objects, like the symbol itself, remind me that what stings also binds. Uncomfortable feelings become tangible reminders of life-giving familial connections, keeping me open to the ways those connections manifest here and now. They are signs that listening and attending are helping heal me—and helping my niblings and those who came before me—a circle cycling healing forward and backward in time.

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In my writing, I strive to braid together disparate threads to build with and challenge the reader—to gather and unsettle. Simone White's *or, on being the other woman* offered a framework for writing through radical honesty—unapologetic and unashamed. Her work names the complexities of contemporary Black feminist life with sharp clarity. I attempt to write into discomfort not only through content, but also through form: scattered shaping, disjointed lines, and spatial disruption as method, not accident.

There are times I want to nudge the reader out of habitual interpretive patterns—to make them pause and sit inside the tension where possibility lives. Our brains tend to default to old grammar; a well-placed pause opens space for something else to emerge. These ruptures may appear as contradictions to readers hoping for cohesion, but like mud and lotus in Buddhist thought, they exist in a symbiotic relationship. One requires the other to exist. I try to support moments of possibility in the gap, in the space, in the silence—an extra breath, a slight curve—where the next word can echo back toward itself differently. A space of potency. An unfolding.

This pause is a cousin to silence—the silence invoked by John Francis and Bob Kaufman, both of whom took vows of silence as political acts and creative practices. In this kind of silence, seeds are planted—making way for reforestation of the mind, a move towards expansive and sustainable futures. A restoration project.

Silence, released from confinement to religious ritual or formal sanctuaries, enters everyday language—into the poem, the line break, the page.

Silence as a space of personal and collective transformation. A form of reverence anyone can access through intentional awareness, through breath, through line.

In this country, people from the African Diaspora have been—and are being—personally and politically silenced. From the time of enslavement—with iron muzzles, bans on native language, physical and psychological punishment—to modern structures like school-to-prison pipeline, selective news coverage and restricted laws. The African American relationship to silence is complicated. Just as recently as 2015, the sucking-sound gesture—common in African and Afro-Caribbean cultures—was banned in some schools in France. I use this sound annotated as ʘʘ in a performance of my poem *Fried Yams of Lomé, Togo* as an act of reclamation.

I use a range of visual and sonic strategies: wide caesuras, clipped or single-word lines, intentional white space, sudden tonal shifts, and nonlinear sequencing. I also work with symbolic imagery and layering—especially through the inclusion of photographs. My forms include blackout, brackets, irregular margins, unusual lineation and indentation. These choices unsettle the eye and ear, inviting the reader to slow down, circle back, and find meaning in the gaps. In this way, silence is not absence but presence—woven through poems and prose that explore bodies, healthcare, lineage, and ancestry.

I hope to help reclaim silence through the pause—the gap evoked in the way this work unfolds.

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This work is another object, wearable like the fiber of a tree. Like my family's jewelry, I wear it as altar and frame. It is also an offering to those who came before and those still to come. My aunt's gentle smile on the book cover, my mother's aging voice recalling her recitation, my father's quiet impulse to preserve—these live in these pages.

I can feel the tree trunk growing through the gap in the ouro~ensō, extending through my body. Silence and difficulty are a resource. I am part of the whole, one branch in a regenerating forest of stories, bodies, and breath.

OUR SHOULDERS BRANCH ACROSS TIME



Victoria P Buffalo first row far right
Women's Service Guild Zion Baptist Church
Philadelphia



Fannie Tribble Glenn mother of Victoria P Buffalo

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SOFTWOOD MEMORY

Re-mending myself

way of fibrous medicine

African wood pillow

twine together

a black future or two.

Trail of letters

my left arm bleeds

short bright spurts—
red spell.

Breed to work

stripped stinger

bark displaced

tree spine lashed straight.

Aunt Gracie cherished her mother's quilt
sewed by her tribe for her wedding.

