

SANCTUARY

by

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A THESIS

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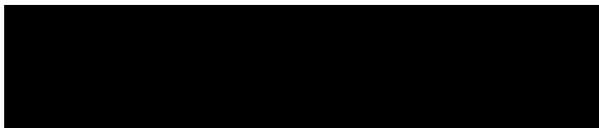


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CURRICULUM VITAE

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sermon for a believer

listen to me church i'm saved and sanctified can i get a witness in here

some call me crazy cause i believe in the magnificence of the invisible

i cling like a mustard seed cause i know the lepers itch i been the abominable

bout died but grabbed a hem got healed got joy an nothin to fear

when jonah was in the whale belly shamed worn wary

who you think he turn to in his bitter hours of trouble

who you think he need he kneel on that whales tongue an beg away evil

three bleak days an nights he breathe belly and gawd in prayer

i believe the sea split and gawd made it to bleed he flood the fools

made tap water wine keep yo cup full feed a a crowd with twenty loaves

plague the masters with lice and toads delivered shadrach meshach and abednego

church its possible to clean the sin sick soul to save the faithful

the lawd my shepard though invisible makes the rock cry out and the river bubble

believe of me what you will this i know gawd changed my name calls me miracle

the gospel

on a good sunday the gospel gone grab you by the feets and loose yo soul
the cherubs gone sprout wings and things and leave they patent leather shoes
the altos the tenors and sopranos the one baritone hallelu halleluuu-
hallelujah why don't you just clap yo hands why don't you let go
and let gawd chillun why don't you let jeezus in and give it up to the holy ghost
like sistah smith when her arms fly up and her platter rimmed hat fly out the pew
she babel and flail and some gracious usher wave a funeral fan or the good-news
bible in her face till her tongue crawl back in an she start signifyin bout the ol'

rugged cross an how much she tithe can we change the communion wine
oh lawd my gawd let there be change in the offerin plate for a twenty
let the congregation say aw yeh and amen the angels in heaven done signed my name
on pastor's pearly gate cadillac car-note on his discover charge and his fine
purple robes pinstriped suit and wingtipped shoes we give him plenty
we give you the glory everyday twice on sundays lawd have mercy we have no shame

sanctuary

we in gods basement heads bowed gathered in a circle of prayer

seven near bloods two sunday kin

one stranger

his carved smile a glow in the dark

wire rimmed eyes

electric against quick schemes of light

we young and black and masked

ghouls and witches a man with a hungry axe

the magic of voodoo vengeance the science

of patchwork and death

lawd bless this place and these demons we bout to become

our shotgun sanctuary a sore mouth

its chapped lips a parted door

its folding tongue a table where frankenstein

resurrects every ten minutes

these buckteeth closets this tar dark

who knows what rot lines each crevice and cavity

what god-spells

forgotten choir robes

what jack-o-lantern boy crouches in thick shadow

some closets keep memories like treasures

and stains fluorescent in the dark
some closets i know like a pit in broken bone
a glow of grin sharpens into my neck
hardens between my legs pushes until blood
tells me mothers name as if i do not know
tells me her choir space her solos that i should know he knows
he pushes and tears me apart
while allagodschildren run wild in a mouth of flashing light
hush
he tells me
or he will tear her apart
i should kiss him here and here
and here in a crack of space
he tells me be obedient
and jesus will surely bless me
we who are cavernous and demonic
choose our fate in bodies of dark
under hi beam strobe and howling cassette
when allagodschildrens come painted and costumed
swinging hollow pumpkin heads filled with chocolate ghosts
black and orange dyed caramels candied apples
wrapped and twist tied

me and punkin and alla'dem

when i was young and fat and bucktooth i jumped double dutch barefoot on the corner
of lexington and plain we did ah mumbles side to side bent down to touch the black street
me and punkin ah soles scrapin northside turf we bought penny candy at the lil red store
hurdled over sidewalk cracks and ran back to ah clothesline rope strung out in the grass
ah callous feet ah twenty brown toes stuck wit tar and grass blades and lil rocks
we aim and shoot at passin cars, banana and cherry taffy in ah teeth we pray

in the alley for the baby we find wrapped in the sunday funnies and a pillowcase we pray
cause we think she bout two and her mama must be in church or on the corner
callin her name i tell my mama bout ah find and worry she bow her head and rock
and moan like she grieving wit the holy ghost she tell me i can't play in the streets
she don't want nobody findin me blue and black and dead i can't even roll in the grass
just roller skate back and forth cross four feet of front porch but i make do and store

