

**Ailish Hopper** / Excerpt from *Not By Half*, work-in-progress, 2021.

**“Trains whistle soft and low...”**

Trains whistle soft and low  
somewhere in the next neighborhood  
While I'm in bed with no one  
Intimate with shadows on the ceiling  
Warm cotton across my breasts  
Like a quarter spinning  
Between one day and the next  
Ridged silver disc  
By thumb and forefinger, made alive  
What joy, stretched  
Like a sheet, clipped  
To a line backdoor to fence  
Nodding to an interior  
Just another  
Wheels on smooth railway rocking  
Like an infant in my own arms  
Just another waterfall  
No barrel, just a carrying me, freely  
Over

## Throat Ode

Birth box, eternity crevice  
Cavern that hums  
with silent B

My head pulled back  
click click of spine  
*Do you spit*  
*or swallow O*  
Nightingale, head's tiny swivel

precarious  
as an infants' nape  
first breath, lips agape  
though even grown men's  
thick as branches, can't

be protected. Through gate  
of lips, Sirocco winds, *Get.*  
*the fuck. away* yells a woman  
in the street; next to her, someone  
waves, all-caps. Children shout

when the dog's penis comes out, *lipstick*  
they laugh, like it's a nature-movie closeup  
on snakebite, someone sucking  
out the poison. *Thank you*

the man says, when I come back to bed  
tongue dancing with his, our lips  
tug and suck. This world is full  
of bruisers, their hearts

like store-bought chicken  
under plastic. So a woman's mouth  
obliged to frame, reiterate  
her torturers' *your fault*, & forced  
a child's vocal cords' *I love*. I've let

a man hit me, more than once, my archaic cry  
a trees' echo, sound-quiver  
in this infinity room  
I want a *word*

to change  
a room, someone's mind, be path  
to a kiss. I want to ask it all  
through this frail funnel---  
Today, this man, glorious slant

of daylight; my grasses, parting

for his warmth  
Thank you, cellular whispers  
that whirl  
careen, and spill

New thought, feeling, each time  
Utterance, a being  
brought to life  
Thank you, this cavernous  
this slick flesh, this vast as night  
as life---

intern-iverse

***“What you can take off your body...”***

For Freddie Gray

What you can take off your body,  
but you can't take off: your body.  
Starved, polyester *blue*, as a birth cord,  
placenta-gorged, as if you'd just slid into

this world. Hand around my daughter's palm  
I see them arrive, elbows out, hips blanketed  
by guns. Some uniforms, a conjuring:  
what you *wear*, you *are*; their honored hours  
noiseless as a tail light, a broken spine. Look up,

the branches spread through families. Look left,  
the sun, a cousin's smile; look right, the star  
that now follows him. Walking the beat  
like beads on a string. Some peek out,  
but won't be peaks above the in-crowd clouds.  
Any pledge, vow, a spell, a body ridden now

by *One of us*. Absolved, they disappear  
their gunshots, walk between raindrops,  
check stops. Sing, sing, civilian birds: *What  
happened here?* And from every oath-born body,

in reply, sure as the sky: blue

silence.

*from*

**~~Crossed Over~~ Crossed Out**

“He walked ...possibly in either city. Schrödinger's pedestrian.”  
--- China Mieville

*Yankee!*

they laugh, meaning  
raised ~~too~~ near, this child  
learning

at gyms and dances  
on blacktops, or behind  
the private walls  
of library books

~~new persons~~

~~free ones~~

\*

Enclave, autoclave  
sterilizing *here*

with a song  
*you don't belong*

When I cross *there*  
*Cmon sis*  
And ~~necessary~~ suspicion. Any  
*which side?* a sign

~~There's a war~~  
*Here*

\*

I no longer

white Department supervisor white Labor union white Book group white car dealership white Neighborhood group white Alumni association white Country club white Private school white Fusion restaurant white Civic association white Bank white Church white Gym/Yoga studio white Swimming club white School board white Sr. manager white

~~belong~~  
exist

Put away, their silver  
*Don't take this*

True thoughts  
*the wrong way*

A few, later, whisper I agree  
What you said

\*

Moonseed and wild grape  
Horse nettle, green tomato: nausea teaches

America's ~~first black~~ president, a ~~white~~ man  
sings the blues, builds

fills prisons, too. Medicines, poisons  
wear similar garments. I meet

a ~~white~~ professor who writes  
~~about black people's~~  
culture, wins awards. *So*

*you like to cross the color line*, he smiles. Hires  
only white people, by word  
of mouth. *Don't make this*

*about race*, he says. On the radio  
Dionne

*Déjà vu*

\*

Even wild  
can be made life-like  
Plastic for crown, for  
zipties: everything

must bend. William Dollar, Viola  
Liuzzo, ~~shot, killed~~

person-no-longer, mirror  
~~can confuse~~ show them  
~~for~~ someone else

who ~~belongs~~ agrees

\*

Q: What do you call a group of white men

A: People, defending against outsiders

Q: I thought we were all insiders?