branches stretch cloth

on master's land

imagine my ancestors
with frosting on their face—

cracking sound

broken rings



Joseph Quinton Buffalo in Buffalo's Bakery in Philadelphia

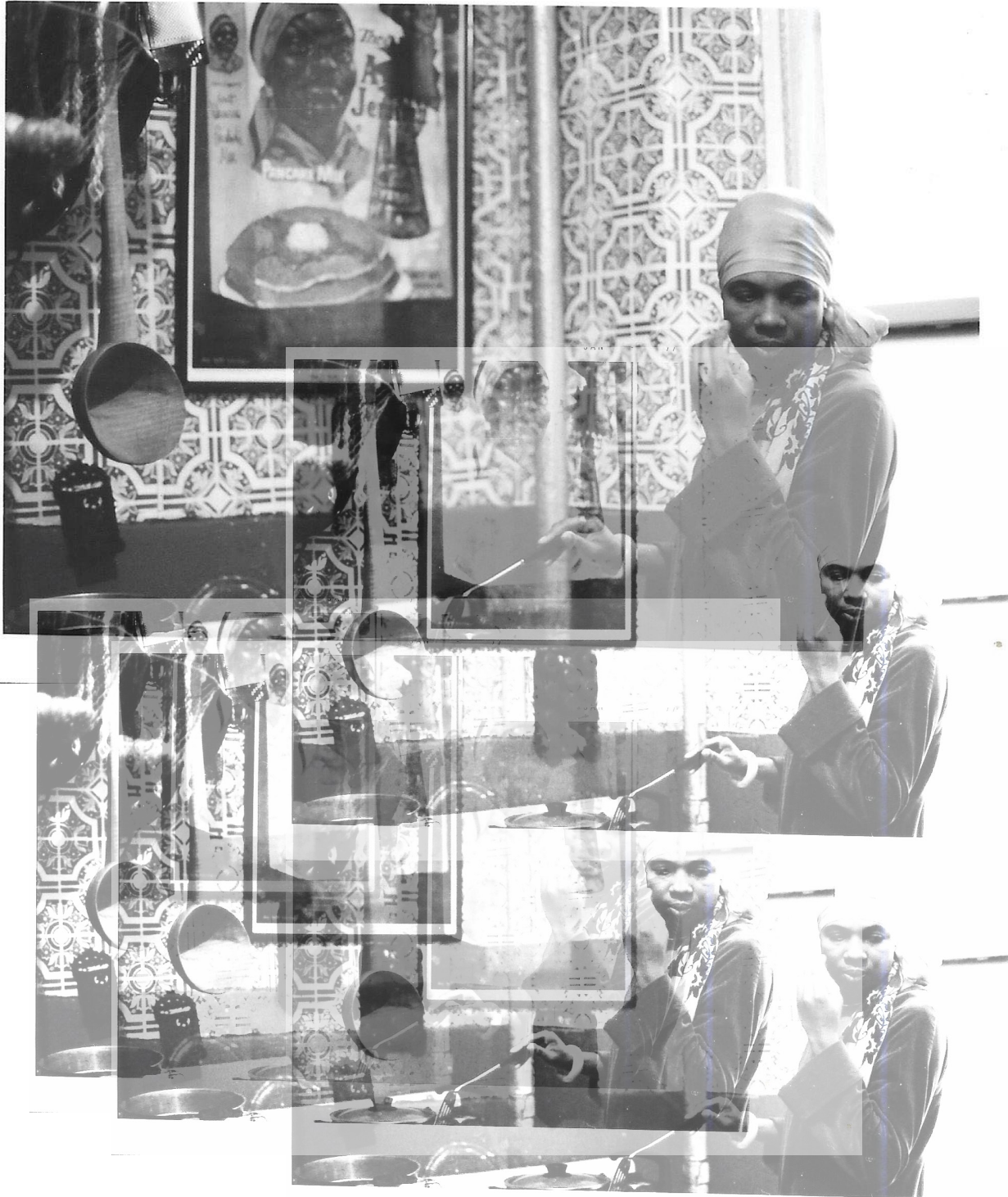
THE BALM

Cowritten with Donita Buffalo Hicks

Do-rag keeping do in order
Warmth of sweater
Bracelet ready for the next event
Wooden spoon's back
Warmed by the sun
Front Warmed by the stove
Getting ready to face the day
Why does it always take so?

She's disgusted, listening to the sorrow of grated bodies in a room so long from the bright street. One pad of butter on a stack of pancakes floating before the warm syrup drowns what was started by another. Matching head armor keeps the mind steady.
What does it always take?

Each wheel deserves its own sound
Sagittarius makes a shifting symbol
Aims for the bullseye
Patterns enslaved in walls' repeated circles
Dizzying stories never ending always turning,
Balms of friendship soothe life's pain
How to finish flipping?



Vertamae Grosvenor in her apartment in New York City

CROWN ROYAL TAKES HOME

wet velvet
worn headrest reclined
liquor cabinet, arms' reach

Uncle Wilbur's ashen boy legs, twitchy—
wind got up underneath our one-room paper roof
granting straight look to the stars.

Brothers John, Herbert, and Wilbur crane
bug-filled hay heap
away from rain.

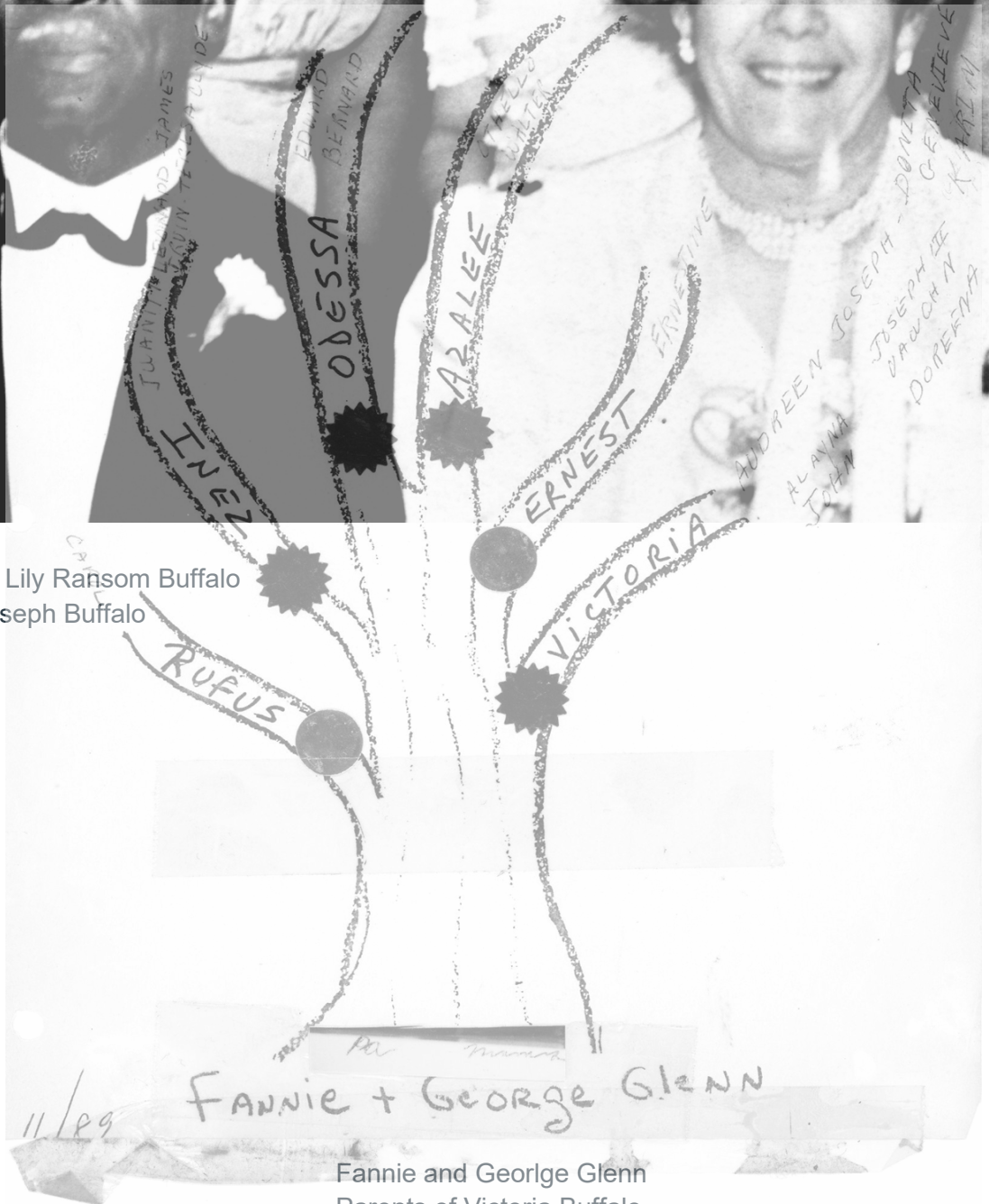
Asleep on dry mound,
John's crack-o-morning return—
white man's treatment clinging.

Put cold feet up under Wilbur's restless legs
make us wanna get out of bed—
but where to go?

Wilbur M. Vaughn always gave us kids coins from the purple bag, brother of Chaney Jones—lived at 1437 Kitmore Road for many years, cared for by his sister.



