

Mahogany L. Browne & Sean Mason

CHROME VALLEY

1. Homer, Louisiana (Prelude)

—

Two

When I say freedom

What I mean is American flag

Knotted in the spine and ripped from the root

When I say root

What I mean is Detroit Red

What I mean is Malcolm X

What I mean is Barack Obama

What I mean is history repeating itself

What I mean is history rewriting itself

What I mean is apple pie

With a slave owner on the side

Four

When I say root

What I mean is Fannie Lou Hamer

What I mean is size 10 and no laces

What I mean is history repeating itself

What I mean is history rewriting itself

What I mean is apple pie

With a prison warden on the side

When I say side

What I mean is handcuffed and kicked,

Stripped and water hosed,

Bare and ass and thighs debated on its firm

During prime time

When I say prime time

What I mean is ratchet opera,

Hood rat antics turned fabulous,

Turned appropriated for honey

Boo boo chile consumption

When I say consumption

What I mean is—O, say can you see

Miley Cyrus and Raven-Symoné got a TV show called

America Ain't Got No Talent

But we twerk and shake and can sell anything

On top a black woman's ass
And turn it solid gold

Five
Your people come from Homer, Louisiana
And all you know is a tale of the night when
Your grandpa Lester
Stole your great grandma Octavia
And great grandpa Nell
From the spitshine sharecropper
Into a dirt-poor freedom up North.
How they threatened to lynch him
And his dog before daybreak,
How his slick mouth was a gunshot wound
waiting.
And you never heard him whistle Dixie no.
Only his southern twang riding high in Oakland, California
Brown cracked fists shielding his eyes from the top of the porch
Every morning like prayer —
And watch the sun rise

One
When you are a Black writer in America:
It gets harder to ignore the bodies.
To step over the nameless namesakes
And point apparatus to the sun.
They say writing about the almost dead only gets harder.
My grandmama sighs "pray for them baby."
I think "My God! Is this the fight?
To be Black and beautiful and breathing?"

2. Redbone Dances

—
If you ain't never watched your parents kiss
Ain't never had them teach you
'Bout the way lips will bend and curve against a lover's affirmation
Oh how that sunrise got a name
It sound like a blues song
A woman's heart breaking

If you ain't watched the knowing nod of sweethearts worn away
As soft as a speaker box's blown out hiss
Oh how that sunrise got a name



It sound like a blues song

If you ain't sure there was a time
When their eyes
Held each other like a nexus
Breaking the lock to dip dark marbles
Into hopeful corners of a shot glass

If you ain't never known a Saturday night slick with glittered promises
And clouds wrapped wet in a Pendergrass croon

If you ain't been taught
How a man hold you close
So close
It look like a crawl

If you ain't had the memory
Of your mother and father sliding hip to hip
Their feet whisper a slow shuffle and shift
Her hand on his neck grip the shoulder of a man
That will pass his daughters bad tempers
And hands like bowls
It sound like a blues song

If you ain't watched a man lean into a woman
His eyes slide across her bronze
His hands pillared in her auburn hair
Her throat holds the urge
To hear how her voice sounds
Against the wind of him
If your skin can't fathom the fever of
Something necessary as this

Then you can't know the hurricane of two bodies
Then you can't know the hurricane of two bodies

Then you can't know the hurricane of two bodies
Then you can't know the hurricane of two bodies
Then you can't know the hurricane of two bodies
Then you can't know the hurricane of two bodies
Two bodies
Two bodies
Two bodies

How the bodies can create
The prospect of a sunrise
Oh how that sunrise got a name
It sound like a blues song
A woman's heart breaking

From the record player skipping
The sky almost blue

From the record player skipping
The sky almost blue

From the record player skipping
The sky almost blue

From the record player skipping
The sky almost blue

From the record player skipping
The sky almost blue

From the record player skipping
The sky almost blue

From the record player skipping

3. The Blk(est) Night 1993

—

Jesus came to the crib
Saw the blk(est) girl with her box braids
And hammer in hand
Climbed past the steel-gated screen door
Looked at the shorty with a gleaming scalp
Shining bright
Blk girl lips smack at the sight of jesus
Everybody 'round these parts bend corners quick
So she like where you been?
She questions his arrival
Late as a summer sunset but still hot
And on time
Praise be
Jesus don't hold grudges
Come right into the crib

Blk girl staring with salty eyes
As fly as he made her
And he like:
That's good

4. Best Time III

—

Me too, me too
Me too, me too, me too

Me too escapes a whimper from the echoing
The room now cold enough to clink our teeth

The best time we had as a teenager
Was the last time we saw Deon alive
Was the last time we saw Deon alive
Was the last time we saw Deon alive