my jax in the missing brick space make blue kool-aid ice i don't need no store
bought pickles i got jarred dills i just want a lil bit of punkin and pray
she come soon wit no shoes her mouth crackin and spittin sunflower seeds in the grass
but she never do and i hear she hanging round the hustle brothas on the corner
they smoke kools and take fortys to the head smash the bottles like baseballs in the street
they snort bitch and bang smack they sell reefer to my mama and a handful of rock

to somebody else's next i see punkin she gotta hundred dollars all rocked
up say she holdin it till the cops cool down say she might take it to the store

get some bread and brownsweiger and enough penny candy to fill the street
say she might give it to her mama if she pay her then she wont have to pray
so hard bout bein broke wit busted shoes say she might post on the corner
when she get grown like the hustle crew say they take good care let her smoke grass

drink they brew she say some dude wit a cocked cardinal cap even kissed her in the grass
by the park say they had some liquor and his mouth was hot and he climbed and rocked
on top of her like she didn't have braids and beads and wasn't round the corner
from twelve say she his girl now she his chocolate tease say he'll tell her stories
and keep her safe and he climb back on top and she think her prayers
been heard and he gon get her them hi top hot pink sneaks to skip the streets

in the heat and steam of july alla st.louis crawl out and walk the streets
shoot bottle rockets at passers by lay out squares of blankets in the grass
watch the sky explode ova the arch in orange and red and gold white and blue i pray
the city don't fall apart i pray some colored flame don't hit the mighty mud and rock
ah boats like noah in the flood when gawd made him save two of evrthing in the storm
i wonda what his woman think when he bring on two mo if her heart curl up like the corners

of his lips were the corners of her eyes wet and his tongue sharp as beer glass flung in grassy
patches slicin black streets like hopscotch squares or back alley cracks where rock
mamas suck down smoke and store they babies like tight lipped jars of unheard prayers

ninth ward

crouched beneath a dirty mouth river

the tongues a city forgot

droop and float behind claiborne

lick around st. benard parish

any day they will sink and sew root

here the dead slice thru cypress swamps

like gator heads swell and stick out as bald trees

knees or knuckled branches of wax myrtle

here the waters rush and swallow the nine like sloe gin

the dark roux and chicory skins

the motley creole mouths

oh to fiddle and play a cajun squeezebox

under muddy blues to dance louisiana zydeco

brush stepping to eat the beat

the unclaimed fat as pickle meat

the babies pan-fried in the shade

slumped over shotgun camelbacks

the old river testifying

before the war of the righteous everybody go get saved

here a worn and weary crowd gather in summer months
flood the streets and stuff their souls with blessings by the bucket
they babble prayer revive themselves in testimony and sweat
till sin lifts from their skins like steam or an unbound spirit
oh you ought to hear the hydrants unhinge and murmur

you ought to follow the faithful who choose their threads
with glory in mind who come clean and heavenly
billowing sheaths skirts slacks and shower caps
they sanctify the avenue wade in petrified rivers
bethesda jordan the potomac and shaw district

if gawd be a wave in the conk of sweet daddy grace
let the concrete give way and cry out let the waters roll
and cover the lot touch every zoot suited apostles' hem
the sinners and repenting flock lawd bless this place
steady the hosing hands

meditation on a little black dress

because someone said

every woman loves hers

i open my closet

sort through flirty numbers

perched on hangers spaghetti

straps and baby doll minis

plunging v-necks and a-lines

i think how to accessorize

what beads to fit the bodice

pearls or stones or plastic baubles

sandals or stiletto peep toe pumps

oh raven swatch of femininity

because someone said every woman

needs one i think of my own

who prefers a tie and starched oxford

suspenders creased slacks and buck

skin loafers for certain

a fedora strips of color

or a scarlet feather

before the tipped brim

oh sequined night

what becomes of the outliers

who swagger and dip their hats

who are handsome and pretty-eyed

lace their hands round

curvaceous silhouettes

but care not for the fit of your feel

 what becomes of the ruffled hip

smoothed by a cupped black palm

someone will watch this play out

perhaps legs cross or tangle

or undo themselves

perhaps a finger

slipping up a side seam

to buckle round the waist

someone will look twice

see we are satisfied

say nothing

from the purple letters

winter 1940

mis celie—

we in saint louis

how you i doin fine got spots to play here till april last night we played on the river
 and you ain't seen so many folk all crowdin in the water to hear us make some
 noise mens wit they pant legs rolled up almost to they knees them was smokin
 and hootin we had us a good time and the womens they faces pretty as camellias
 they red red lips and sassyfrass spray they was swayin like hymns or sweetgum trees
 they was lovin it