James A and Lily Ransom Buffalo
Parents of Joseph Buffalo



Fannie and George Glenn
Parents of Victoria Buffalo
who married Joseph Buffalo

INSTITUTIONAL FOOD

Looking up the morning's still-faced moon

step on frozen blades of grass

break your mother's back—

wheelchair bound behind gargoyles

the sound of coffin doors closing

dumpster crows tearing open sacks of trash

her hummingbird earrings sway

head shakes

—absolutely no;

do not leave me here

Dad told me they'd call brazil nuts nig** toes

ashy skin does not shed

this walk

still second class

MOM SAID NO CPR FOR HERSELF

ninety-three full-strength pumps
cross the eighty-six-year old sternum—

*God please save my only sister
grant her a feeding tube*

jaw peacefully ajar
sister won't wake after surgery
denying taste of life in a wheelchair

how to differentiate Mom's anxiety from early dementia
she cannot recall how to toggle between cell phone,
nurse call light, and her breaking heart

heavy sound cracks a chest of raindrops

video monitor flickers an African voice
welcome aboard—pull the cord anytime to vacate

bound wrists restrain chiffon skin
her mind burrows sister's hospital bed
chewing knots from white sheets

mom repeats sister's name

I say, just talk with her regular
tell her where she is, she had surgery,
her hip is fixed, promise her the pain will be gone

she puts the phone to sister's ear
you talk to her regular

I'd lotion her legs and rub her head but the rain is too loud

AUNTIE WITH THAT TERRIBLE LIMP

working your hand bones short

toothless smiling
ricochet laughter

elevating footrest
your Black Queen's seat

double leg machinations
reverse retire

starched white towel creased to spectacular precision

— forbidden press absorbs your sweat

my babies will have everything they need



Unknown family member
possibly a young Odessa Glenn

UNDESCENDED

● there will be no record of me ● step by step instructions ●

● my nephew's white step sister ● her patent leather shoes ●
● flesh tunnels and kettlebells ●

● stand alone by the door ●

● sweet pain discontinued ● no future tethered mulatto tight ●

● we can't be family we don't use the same shampoo ●

● pinch my DNA ●

●● burlap skin scratched ragged ●● I pray you will still recognize me ●●

●● in a west African grain of sand ●● knit my life a little sweater ●●

● recline cross legged ● the buddha against my back ● after climbing hills of jade ●

● binocular vision doubled ●
● cold night plunge of sorrow ●

● my tragic fingers dance ●
● every brown wrinkle to jump a broom ●

● fifty five years too late I hump the rich man in the eye of a needle ●
● a room with no overhead fan ●

● future more funerary with each slice ●

● overhead press collapsed corners ●

● you smile a mouth of gold in a famine ●
● welcome heart ● yellow sun my puckered heart ●

CHANGE OF SEASONS (1)

No longer demanding of herself that she remember each coworker's name, here she was—a great disappointment to herself. Name games, Lumosity, and BrainHQ apps—all laid down, abandoned—just like her ability to retain and retrieve information on demand. She knew a 73-year-old show-off of a woman who could pull her kindergarten teacher's assistant's name out of her ass—a mutant. She'd wanted to clone her, but now it was more important to focus her diminishing energies on opening the door to what lay beyond. Dialoguing with the unseen world was easier for her than recall, though she was vaguely concerned about what might answer back.

When her aging mother stopped going for walks, she pushed her to keep moving. She even flew across the country to run her own personalized boot camp for her mother, living up to her nickname, "General," given to her by patients. After a week, Mom's gait galloped rather than stuttered. So did her spirits.

Since then, Mom had suffered a stroke, and parts of her brain had gone numb. Preserved was her ability to parallel park like a big-city parking attendant: cutting and exact. Post-stroke, she was as erratic as an equal-arm scale suddenly unweighted.

The grief over losing her mentally capable mother made her quick to anger. When a coworker asked for the door code to the storage room while she was walking an unsteady patient, she snapped, "1234," then quickly corrected herself: "1234 star." The coworker punched in the code, stared at the door, and said, "It didn't work," even though the lock could be heard unlatching. A passing nurse added, "4418 star," implying she was wrong. The door had multiple codes.

"1234 star works too," she said, loud and terse. She had crossed that threshold a million times. Still, her own fading memory needed a simple sequence she could actually remember.

All the while, her unsteady patient stood exactly where he'd been told to stop, waiting for further instructions.



Chaney Jones with her
granddaughter Ebony Johnson

Stillness

Moving

ISOLATION ROOM

A. Light inside father's liquor cabinet

*Tequila orchestrates a particular aesthetic
staggered tall ornamental grasses... he throws back his head...sharp plumes
tenderized throat blooms a satisfied growl...crowded faces ricochet sound*

B. Glasses beside rocking chair

*Cocktail napkins fading logo
flesh-veined tea leaves ...rusty bit of two toned teeth his moist formulas
second hand prism cracks*

Irvin Hicks Sr. working as a mailroom clerk in the State Department and retired as an American Ambassador. Social drinking—a large part of life as a diplomat.



Victoria P Buffalo with her certificate for 20 years of service from United States Navy

CONVERSATION WITH ORLEANS AND BOND STREET

The house they rented was right next to the alley and the bar that Aunt Ruth ran. My Dad helped run the numbers; that's how he got so good in math. During Prohibition, they would hide the liquor at 404 Bond street. Uncle Wilbur stayed there a while. They'd shared a room on the top floor. The family moved: across the street to 415, then a couple streets over. 406 was Mrs. Minnie's place. When his mother fell sick and was not long for this world, she and Aunt Sis finally left the neighborhood to purchase the house on Broadway. Sis raised him there after his mom's kidneys gave out. The only time he ever saw his Dad was at 404. He showed up unannounced to the front door in a military uniform and tossed him up so high that he'd hit his head on the ceiling.

I didn't get milk at school some days because they'd run out.
it was a friend's bike, we'd traded toys
when it hit the car fender I did not cry.
They took me to Hopkins
where my cousins, who were like sisters to me, would later work 'til retirement.