The best time we had as a teenager
Was the last time we saw Deon alive
Was the last time we saw Deon alive
Was the last time we saw Deon alive

Sideline smack-talker with unwelcoming eyes
Boa constrictor of a boy
He took a girl's stuff even after she pushed him away

She tells us the story in the locker room
Other girls earshot near
The newspaper bleeds his obituary

All our girl bodies hold up the steam crusted walls

The steam crusted walls

All our girl bodies hold up the steam crusted walls
All our girl bodies hold up the steam crusted walls
The steam crusted walls

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All our girl bodies hold up the steam crusted walls
All our girl bodies hold up the steam crusted walls
The steam crusted walls

Me too, me too
Me too, me too, me too

Was the last time
We saw Deon alive

5. Kerosene Litany

—

I wish I could break all the chains holding me
Nina Simone

Today
I am a Black woman in america
And I am singing a melody ridden lullaby
It sounds like the gentrification of a brooklyn stoop
The bodega and laundromat burned down on the corner
The people on the corner
Lock and key their chromosomes
A note of ash and inquiry on their tongues

Today
I am a Black woman in a hopeless state
I will apply for financial aid and food stamps
With the same mouth i spit poems from
I will ask the angels of a creative god to lessen the storm
And I will beg for forgiveness if ever i curse
The rising dawn

Today
I am a Black woman in a body of coal
I am combustible and no one cares to know my name

I am a nameless fury, I am a blues scratched from
The throat of Ms. Nina
I am always angry
I am always a bumble hive of hello

Today
I am a cold country, a certain storm,
A heat swell and audacity of being woman

Today
I am a woman, a brown and black and brew woman
Dreaming of a freedom
Today
I am a mother, and my country is burning
I forget how to flee from such a flamboyant backdraft
I'm too in awe of how ravishing i look
Ablaze

6. Trivia

—

What is a bullet
What is a bullet
What is luck to a Black body

What is luck to a Black body

What is a bullet
What is a bullet
What is luck to a Black body

What is a bullet
What is a bullet
What is luck to a Black body

What is a bullet
What is a bullet
What is luck to a Black body

What dies when no matter whom it loves wrongly
What is a hollowing instrument
What else is there
What is a certain gone
A collapsing



Or even an implosion
If you're lucky
What is luck to a Black body

What dies when no matter whom it loves wrongly
What is a hollowing instrument
What else is there
What is a certain gone
A collapsing
Or even an implosion
If you're lucky
What is luck to a Black body

What is a bullet
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What dies when no matter whom it loves wrongly
What is a hollowing instrument
What else is there
What is a certain gone
A collapsing
Or even an implosion
If you're lucky
What is luck to a Black body

What is a bullet
What is a bullet

What is a new and improved lynching
What is a new and improved lynching

What is a new and improved lynching
New and improved lynching

Lynching
Lynching
Lynching

Lynching
Lynching

Lynching
Lynching

Lynching
Lynching
Lynching

7. Working Title

—

The name of this poem is
How to write a poem about Ferguson
Or

The name of this poem is
How a black man dies and no one makes a sound
Or

The name of this poem is
Everywhere is Ferguson
Or

The name of this poem is
When the moonrise sounds like gunshots
Or

The name of this poem is
How to teach your babies to walk and not run, ever
Or

The name of this poem is
How to teach your babies to carry a wallet the size of their smile
Or

The name of this poem is
How to smile and not make yourself a target
Or

The name of this poem is
How to write a poem the same size of Emmett Till's lungs
Or

The name of this poem is
How to write a poem about America's thirst
Or

The name of this poem is
Black blood'll keep you thirsty
Or

The name of this poem is
I'm Still Thirsty
An American Horror Story
Or

The name of this poem is
How to write an escape route from a tornado
Or

The name of this poem is
How to write an escape route
When the tornado's name is Stop and Frisk
Or
The name of this poem is
How to walk the streets without fearing someone will cut your neck open
Or

The name of this poem is
How to walk into a boardroom
Without fearing someone will cut your legacy open

How to walk without asking for it
How to walk without asking for it
How to determine what "asking for it" looks like
The name of this poem is
How "asking for it" feels like a church bombing
Or

The name of this poem is
How to not intimidate nobody in three small steps

Or

The name of this poem is
How to use your science books as Teflon
And how that still might not work

Or

The name of this poem is
How to write about that one time you held a gun

Or

The name of this poem is
How to write about that one time you had a gun pointed to your face

Or

The name of this poem is
How to write about that one time you had a gun pointed to your face

Or

The name of this poem is
How to write about that one time you had a gun pointed to your face

