GIVING VOICE TO “THE INCIDENT”

Poems by members of WORD: Performance Poetry at Yale
Pray full of the rolling dark, 
lest we forget 
that bitter taught us: 
our voice treading 
in the path of the past, 
liberty unborn. 
Beneath every God, 
a rising beat, 
blood harmonies.

We sighed, 
facing the slaughtered 
light, our song, a full-faith 
chastening: 
Our feet brought us, 
not a White “victory.”

May our tears 
star the skies, 
gleam as the sun 
of a steady hand.

Resound the hope, 
weary fathers; 
we have come.

We have come.
In English class one Thursday, I am asked to do a close reading of a photograph of a dead Black boy from the Soweto Uprising in South Africa. We discuss camera angle. We discuss lighting. A White boy, whose voice reverberates with centuries of a crisp authority, not unlike a whip crack, not unlike a sonic boom, even compares it to the Pieta. Sitting speechless in my seat, I recall the story of crucifixion, the way the condemned have difficulty inhaling because their lungs are open so damned wide, and I feel my chest gaping with all the words I do not have; when you are left without a language, you become a nervous condition.

As a poet, this is my greatest fear.

In Introduction to Third World Studies, I learn that I can blame the Enlightenment for the constant desire we encounter to classify to know to get to the bottom of, but the logic of racial violence is built on a foundation of quicksand, what is truth and reconciliation in the face of a years long trauma not the lynching, but the fear of it, when the violence at the heart of the colonized is a well you can’t see the bottom of and you are so close to death that each day feels like your life flashing before your eyes because the condition of this country is chronic.

Every time I write, I pray that this will be the poem that cures me of my ailments, but with each line, all I do is cough up more lonely, more tremble, more nervous tic, if you ask my poems to point to where it hurts, they will cry out EVERYWHERE— I came, I saw, I pointed to the point of conquest; this entire country is a nervous condition but only half of us are diagnosed with it: Anosognosia — definition: deficit of self-awareness, a condition in which a person with some disability seems unaware of its existence,
the rest of us called Cassandra, the only one who believes what we know is to come, force fed a diet of disbelief that only results in starvation advised to medicate ourselves into a stupor or even better, just die.

When Wilson painted his fear onto that wall, his mission was not to absolve us. Here, we can talk about the lighting. Here, we can talk about angle. These, are the tools of his diagnosis. Our condition does not end when we leave this room. But now, at least, maybe you all will know that you’re hurting.
when I was younger
I used to cry into the arms of those who hurt me
in my family
the only way we know of moving forward
is back through the broken glass that brought us wherever we are
a bandage never fills a wound the same way a shard can
after all pain only hurts on the way out
can’t be dangerous if you never let it leave you
my mother always talks about me to me
I say only nothing out loud
she is no good at being cradled
so I wrap myself in muttered sorry
tell me what they meant to say
reach through my lips to find the words
brother says
its not stealing if its family
mommy say
childhood can’t last forever anyway
it too must step through broken glass to heal
finest china of women taught me
fragile is weak
so I let hurt become a steaming pot
that whistles in whispers and boils itself into vapor
this way
I learn not to touch that which will burn me

at dinner we clean the knives with alcohol and our wounds with sea salt
I stuff cotton between my ears and my kin
think i finally learn not to love
those who scorn me

I watch the cuts mingling
In my mother’s arms
And she calls her skin mosaic
She winces and it must be a smile
My mother taught me beauty
is anything the pain left behind
So I carry all our dead parts around inside
and hope my body to be home,
even when it feels like a coffin
tell my English teacher “family” is a word you spell anyway you like
and take out letters
until it starts to sound like a friend
and I etch their faces into the soles of my feet
just to pretend they are my blood
best friend cuts me out of her life
for trying to heal with bandage in the proximity of blade
and I think maybe we arent the only ones who love with stiff bodies filled to the brim
with bruises
i make myself into a weapon
just to get close enough to fill the space in her hands
just to fall far enough into orbit not to feel like space again
sometimes I dont know the difference between crush and cradle
maybe this is why I mispelled family last summer and mourned in my mothers arms
there is nothing closer to a star than burning alive
I crumble
she collapses
and we meet as we are
in the same vacuum of generational trauma
I finally understand why she is no good at being cradled
there is glass all around us yet we feel no friction when we run
who could tell her this is what we look like whole
wasnt she wrong about what it is to be fragile
broken is where black family finds it names in each of our footsteps
we learn this is the only way we know how to love:

teeth chipped and missing--still smiling
meal, hearty; pot, steaming; gas still escaping
holding on tight
even if only air to atmosphere
only home
still home
even if the doors never lock.
there is a special place in hell
where the only demons are the trees
dark and thin
slick with blood
they snatch
the soul
right through a black boys lips
and watch his corpse dance without its partner
for eternity

sometimes the angels come down to watch
spread his daughters’ skins out over the lawn of bones
so atlas’s dark shoulder blades don’t cut where they lie on his many backs

them trees hug a black boy like a pomegranate they’re trying to burst
until his mouth pools with blood
and the svelte bodies below tilt their necks back to dicker the seeds down with wine
you know,
pomegranate don’t stain the lips of angels
so the legends say
hell lies the man that bloodied his mouth with his own seed

here lies the souls too niggardly to warrant a private punishment
he will be tortured in the same way that his sons will
and their sons
and the daughters too if they don’t lay themselves down properly for us to rest on in leisure
the legends say
you can tell the worth of a black boy by the way he dies
there is no Elysium behind these gates for a man whose life is worth too little to judge
so we know to plant a tree in the fields of hell
each time a black boy trudges out of the ocean

we don’t watch his shade, until it is ripe enough to snatch out of life’s rhythm
and that might be 12
or 21
or however old that boy tamir rice was
when someone puts a black boy in the ground
his soul blooms here at the end of roots scratching at the thick air,
blooms scratching,
like he can dig himself out of hell’s embrace
blooms scratching,
like he’s going somewhere.
roots coil around his neck until he dangles enough to make them branches,
and we watch him wriggle and twitch like a church bell.
my god
is too great to come down here and see this
but we know
this too made eternal love
his jig, and the stage he swings from
his ending
and the mouths who taste it
this too, made eternal love.
when red and blue first danced
they made the color purple
the color purple
knows no aftermath beyond itself
beyond being a pigment
a color to paint something sweet
maybe a body
tender enough to crush into paste and preservation
a body so sweet
it decays the teeth of the ground that swallows it
i drive through north philly and pass nothing but
purple faces
who stare at me with painted pride from the sides of
crumbling buildings
i see eyes who will never see anything beyond the building across from their deathbed
their portraits are adorned with every affectation but what became of them
the walls tell us they were 21
an angel
beloved
none of the walls say they were murdered
but the empty in their acrylic eyes tell us they all were
red and blue lights pass through my neighborhood
tell boys that look like me stories about how red and blue danced and made a ghost
called it purple
told it never to ask for anything beyond itself
like yes
be art, when you cannot be human
or yes, imitate life, when you cannot hold it
be art or shadow or ghost
whichever you find the most visible
and somehow
the black death painting the neighborhood
became better for a mural than a movement
somehow, the buildings outside of the city are pristine
there, men in blue die and get history books
here, purple is just something to crush between mortar and pestle
something to grind into paste,
to scrape from pavement and mount to wall
as if death is an art or something
a legacy, the magnum opus of a chocolate boyhood
i ride through north philly
and imagine the walls are screaming
in this life
they want to be sweet enough to decay everything that killed them
maybe that's why all the buildings are crumbling
why the streets are cracked,
splintering where their blood was spilled
there are faces on the sides of buildings who want nothing more
than to be able to stop smiling
they knew a mural would not be enough to prevent the next one
they grew up in neighborhoods built out of murals before
becoming one
in my city art is an albatross of compromise
we make portraits when we can't afford coffins
when we can't afford justice
when we can't afford an aftermath beyond ourselves
i ride into west philly and the murals become lectures
they tell us to put the guns down
to keep going, to smile
that a system isn't deadly if it lets you paint its victims out of history
that a city isn't broken if it looks like a mosaic
that nothing is dangerous enough to change
i used to see the murals and wonder why no one stopped to stare
where all the people went
where all the people were going
people made into bodies,
bodies made into two-dimensional screams, screams scrawled into walls and painted over
so that we can continue to ride past them
continue to see the murals and smile,
to keep going forward;
and never notice the graveyards surrounding us
what is summer if
not the killing (season)
when tongues become
hungry for more blood
more sugar wrapped
in a soft perfume
coaxed from the mouth
of a tasteless sorrow

didn’t you know
you only get one first death
you’d better spend it wisely
watch your faith die wisely
watch time do its forgetting work

your kin only die once
brave it
watch their blood dry
the concrete
the color of undone (human)
show you what the
inside of a dying thing
looks like

our summer is what if
not the murder
(season) the white picket fences with
black underbellies
(seasoned) blood don’t show up too easy
on those nights
when string and skin
look too much the same
pull enough and both will unravel
into the hands of the waiting dawn
where mothers stand
and watch their children swallowed
by the wrong kind of water

if a city floods and another burns
will they tire each other out
when the whole world is undone
what ceases to exist
how much poetry does it take
to make a dying thing
beautiful again
or for the first time
after so much life
has made it frightening
enough to kill

the thing that makes the Black boy unkillable
is his mother's love
she her own religion
prophet and congregation
eternal life is a beautiful offering
until it means being killed
to be reborn
as someone else's beautiful thing
to hold close at night

did you know
Jesus might have
suffocated to death
on the cross
we're not too sure but
he might have hung there
so long his breathing reversed
the problem
not so much the taking
but the release
too much of the needed thing