I still have the leg scar 80 years later.
My mother Catherine yelled to come eat before it got dark,
she planned a special Sunday picnic outing to Druid Hill Park
in the new outfit Mr. Gene brought me that month.
Sundays they dressed me up and sat me on the porch steps.
Church let out, Aunt Ruth and Mom came to fisticuff at the corner
over a can opener
with everybody watching

the boy is still embarrassed by that fight on that corner

the old man can see his boy-self [still sitting on the front porch]

that grey horse and its wagon carting ice will come by soon



Nora Tribble
Grandmother of Victoria Pazonia Glenn Buffalo

COMPOSTED PRAYERS

(as heard by the almighty)

[A]pron

[B]lanket

[C]ouch

[D]oilies

powered arthritic palms

knuckled joints

FROM

Baltimore

[A]

1437 Kitmore Road

(1)

basement metal basin neck cradles

(2)

outdoor cellar door slams

TO

[D]

2331 W Firth Street

Philadelphia

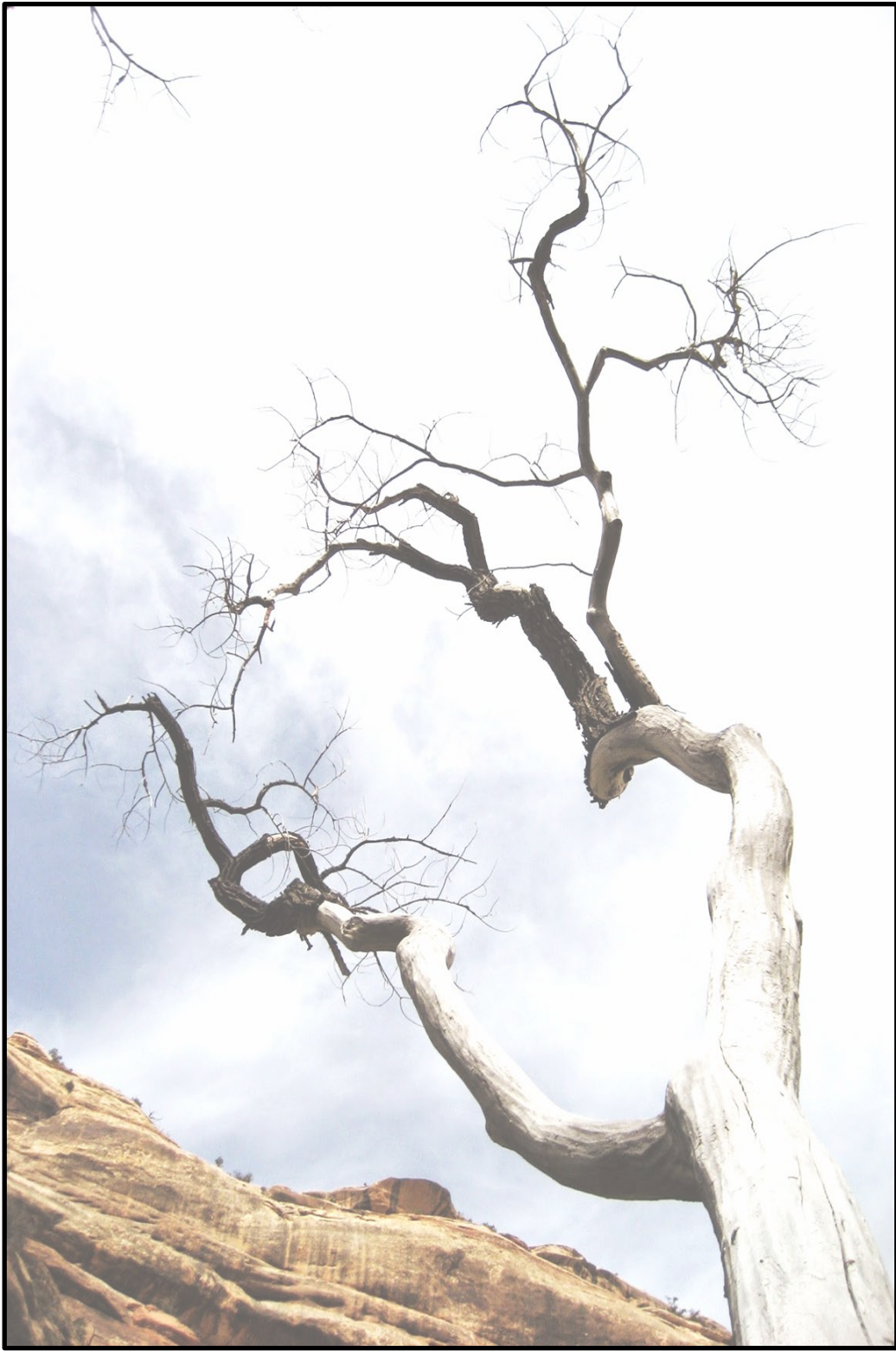
(1)

bleached front steps warm buttocks

(2)

plastic tablecloth clorox clean





HEARTWOOD

CHANGE OF SEASONS (2)

*Your doctors ordered physical therapy.
Bend your knees to roll over to your side—
Keep your knees bent—
Move your feet together over the edge of the bed.
Push yourself ^ up ^
To sitting—
—scoot your hips forward
Bring your feet to the floor.*

// `Breathe`

*Are you dizzy?
Let me know if you feel nauseous~*

// `Breathe`

*Who do you live with?
Are there stairs?
What is a regular day at home like?
Had any falls? Close calls?*

*Push yourself up. To standing—
—|Grab the walker|—
Wait for me to grab hold of you.
Look ahead.
Relax your shoulders from your ears—
Push it forward.
Drive this body away from its maker.*

The following piece is a redacted electronic chart note layered over Hank Willis Thomas's 2013 work *Trouble the Water*. The repeated, blacked-out variations of "There are no stupid questions" reflect the confusion and disorientation that often follow a new blood cancer diagnosis. The words of the phrase fracture and reorient; they further disorient when placed alongside the adjacent clinical language, which mirrors the disembodying process of having one's life suddenly medicalized.

This piece also responds to the silence I have witnessed in hospital rooms. After medical teams finish their rounds, I've had African American patients quietly ask me questions they were afraid to voice earlier—fearing their concerns would be judged as "stupid," or worse, as signs they didn't deserve access to costly care. In that silence, and in the erasures and redactions of this piece, I'm troubling the values of an industrial medical system built on efficiency, profit, and hierarchy—where not all bodies are treated as equal.

CHART NOTES

Assessment/Plan **In Progress**

ONC:

MDS/AML

- There are [REDACTED] stupid questions.
- Are there [REDACTED] stupid questions.
- There are no [REDACTED] questions stupid.
- There are stupid [REDACTED] stupid are questions.
- There [REDACTED] there stupid questions are.