Or

The name of this poem is
How to write about that one time you had a gun pointed to your face

Or

The name of this poem is
How to write a poem from the perspective of a cop's gun
A cop's taser
A cop's baton
A cop's boot

The name of this poem is
How to write a poem without repeating yourself
The name of this poem is
It ain't got no name

The name of this poem is
A series of numbers
The numbers sing fear at night
And warn me sweetly
You should be afraid to have a son
The name of this poem is

It ain't got no name

It ain't got no name

It ain't got no name

It ain't got no name

It ain't got no name

It ain't got no name

It ain't got no name

It ain't got no name

8. A Chorus of Hands

—

There was that one time I thought I could recover my soul
From the warmth of a random man's mouth.
It must've been on the dance floor in San Francisco
After I left my high school sweetheart in search of myself.
He had a way of not looking at me
When I talked to him.
Or looking through me
When I talked to him.
Almost like the time I thought my father,
Home fresh from prison,
Could never hear me clearly,
Unless
I spoke to him real real fast.
Sped through his sentences like a runaway vehicle,
In the back of a vehicle,
I spilled
Every fact I stored in my memory,
Waiting for his attention to return.
Until his hands sliced through the air like a switch.
Until his open palm landed on my mouth like a firecracker.
Closed me shut real good.
So there I was,
On the dance floor,
Forgetting about the man that asked me to choose him over poetry.
Forgetting about the man that only had rough hands to father me.
A trick he learned from his father.
A trick my grandfather learned from his country.

9. If We Praise (We Are Beautiful)

—

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

The names of our fallen
We lift the broken with our light
The names of our fallen
We praise their names and the hands that write

Praise the mouth that speaks
Praise the truth that soars
From the spine of the most nimble creatures

Praise us creatures
And our immodest fragility
Praise us creatures
Praise the humility

The learned spaces, the space that dissolves
And births the wind, praise the wind
And the storms that change course

Praise the creatures born and reborn
Praise the boom bap split, silence, shattered
Praise the fragmented bodies and heavy breathing like rain
Praise the rain, feeding our hearts and homes and leaves

Praise the green, praise the Black
Praise the bullet breaking brown flesh like fruit



Breaking brown flesh like fruit
Breaking brown flesh like fruit

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
And worth the stretched breath of the unimagined and unseen
Praise the nightmares we've endured
The salt we've tasted in our release
Praise the divine living
And our voices reaching towards the sky
singing our own name
Praise the fruit
Praise the stomachs and minds unfed
Praise the hungry
Praise the God in everything
Praise yourself
Your own flesh
Sinewy, boundless, overweight
Glorious and alive
Praise the life
Praise the durable love
Praise our sovereign journey
Praise the destruction
How it reminds us that ribs heal
And purpled lips return
Perfect and pointing towards the sun
Praise the burial
Praise the new day
And the healing



Praise the repetition
Praise the repetition
Praise the repetition
The times it will take us to remember that

We are beautiful
Beautiful
Beautiful

We are beautiful
Beautiful
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We are beautiful
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We are beautiful
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We are beautiful
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Beautiful

10. Crowned

—

If the mouth is a house
Then most days I am homeless

My Mama taught me
Women are loved best when silent

Once I leaned into a man's shoulder blade
I haven't found my tongue ever since

I hear my father is a dream boat
It is no wonder I am afraid of the sea
Each wave carries a sound I don't have the courage to carry

If the mouth has four walls
Then is the roof a spotless wonder?
My Mama fetched her voice box for a pipe once
I've been scared of smoke ever since

No mouth
No cave
No casket
No shadow

My mouth harbors love like a well
Except most days the container is brittle
I've been taught to fear large bodies of water
And boats
And men with the collarbone of a man i can't remember
But will always relocate the familiar
Hum

Mommy mouth screamed at a gun twice



Each shot siren sung like an air raid
Or a prison break
Or a black man's back
I am always concerned with my tone
San Quentin children learn they place
In the limestone
Somewhere;

My father got a skeleton awake and swaying
I'm still afraid to go home
I've learned to live amongst a commune of ghosts
Each ghost got a special something
And remind me of sin
Where all the women talk real loud
Let men marry them or not
Hit them or not
Leave them then come back
Years passed and skin sagged
Locks unchained
Mouths unhinged
And swinging hello
To any two-bit hustler with swagger

No matter
If he arrive with another woman's scent tucked in his collarbone
My mommy used to sing to me
I've no proof
But my spirit whispers sunsilk memoir in my dreams

Anytime I hear a horn scuttle across the dusty room
I think:
This sound smells like my mother
It's the best kind of sleep
Way after dusk
Well before I wake
With a bullet between my teeth