Jesus died because he couldn't give back
that which he had taken for himself
so you see
to be christlike must mean
to be selfish only

with the things we do need
to live a death
where what kills us
is not what actually kills us
to become the world
after we are drowned in it

do you remember
the summer
every week
saw a Black death
where the air was of
the same heat that must have
filled Jesus's lungs
and it felt like the rain
would never come
do you remember
praying for the flood
for this earth
to be washed anew
for the killing season
to let go of
the breath it
had been hoarding
i remember
a hand held to the sky
braced for the storms
that never came
i remember
breathing for all of us
praying for an open
sky for all us
air umuddied by hands
that have seen too much
of these killing seasons

i am still waiting
for the flood
that brings the resurrection
for summers
more noise than casualty

i know when
it rains it pours
(Black) when it pours
it floods (biblical)
and the after is only
what we’ve made it
a white dove
a dry rock
an arc still
riding the floodwaters
(biblical)
when my TA tells my class that she is fearful of motherhood,  
i don’t immediately know where the tightness in my chest comes from;  
don’t know i have uncovered a truth lodged so deeply that i cannot sense its presence  
until the moment i feel it untether, find myself wanting to reply me too.

i realize i am afraid of a life lived in snatches of stolen breath,  
in the gasping air that i will try to save for my children,  
in between goodbyes that seem to unstick themselves from my throat too soon  
and warnings that hang in the air until it becomes too dense to inhale.
i fear a life marked by moments spent waiting:  
by the door, by the phone, by the skin of my teeth  
waiting until the world reminds me that my children are too precious to be true.

i am scared to die a thousand deaths in quiet progression.  
to know that each skipped heart beat is a countdown to an end i have seen before.  
this is black motherhood: suspended sentence, slow surrender,  
endless anticipation anxious to turn me into dread, fashion me into guilt.
is it selfish to bring a child into a world that already wishes they were dead?  
is it foolish to believe i can love a child enough to make them sacred,  
to transform them into untouchable, safe?

my mother tells me she regrets raising children in this country.  
forgive me, she pleads when the nightly news plays its unrelenting death march.  
forgive me, she whispers when ghosts are made of children who look like me,  
when their forms burn visages behind her eyelids as she tries to sleep.  
i do not wish for a life spent atoning for the offense of loving my children,  
of trying to erase the unholy knowledge that there are lives that do not matter,  
that i am capable of creating a life that does not matter.

how can i ever understand what it means to give birth to a child born criminal,  
born so steeped in original sin that they can never know righteousness?  
how do you teach a child to be kind when karma cannot create an alternate ending,  
to be good when it makes no difference?  
to dream in uneasy unrest, one eye open, fingers splayed wide:  
surrendering? reaching? maybe black hands mold them into same.
how do you make a child look in the mirror and see something beautiful, something made fearfully and wonderfully, desperately, lovingly, even when all the world sees is burden sees bloody, broken, danger, dark thing, shadow sees nobody at all.

how can my mother be anything but forgiven when each morning, she measures her children by the empty they will one day leave behind? when all that stands between her children and the world are her own trembling hands, grasping onto something she knows she cannot hold.
“What have you done?” replied the LORD. “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground. Now you are cursed and banished from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield its produce to you. You will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” —Genesis 4:10