*PB chimerism (4/30) pending

*Bone marrow aspiration: date TBD. **Patient preference for moderate sedation so unable to perform at bedside.**

HEME:

- #Stupid [REDACTED]
- Questions [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] no?
- [REDACTED] there [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] there [REDACTED]

#AGMA

[REDACTED] No, their questions are stupid. **Patient does not have signs of liver failure and has only mild memory impairment per wife.**

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] low suspicion
- #at risk for GVHD

REGIMEN-RELATED TOXICITIES:

- [REDACTED] there, questions stupid are.
- #nausea and vomiting
- #Deconditioning [REDACTED] expected post transplant. **Patient OOB as tolerated, PT following. Follow up with PT to determine if safe for discharge home, flight of step stairs into house no railing.**

- #Leukocytosis
- #anticipated pancytopenia
- #AKI on CKD
- #ICI Hepatitis

[REDACTED] Checklist:
Fluids/Electrolytes [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Lines [REDACTED]
Disposition
[REDACTED] Status

EAT MY MEDI[C/T] ATION

electronic health language document, may bi-as, renegade chart

55 yo black female wearing silver, driving with .9 mechanical lead pencil who appears younger than her stated age. Past medical history significant for fear of disability, driving aggressively while black nephew carries gun

- Oral: for complete history see note dated 1619
- Heart: shimmies good rhyme denies palpitations endorses good lovin'
- Lungs: commented stethoscope color, encouraged daily breathing exercise

Patient education on heart healthy diet

Time again and again on Regimen related toxicity of fried food.

At risk for eating second plus third serving

#mild amnesia - please monitor for CRS syndrome

Medications: increase blood pressure medication by 5 mg, recommend sedative as needed (especially when feeling angry at the world) or try meditation

Addendum: Post visit correspondence received through patient portal

I did decline to eat your meditation, not fried and probably won't taste good

#order stat CT if no improvement in next generation

DEAR LE(S)PHINCTER

It's your right F.H.Brevis. As neighbor to your one and only demi-bunion, I apologize. Deformations happened in response to the gravitational pull of stilettos (absolutely natural). As a lever, it's up to me to help hold the angle (not right). Forces aligned; musculotendinous junctions exerted the fork in the road. The foot—in fact newest patrol—is in parallel with Achilles. Vibrations pile up at heel strike. The ascending colon grips its contents. It smarts. Please do not take this personally. This is related to how fast you have been shoveling food into your mouth without chewing. The ring at the end of the tube will pass. I see you have been taking acidophilus—it's great toe. We are connected by Meridians. Please mind the Soma River lines; they are subject to tides and backflow. Demi-pointe verticalizes stomach and mouth, indeed a feat. We are both indispensable.

Yours truly,

FHB

SOMATA

*

Stomach's motor revved
a deeper pink than language

Wooden outdoor metronome

tick-
tock
throat milk clots

Emaciated stick figure draws
an ample torso
hemi-diaphragm exhales

**

[Still point]

Body tries to default to old grammar

```
      \ /      |
      / \      XXX
[ ] : < -c----- (EST-{{{
      / \      XXX
      |
```

How do vowels prostate?

Three plants are dying because the house is too cold. Hardwood floors leave barefoot toes porcelain white. Tea green shot glass on the bookshelf holds miniature dice. Black and white backgammon pieces conjure a neighborhood with roundabouts at every intersection. Who can sleep through the night without waking from body terror?

SOLITARY

dosed sedation delayed too long after the paralytic
by a mere fraction of the happy birthday song, multiplied by two.
Code Blue. Code Blue. Code Blue.
ocean, sadness, berry, forget me not, Kali
Bleeeewwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww

four tentacles pinched, off—

one
at
a
time

noise blanket dappled with dollops —

2mg, 4mg
repeat
that was
2mg, 4mg

knock the heart shaped eye
with that mallet in the chest drawer

vesper of awakened state
marrow vibrates, waves and snaps

anticipate

add weight

the slender wall that holds the torrent

drops

into darkness

It is an emergency.

THERE IS NO SAFETY IN NUMBERS

When the red light in the next lane turns green, your foot flexes—you nearly accelerate into the car in front. The fourth digit of your non-dominant hand presses into the hairline. Your fender meets an oblique bend of memory. Metallic taste of fear hydroplanes. The axis bone's stuttered exhale. Steel grip of reflex.

BOOMERANG SPINE

perpetual downward facing dog
you navigate errands

blinking walk sign
seen only in imagination

nothing you did caused your spine's excessive earth-bend

asymmetrical shoe laces—

mismatched socks
a broken code

insect colonies under foot—

earth answers back to those who listen deeply

like younger your bones

skin straightens when you lie in bed

weight of organs

nestled tenderly against the back body

Gravity's free traction

magnetized pull of sky—

heaven's repeated call

at dawn

at dusk

NOTCH PASS WASHINGTON

In line to catch a ferry,
backpacking on far side of Puget Sound.
One thing missing—wallet. Forced a U-turn.

On the trail's edge,
a statued postnatal cottontail—
a victim, body smaller than hand's life line

Unblinking eyes shine back
at two legged creature,
looming monstrous aside fairy tale endings.

I will not hang your bear bag on
shadowed limbs of white barked pines.

That famous poet told me to lie is a poem
Which is the very best lie to tell?

On this peak:

*Coworker performed a match.com marriage of brides

**Russian woman in American flag cap hikes with a margarita

***Toothless panting dog's tongue drags on ground

Hello, mystery camp.
Distant water.

Six liters hauled
up curves.

My switch back
angles the grand traverse.

At the periphery,
my sweaty pants
swung by the wind,
scare me.

A hummingbird keeps courting
my fuchsia windstopper.

It wings beating out the silence

My lowered bra straps soak in armpit sweat
Can dark breasts feel safe in the woods?

Tonight, resting under amniotic northern lights
I'll dream a white bear into my tent.

a trio of lost-man boys with open carry
float voices across the valley

The next morning, climbing Buck's horns,
I'll meet the Russian and her toothless dog

She forgot her cap—
purchased stars and stripes.

The only one
at the one store in Quilcene.

THE LONGEST NERVE

swift kick—
his rectum wrenches
irreversible shredding
every chair sears

*I want
I want
as a healer*

*a location for rage that isn't social media
voodoo*

to conjure specific good
channeled to my ancestors

*to gently
to gently
as a healer*

*dab shea butter on a whip bloodied back
rub skin chafed by irons*

soothe in the service of restitution
instead of the institution

FRACTURED LUMINESCENCE

My
broken
hands

cup water shrine

Count
back
time



FRACTURE



I'LL REMEMBER IT WRONG WHEN I DIE

seen enough rotted heads of lettuce
to make your eyes bleed

my neighbor, melon man, gave me two overripe slices, a tan ball cap because we both
have big crowns. Actually he's bigheaded, me my fro.
my other neighbor stopped lurching her quad cane down the middle of our street.
three... two...one, she texted. "Life is counting down."
the edge of my rubber tree aglow, like R2D2's lights. My plants are going to outer space
with me.

some cancers are not retractable
I am more interested in plants than people
leaflets leaning towards yellow sun
full of song water weekly

My coworker's husband asks
why black people don't kick off
and kill all white people

I keep him out of mind
ruined shellac fingernails
tapping out longevity and vanity
not the place to sit your ass
when you can't balance

Today a patient shared they got mostly cured of metastatic cancer using grounding stick
therapy. I too have been cured of some serious shit prostrating the earth. I really hate
that everybody dies. Why can't we all live forever seated shoulder to shoulder on the
edge of a swiss cheese plant

leaves swinging

DO NOT INVESTIGATE

'White homicide'

on trees

peeling bark

public entertainment

Who is deemed innocent by proxy of the almighty?