A: *Here* never let *There* in

Burning of Pennsylvania Hall

Memphis Massacre

New Orleans Massacre

Camilla Massacre

Colfax Massacre

Carrolton Massacre

Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion

Anti-abolitionist Massacre

Sacking of Lawrence Kansas

Pottawatomie Massacre

Rock Springs Massacre

Red Summer Orangeburg Massacre

Long Hot Summer

Los Angeles

Ferguson

Baltimore

Minneapolis

Driving south from Baltimore, tall Loblolly pines keep highway time

Stretch of green outside DC, trees straight

as escorting Marines

Between the rivers

*Potomac*

*Patuxent*

Andrews Air Force base, Fort Meade, Prince George's Correctional Center

\*

waiting

Casual Friday khakis, doctors'

rooms, What school did you go  
to, Oh my dad went there  
too! *Black*

*Lives Matter* on some lawns. Black  
olives from that new French store  
downtown. Uniform gray, at the  
gate, security for any

unwanted

*Those*  
people, in *Khaki*, Urdu, from the  
British Indian Army, meaning  
protection  
against

~~*the crowd*~~  
~~*growing by the minute*~~

\*

*My*

skull  
eye eye

mouth

arm

arm

heart

body

body

hips hips

hand

hand

leg leg

knee knee

ankle ankle

body body

toes toes

gently pull

in veins rivers soft-organ blossom skin mountains bone

propagules

hair-thin roots

## **"A Ruin," Drawing on Paper, 2018**

*Drawings are for crossing ----* Renee Gladman

A border that goes around the mountain, anthem only a walking body knows.

What is really there, my drawing hand asks my eyes. My other body, friend or lover, sees my gaze; points, re-directs. *"That's it."*

John Coltrane's breath kept behind lips, just fingering the horn.

Most sweat-worn page in the book of illegal sheet music---- I leave it alone.

People who think shit-talk isn't a skill worth having probably don't know much about loyalty. Maybe they never had to choose: You, or the people that made you. And I don't just mean biologically. Cattleya orchids, when shivering, pop out a shock of magenta blossoms, sensing impending death. My own sour scent and steaming pile, a ticket to the kingdom.

"Attention" is kissing cousin to "attend," the way I do now with my mom, can see things happening before she does. "Is that soup bubbling kind of hard, Ma?" Which is kissing cousin to "tend," the way my finger presses soil around stem, tomato dangling, one day green, then one morning

rolls onto my palm.

The dead are not the only ghosts; the person with no teachers, re-directors, has no history. A teacher or friend, a relationship with trust, is a kind of home.

To know what it is to wrong someone, the nauseous feeling. Such gentle words for such a harsh moment. Dictionary definition #6: an animal that lures you to kill and eat it—then poisons you. A reward I did not earn, and being *free*: not the same.

In the temple, never eat faster than the teacher; never eat slower either. Walking in Druid Hill with a friend, our bodies' warmth tethered, steps get into rhythm. A yardstick, not personal; three and two are just marks in space, on imaginary paper.

It's possible that none of us are what we most closely resemble.

## More is More

We lie together, pressed  
against the day  
A Saturday silhouette  
an ancient tale.

*Don't*

my brother says, *show him*

*you care*

You bring steaming Assam tea

turn its cool porcelain ear to me  
My fingertips, silked by soap  
warm-water fishtail

your jeans. So long

in a terminal forest  
with the other angels and demons

*Little bitch*

*Man up*

I bathe

in your gaze. Kindness  
is also a power. On just-baked bread, butter  
melts. Blood returns

even to the past; tender veins  
to fattening tissue  
slowly rectified, whole. In each

of our eyes: A universe  
Arcing, curious

Nearby, a kora player's crystal notes

Scent of peeled-open oranges