The acre is a semi state.
Only a half-meadow lies in the wake of a petal’s grief.
And somewhere
under the fisheye of starlight
an entire plain is belting its swan song.
Ballad gutted over basin hums its last notes into a softening soil.
The greeks have the same word for valley as for egg
And, it’s funny like that
The things that find their way out of the fracture.
Plastic flowers pool in the hollow until it is thick
enough to lift the tombstone from the weed’s fingers
and the body dances once more
floating on the fog of a stubborn vigil.
It is always the first rose to twirl out of the figure-field that’s plucked
And, it’s funny like that
The way bloom promises decay.
The way that birth endangers.
A double coincidence for this swollen head of a bulb
to heavy to raise towards an abstaining sky
a midnight cheek turned in disgust,
in humility of The land’s undressing.
Instead the bloated blossom is bent over the earth in mid-study
Squinting against the glare of slit leylines.
What is seed is first scar
But what wound is worth beauty when every wound is a weed
a hydra-sprout
hissing under the kiss of leaf on air?
Somewhere beneath the land
a maze eats its maker for the first time.
The gnashing of stone against body
Makes some kind of song
The drum of bone-snap
Soothes the knot straight.
When prayer cannot waft on the wings of broken promise
Consumption is the last sacrament.
Cain is left with his spade and stone
and grass that still flinches at the threat of blood and
the valley closes its lips around the soured air like it’s the last of it
Settling for rancid, settling the dust, settling the score once more
And it’s funny like that because
Because it’s so young
because it’s all so young
because what is flesh and not fledgling in the crook of a field?
WHO TO SAVE FIRST

“Their eyes are each other & each other & each other & each other & each other & their jaws are denials revoked & that smile? That smile? --- It is terror deciding who to save first.”
—Siaara Freeman, “Urban Girl & The (Urban) Urban Legend”

in the last summer before we outgrew our innocence me and my sister and my cousin chased red dragonflies through peach orchards went swimming in irrigation ditches ran down dirt roads with dusty feet competing for freedom and as many stretches of empty as we could claim.

there, our fears were always mythical. the river monster nibbling at our feet the folktales of shapeshifters hiding in the long grass, there was a time when my worries occupied a smaller part of me.

but we have since transmuted our innocence into terror as the fear became more rational.

now, my terror looks like anticipation and hold on and wait and wait and wait and silence. looks like the spaces my family leaves empty that I cannot fill, a Pandora's box that not even Hope wanted to stay in my terror looks like New York and a cousin just young enough for the city to pick its teeth with like a sister whose voicemails seem more echoed outline than sibling.
in summers since
my terror has looked like murals,
like brandished fire and a swallowing of bodies in the night,
sounds like packs of ravenous white men
who follow us down the street on the 4th of July
their jaws are hungry threats
oozing with the scent of liquor and war cries

my terror lives in how we
flinch at the sound of fireworks
walk closer together on the sidewalk
how we hold hands like a legion
in the hope that if two Black people pray at the same time
they become harder for God to ignore
are not so easily remade into ghosts
are a little less invisible
if not to anyone else,
then at least to each other.

what are our lives
but vanishing acts valued only for their climax?
us, left wondering how many people will applaud
the wrong kind of black magic
when we disappear.

what more would it take
than a command and the flick of a pale wrist
to make them slip between my fingers?
to ignite a flash of raging light and
create a blinding whiteness that breaks us
into nothing?

my terror is the realization that all we got is
each other
and each other
and each other and each other and each other.
nowadays, we’re too
far apart
to have even that.

the truth is
the terror of deciding who to save first
is always
followed by a loss anyway
riddled with guilt when the answer is yourself,
assumes you had any power to start with
makes you question if the loving was futile
means you are constantly running
out of metaphors to talk about death.

I am tired of writing poems
about orchards filled with strange fruit
of tributes to Emmett Till ending with my hands up
of recreating and staging all the ways our bodies can be unmade,
so maybe, I could tell you
about all the ways they can be whole.

my terror
is often indistinguishable
from my reality
but so is my heaven.
so maybe, my voice be more than a testimony of violence
and I could give you a song.
did you know
that my heaven sounded
like the wingbeats of a thousand tiny dragons?
did you know that the fruit there was familiar in the best way possible?
that our eyes were watching kinder gods of our own creation?
looking at each other and each other and each other and each other and each other
our jaws were
aching from the taste of sweet things
we were finally allowed
to savor
and our smiles? our smiles? they were
seeping with the joy of having nothing to run from.
when this country’s lethal legacy
metastasizes in my memory,
wreaths its bleeding tendrils
around my synapses
until every strangled electric pulse
sputters from storm to spark
for want of solace,
I imagine myself as a bird on a wire.

nested in ephemeral serenity or soft song
this body, breathing and blessed
reluctantly rests in a plume of unstable safety.
here, I am nearer to the silken sky and perhaps God too,
black and living and whole,
 can peer into the past without fear for being buried under that which I stand.
here, I am witness. and in this mind
time and distance are overcome.

when telephone poles first splintered this country,
wove voice into wire,
they called it a convenient American invention,
time and distance overcome.

no one imagined the strange fruit hung from
lynch post forests strung together
by a current of convenient killing,
the thousands turned ornament
on telephone poles made accessible and plentiful gallows