'Sweetchild'
stay close to water

green flash at dusk
is overdue

WHO IS SPORTING THE COLONIZERS VEIL TODAY?

Should I wear

across my shoulders

democracy

draped

not bone-straight

my hair

parted

zipper wide open

down the middle

shackled, ankles crossed

we have been
undone

IT'D BE A LOT EASIER

to see you if you weren't wearing dark clothes
walking your dog on that black rainy night
said the woman driving to the funeral

only the whites walk dogs with illuminated vests and headlamps

sent down as disposable
traveling dark earth's narrow shaft

not all non-white people
mostly all white not people

put it on a leash please take them for a walk
happen to be non-White, non-Lassi, non-Benji?

"Out, damned spot"
black lung, black death
and look—

how we care for our
pets.

The back story to the next poem *Fried Yams of Lomé, Togo* is that my first spiritual teacher, Godfred Amereka, was a Ghanaian man hired as the daytime guard of our home in Lomé, Togo. He had spent years in a Ghanaian prison for his role in a coup d'état sponsored by the American government. After his release, he was hired by the American Embassy in Lomé. Amereka and I spent countless hours together studying the Bible, which he had devoted himself to during his incarceration. Yet, when disputes arose with locals, he turned to his traditional ways of mediating—calling on the natural world and ancestral spirits. It was through Amereka's fluid movement between traditions that I first learned to embrace spiritual multiplicity.

A walk down memory lane takes me back to the sounds of women selling fried yams, belting out *KO LI KO JAAAAAH KEEEEEEEEEEEEEE*, and the sharp teeth-sucking sounds heard throughout the streets—interwoven with Togolese and French. In 2015, the sucking-sound gesture—common in African and Afro-Caribbean cultures—was banned in some schools in France. I use this sound, annotated as ↑↑, in a performance of my poem *Fried Yams of Lomé, Togo* as an act of reclamation. I used to dream of asking my dad whether his job would ever allow us to return to previous posts.

FRIED YAMS OF LOME TOGO

za

Lo me

To go

sh

SH SH

sh sh ↑↑

↓↓

ch

↑

ch ↑

ch

↑

ch ↑ ↑

un

um

uh uh

um

↑↑

prrrrist pstt pstt sa ↓ SA ↑ sa

yo vo vi yo vo vi donnez mois dix francs

↑↓

↑↓

↑↓↓↓

wawnt

to

go

baaa

to

Lo me

KO LI KO JAAAAAH KEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

pah pah pah pah

pa pa pa

paw paw

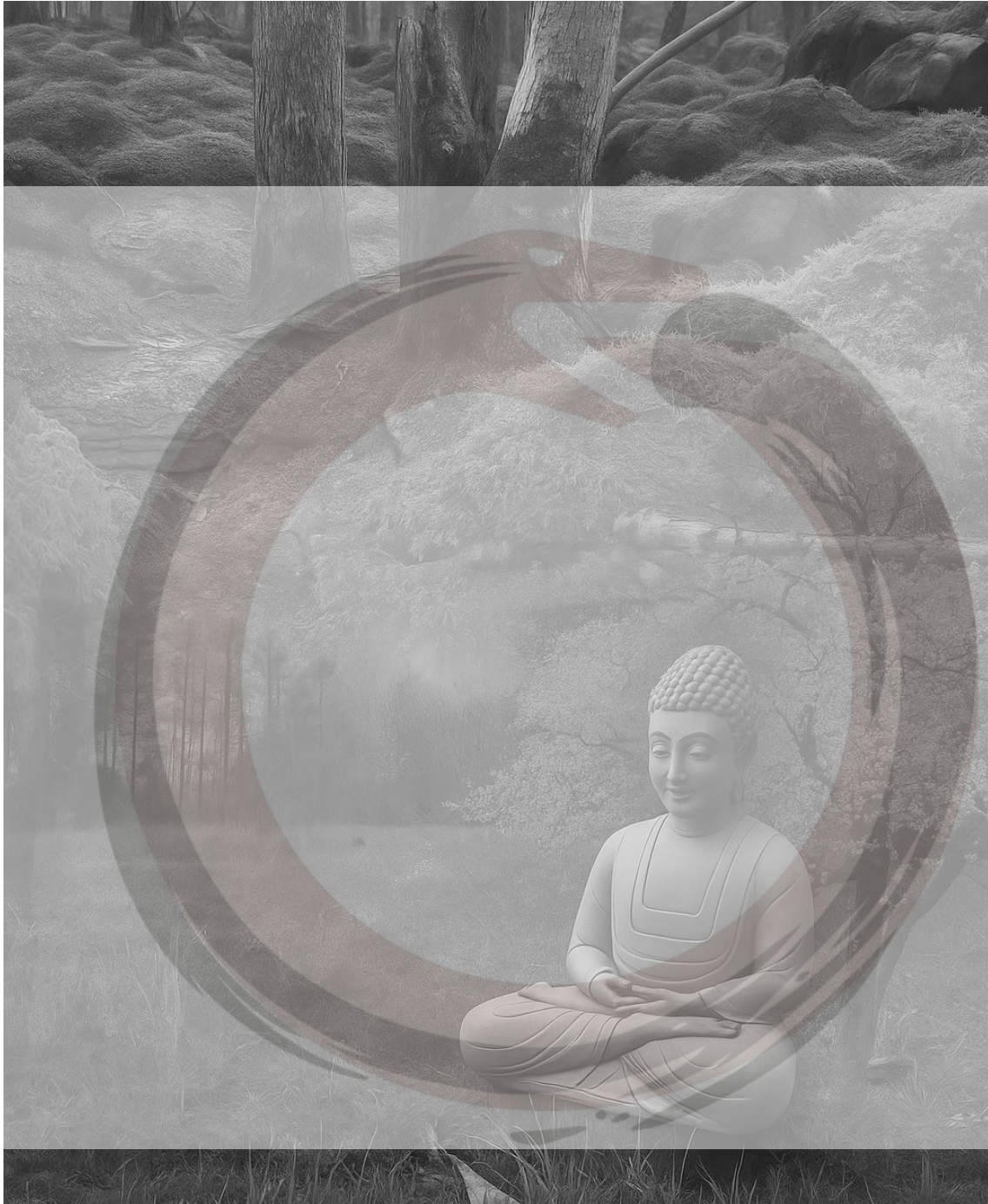
kan

wego

baaaaaachhkh



AFTERBREATH



The mossed forest and seated Buddha overlaid with ensō and ouroboros gesture toward spiritual multiplicity and layered time.

The Zen circle, called an *ensō*, drawn in calligraphy by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, represents the idea of interbeing. It suggests that all things are interconnected and co-exist—each thing relying on others, never existing in isolation. The *ensō* can be drawn with a deliberate gap, and here I lean into poetic leaps to engage with the space left open between the circle’s unclosed ends.

Our lineage a line whose ends don’t meet is fissured but not broken

I bring three aspects of the *ensō* into conversation: the space inside the circle, the space outside, and the gap as a portal or threshold. The space outside represents what lies beyond the body—auras, homes, neighborhoods, and communities. The inside is the body’s inner terrain—feelings, thoughts, and dreams. The thick line itself is a collection of 12.5 million Black dots—the body itself. One of them survived the transatlantic crossing: the woman from whom I am descended.

At times, I write from inside the line, adjacent to it, or gather fragments that have bled into the periphery. In this act of witnessing, I may be braiding strands, breaking chains, or conjuring a snake. The *ensō* transmutes into an *ouroboros* as my Buddhist lineage and African heritage meet. The circle grows scales, becoming a snake reaching for its tail. In the gap and the overlap, the four directions of time and space are implicated. The tail feels the pull of the encroaching head—the ends of the circle morph, dynamic.

The *ouro~ensō* holds multiplicity—different truths coexisting without needing to resolve. The gap becomes a portal, a space where the past and the “present moment” twine toward transformation.

CHANGE OF SEASONS (3)

In this busy urban hospital, a man without a bladder, lost to cancer, often waits for his multitasking providers.

A man carrying what once resided inside him, now external, which his doctor crudely calls his new man purse.

A man whose clear plastic bag slowly fills with yellow fluid.

A man with Parkinson's walked into the hospital with a normal gait, now reduced to a weeble-wobble.

When the closet door finally cracked open, when the coworker finally pushed down on the handle, out came a host of red-faced demons, rushing directly toward the patient. Out of the windowless storage closet, lined with abdominal binders, urinals, and hand sanitizer, they made their furious exit.

"And how did she know they were demons, you ask? That's obvious—they had horns."

From behind, she placed her hands on her patient's shoulders. He was a former Marine who'd fought in Vietnam for many years: a kind and gentle man who appeared unbroken by his experiences in war.

Now, it seemed, demons from his past were coming for him.

Or perhaps, it was she who had unleashed them.

TWICE-CORRECT CLOCK

vulnerable tock

death smokes earth

impact sprinkler churns

breath's final threshold

grimy bell rope swinging

casket's wooden door

surrender

BLUE~BLACK~MINUTE

unhoused

waves

stripped

cultural markings

I chant

an ocean

gather

~splintered sounds~

ROWS OF SILENCE

“African-rooted, culturally descended ways of meaning of speaking that emerged from the dungeon and dance of silence”

John Edgar Wideman’s “In the Praise of Silence”

for John Francis and Bob Kaufman

three bodies
inside
one note

Cold feet
Cold wind

an auditory hallucination
we are not in control but our mouths

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

I’m for Black words

~~space beneath exposure~~

shafts should be avoided

XXXXXX●

●XXXXXX

they walked to dance [hand]

body’s daily schedule
10 drops for Black humans

your silent walk sings a world of sound

soph’d lingua
shhhhhhhh

In my writing, I try to support moments of possibility in the gap, in the space, in the silence: an extra breath, a slight curve, where the next word can echo back toward itself differently. A space of potency. An unfolding.

This pause is a cousin to silence, the kind invoked by John Francis and Bob Kaufman, both of whom took vows of silence as political acts and creative practices.

In this kind of silence, seeds are planted. It makes way for the reforestation of the mind, a move toward expansive and sustainable futures. A restoration project.

In this country, people from the African Diaspora have been—and are being—personally and politically silenced. From the time of enslavement, with iron muzzles, bans on native languages, physical and psychological punishment, to modern structures like the school-to-prison pipeline, selective news coverage, and restrictive laws.

The African American relationship to silence can be complicated. I aim to reclaim silence from its punitive roots.

Silence, released from confinement to religious ritual or formal sanctuaries, enters everyday language: the poem, the line break, the page.

Silence as a space of personal and collective transformation.

A form of reverence anyone can access through intentional awareness, through breath, through line.

THINGS THAT MAKE MATTERS WORSE

a-gate

underwear
tourniquets
your (inner) thigh

Shattered star

zip tied to a rectangular frame

wet

smile erased

half

small fragment

a leftover dream

who said

Do Not Be Afraid?

green slug leaves its shiny trail

BELOW GROUND

< whole picture an empty bowl
rainbow runs parallel
a moving ovoid window >

< trees fold
passion trap
dark fragrance >

< counsel of owls
muddies sky
out pours a wide path >

< in Paris,
public ashtray
beside ham and cheese baguettes >

< fake news
reshaping truths
because you didn't see me >

< waving a finger
my liver cries
bloody heady steps >

< one cappuccino is enough
world wars began as wars inside,
mosquitoes buzzing across surface film >

< cluster of leaves shimmers
mercury seeps into the ground,
because you didn't see me doesn't mean >

< in difficult times
beauty lies under rubble,
your dusty hands
digging out miracles >

HAMSTRUNG BY REALITY TV

I would rage

robed monastics chanting

What good is that doing?

incense response to calamities

sandwiched catastrophes
demons parading a heart
warring factions potluck

Today I vocalize

a scratchy balm to conjure peace

laughing Buddha statue wink at me

a frozen river

tumbling to a thousand pieces

GLAZED KINDNESS

Buddha's crooked smile

seasoned treasures of Black life

collapsed branch

sprints under human heart



In this glazed bowl, my fear reflected

I've eaten all my tears



A cowslip blooms inside my teabag

there are multiple bodies to listen—

roots, sinews, eyes wide open



Pour all of your love into your warrior self



Catch me please

heart in a cubby hole

keeping Black hands balled in back pockets



Story remains unsatisfactory

(upper) mountain
(hidden) doubt
(firm) steps

ask someone who knew me before to tell you how much I've changed



A dowry for my least favorite cousin

_____ is _____
_____ like _____



Shedding skin does not cling to the body

3 mountains
MT valley
Turn the wheel of humanity

[righty tighty]