I wonder if birds on wires ever noticed
how crossbars resemble crucifixes,
all compressed fire and dead wood, thunderbolt bush waiting to burn
but no God to show for,
here, where death swung from apparent pillars of progress,
where the tree was a young thing
but still sometimes older than the victim,
nearer to the smoking sky but perhaps furthest from God,
waiting for these disappearances
to be thought of as more
than just an un intended consequence.
here, watching, I am
trying to exhume this pain from amnesia
exorcise the ghost of terror from soul or scar
I ask if objects are objective
or why a woven wire knots into noose
when the wind blows it just so.
how bone can bend like canvas or flutter like flag
when manifested from mind’s eye into massacre or mural.

here, I am perched atop aching recollect, suspended in moment or place,
witness to convenient American inventions,
even the ones we don’t take accountability for,
here, I am a bird on a wire
steeped in responsibility to remember,
my identity stretched across century and continent,
my voice, hoarse yet no chirped song sung
and ain’t that time and distance overcome?
What actually comes out of the barrel of a gun if not a promise, if not a roaring stadium disguised as metal casing. Sure, a barrel may lead to a red desert, but I’m not concerned with the chain. Reaction. I’m more so concerned with the origin. I suppose the origin could be a trigger, or a bloodied fingernail, or maybe a bloodied face that thought about the blood for too long. Maybe the origin is the big bang, but then, what’s the point? Let’s assume it’s the barrel, and the eager metal the fish will meet soon enough. Could be a thunder cloud, or cotton candy. But I want cotton to be in my poems less, cuz, you know, I’m black. Like the night, or like the pavement, or like the good parts of the story. That’s not a race thing, I’m just sick of being the negative. I mean can’t darkness just be scary without the value judgement? Oh I forgot, no race. 400 meters down the road. Isn’t that long if you are a bullet, coming from a barrel. So the bullet is a car? Or the bullet is the big bang. But then what’s the point? Right, the pointy end. Ok, so what’s the barrel? Oh I got it. The barrel is where the bullet enters.

I saw a city in flames once. Literally. Cuz race things. M.a.a.d City was the shit back in my day. But also my mind. Always plays the same story. With a boy whose flames burst from inside of him until it was all not-yet-ash. The body was never-ash though. It still wasn’t okay. I mean, at least to his mother and father, but he was fine with it. No one has regrets when they die. Regrets are a problem of the living. They’re bullet. They’re promise. Oops problem. Problematic promise? Promising problems? Programming propriety? The flames weren’t race things. They were just life things. Or life-is-dead things. Or I-want-to-be-dead-life, but also I-want-y’all-to-be-dead-too-life. Two lives still aren’t enough to pull the lever. I think it hurts to have flames burst. But only cuz every flame starts somewhere, every bullet has a barrel. You ever find the boy? He’s me, but like only when my eyes move when they aren’t supposed to. He’s me, his mother’s me, his father’s me (on a different day) but maybe we’re all the same person. Scraping water out of the ocean because it’s raining and what happens when it overflows? Or what happens when it underflows? Undercuts all the hard work that goes into starting a still-bursting-fire. Like, bursting still. As in it bursts, but without movement. Cuz movement hurts and yah its supposed to hurt but not like that. All the not-yet-ash things become ash things, but only after the second fire, the one his mother makes. It’s a cold fire. It’s a shadow creeping down a king’s throat. The king’s white, right, cuz race things, but when the shadow creeps i guess they black then. White things don’t die the same so it make sense. They show blood more easily. That’s why the burn gotta be cold. Ash. We still scooping water. But that just makes more rain. Reign is too short. Gotta beg the darkness to stay. Cuz race things. Darkness wanna leave. Fire in his wake. Cuz race things. Something something poplar tree. Something Something popular fruit. Strange decision. To go that route. Seem lonely. Like bullet. Like barrel. Like enter.
On November 29, 2018, members of WORD: Performance Poetry at Yale performed poems to begin the public conversation “Building Dialogue around John Wilson’s The Incident,” held at the Yale University Art Gallery. These poems, written and performed during the planning phase of the exhibition Reckoning with “The Incident”: John Wilson’s Studies for a Lynching Mural, helped inform future programming surrounding the exhibition. On January 30, 2020, with an inspiring dialogic performance of poetry and song, members of WORD and Shades of Yale opened the exhibition, which was curated by Pamela Franks, Class of 1956 Director, Williams College Museum of Art, and former Senior Deputy Director and Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Elisabeth Hodermarsky, the Sutphin Family Curator of Prints and Drawings. This chapbook includes poems written and performed at these two programs, both of which were organized by Molleen Theodore, Associate Curator of Programs, Education Department.