[lefty loosy]



Nothing more precise than

000000000000000000



This recycled tee shirt, its pit stains never creased
a baby's cry splits the speaker's bullshit in two



Do not spread hard butter on soft bread

stream opens a still mouth

Divination has no individual master

NOTES

Photo 1

In the top photo, Victoria P. Buffalo sits front row, far right, among the Women's Service Guild of Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia—a circle of Black women rooted in service, faith, and mutual support. Below, her mother, Fannie Tribble Glenn, is pictured. Known to be a perfect shot, Fannie's skill with a gun ultimately forced her family to flee to the North. She was married to an itinerant preacher who got her pregnant nearly every time he returned home. She finally left him after bearing 13 children. Fannie raised her children with fierce love and unwavering discipline.

Photo 2

Gracie Starke's family tree layered over a collage of tree trunk photographs I've taken.

Softwood Memory

Gracie P. Starke [daughter of James and Martha Vaughn, b. 12/23/1915 in Brunswick County, VA] was the sister of Chaney L. Jones [b. 8/25/1919, Brunswick County].

Chaney L. Jones was Irvin Hicks Sr. guardian after the passing of his mother Catherine Vaughan(s) [b. 1913 died of kidney failure in 1951] when he was thirteen.

Irvin Hicks Sr. [American Ambassador to Ethiopia, 1994-1996] is the father of Geneviève Hicks [b. 7/8/1969] Karim Hicks [b.10/24/72] and Irvin Jr. Hicks [b.5/19/1962].

Photo 3

Joseph Quinton Buffalo [son of James A. and Lily Ranson Buffalo of Wake County NC b. 4/3/1913], father of Donita Buffalo Hicks [b. 6/6/1944]. Sole Proprietor and baker at Buffalo's Bakery [1810 South Street, Philadelphia//now closed]. His wife Victoria Pazonia Glenn Buffalo [daughter of Rev and Mrs. George W. Glenn of Saluda County, South Carolina] locked him out of Firth Street.

The Balm

Co-written with Donita Buffalo Hicks [graduate Philadelphia High School for Girls in 1962], my mother, during her move from her home in Fort Washington, Maryland, to Collington Senior Living [2024].

Photograph found among the papers of her sister, Audreen Ballard Buffalo [wife of author Dr. Allen B. Ballard].

Poem written before discovering that the person pictured was Vertamae Grosvenor [culinary griot, cook, writer, actress, traveler, and NPR commentator]. Audreen and Vertamae appear together [alongside Alice Walker, June Jordan, Toni

Morrison, Lori Sharpe, Nana Maynard, and Ntozake Shange] in the photograph featured on the cover of *The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture* by Courtney Thorsson.

Photo 4

Multiple exposure photograph of Vertamae Grosvenor in her kitchen apartment in NYC.

Crown Royal Takes Home

Wilbur M. Vaughn [b.10/6/1921], brother of Chaney Jones—lived at 1437 Kitmore Road for many years, cared for by his sister.

Photo 5

My maternal grandfather's parents on their wedding day, overlaid with a hand-drawn family tree from my maternal grandmother's lineage.

Institutional Food

While residing in Buffalo, New York Audreen Ballard began exhibiting signs of dementia. She begrudgingly allowed my brother to transport her—and some of her belongings—to my mother's home in Fort Washington, Maryland.

Donita Buffalo took care of her sister there until they got into a fisticuffs that ended in Donita falling and breaking a wrist. Institutionalized Audreen—an aggressive and uncooperative resident.

This rupture—marked the beginning of my mother's failing.

Mom Said to CPR

Audreen (Ballard) Buffalo, Donita's older sister, died on Easter [2025].

The author of beadwork—she also penciled *Meet Oprah Winfrey* published by Random House in 1993 and articles including *Lena!* For Essence magazine's May 1985 issue.

Auntie With That Terrible Limp

A tribute to the toll of labor and the quiet dignity of doing what it takes—without applause—to ensure your children have what they need. The cost is physical, generational, and carried in silence.

Photo 6

Believed to be a young Odessa Glenn, sister of Victoria Buffalo, though identity unconfirmed.

Undescended

This is a poem with visual components that explores the complexity of race, family, and inheritance. I wrote it as someone who will not have biological children, but who has many nibblings—nieces, nephews, and chosen family—with a range of racial identities. The poem wrestles with what it means to belong, and with the rupture that choice creates in the context of lineage.

Increasing Gears

The unrelenting pressure of trying to survive on government support. It captures the daily grind—deciding between subsidized daycares, stretching thin meals, managing what's handed down or left over. The poem gives voice to the quiet exhaustion of those who are expected to move faster and give more with less. It speaks to the frustration, the numbness, and the craving for relief. It honors the people who keep going, even when every choice feels like a trade-off

Photo 7

Chaney Jones with her granddaughter, Ebony Johnson. The adjacent ensō holds words 'Stillness' and 'Moving,' evoking generational presence.

Isolation Room

Irvin Hicks Sr., born in Baltimore [graduate of Dunbar High School in 1956], started off work as a State Department mailroom clerk and retired as an American Ambassador. Social drinking—a large part of life as a diplomat.

Photo 8

Victoria P Buffalo holding a certificate of 20 years of civil service with the U.S. Navy. Behind her is one of the many pages—this one typed—that I found as evidence of her prolific writing, reflecting on her own mother's strength and legacy.

Conversation with Orleans and Bond Street Corner

Based on a conversation one afternoon with my dad Irvin Hicks Sr., reminiscing about his life as a young boy.

My father is not historically a talker—this was a gem of an afternoon.

Photo 9

Nora Tribble, my great-great-great-grand mother, photographed in the South before the Great Migration. She is the grandmother of Victoria P G Buffalo.

Composted Prayers

My grandmothers, Chaney Jones—who lived on Kitmore Road in Baltimore—and Victoria P. G. Buffalo—who lived on Firth Street in Philadelphia—each offered me shelter. I spent many nights as an adult under their roofs. Spending time with my elders is a ritual that infuses me with joy and carries me forward as nothing else can.

Photo 10

Taken by Geneviève Hicks

Photo 11

Taken by Geneviève Hicks

Photo 12

Taken by Geneviève Hicks

Photo 13

Taken by Geneviève Hicks.
Created using AI and enhanced by elements from canva

Photo 14

Taken by Geneviève Hicks