and today i went and got me a floppy yellow hat and some beads and earrings and things to
 match it up to i'ma wear it for you when i come gon sing fo you too
 us gon dance to jelly roll till yo smile come from behind them big pretty lips you got
 when you smile i wants to kiss you take my time like you a new tune i can't quit hummin
 make my lips buzz it feel so good when you smile i wants to kiss you and when i kiss you us jus
 gon laugh and laugh

you rub on me like august like lightnin bugs stickin to night you what keep me
 saved make me rememba even the flies and things is pretty cause gawd make
 em like so like the tupelo and persimmon the coffee trees celie even the pot belly frog
 you make me feel like that fine to be fine or ugly or loud and it's alright by me

who i is to run off and leave you lonely fah some chump gig a good time in a big city wit a
man layin an leanin all on me when i too busy singin bout what give us de blues

how albert he keeping his hands to hisself look you feed him keep him shaved
keep him clappin in church and drinkin at the juke he don't need no mo from you
you sho is somethin sometime jus a puzzle i think bout you settn out front
in de rocker wit de bible or some fat book in yo lap be wondrn what you see in all dem pages
what you see when yo eyes close or snag a cloud seem like dey get wild wit dream like
somthin get a fixt an like to fly you way yo eyes like a sweet kinda sad song seem like dey
what flowers moan and cry to don get carried way on de melody miss celie
don you go far too soon

shug

how the child was named by the light of moon

here is the story as i remember:

it is night

you are swollen feet and heavy belly

thin robe and mute blues

snoring pregnant with dream

i imagine a house and husband

a mustached man with green or grey

shut eyes his mouth sipping

your neck like coffee or chocolate

where are his hands does he press

his head into your soft spots

perhaps a furnace knocks or

a soul record is spinning

say it is aretha and she sews

song as frankincense sticks

burn out and the sweet

spiced brick house sleeps

perhaps none of this

god calls you and you wake

or suddenly you wake

and gawd appears

disguised as a cloud that multiples
and assembles into a staircase
 you climb it to the ceiling
above the roof shingles and chimney
up into the dark dark dark

and gawd says
step into the night so you do
he says search the stars and choose
a child from among them

what happens before you pick me out

are you weightless in the night
swatting brambles of sky
does gawd stretch a great hand over
your belly does he ask first
may i touch
do you ask

 my lawd why me

you collect stars
like poppies or calla lilies cradle
the light like blooms or a soft boned head

you lean into a hip of shadowed moon

sift through the wild bouquet

like loves and loves-me-not

mama tell me

is gawd my father

are you a holy vessel a martyr

or sinner gone straight

we do not speak of these things

or him whom some call savior

when you return

to sleep or a queen framed bed

to a husband or aretha fading

into hum and phonographic hiss

you are swaddled

in cloud and star dust

a name or dream

burned into your palm

you know i am a girl

you pray i am the color of gawd

given night my eyes

twinkling keepsakes

you wish me a cool

road a callous-less

sojourn

a conjurers touch

that i will make

a man stay put

keep a house warm

you say my soul will

be a light in shadows

a divine secret

sweet as the moon

catchin the spirit

mama i faked the holy ghost i couldn't help it all the play couzins
got it they fell out in choir rehearsal they switched sundays
their bronze faces beyond us those bean pole arms twerking with the spirit
slapping air maybe a cheek or chancel robed chest bone the piano playas

hip or wire rim waist i watch them girls shout and get happy and collapse
in the sanctuary whine and wail during alter call eyes wet till the benediction
they mamas friends and kin diligent as saints praise the blood of jeezus
wave they hands from they balcony pews thankin gawd for redemption

mama i musta been the last untouched heathen left to cry and give it up
some july the ushers bowed hearts lined the sanctuary they soles tappin in wait
i let loose on selection b overcome with the everlasting swagger and swoon
of the gospel first the tears the handclap my body a testament i got to shake

the devil outta me i stomp the whole notes when the sopranos shrill till my breath
run out mama you want gawd to slap the joy in my heart you got a mouthful
of scripture you tongue me down bawlin like the others thankin gawd in refrain
i make you a believer mama like you shoulda been ghost in me or not at all

nightlight

the first night my father comes at me i do not remember
any light at all the sky let go like a flailing squid
dark blue darker purple what i see when his fist
pulls back like my jaw in the mirror in the morning
the black crescent of skin beneath my left eye
for days i see only stars and floating blocks of blue
i search every bit of night outside my window for a star
to cling to like jeezus
when i sleep i devour the night
all her children chew the light out suck it down
like the holy word
a keepsake or sweet-tart
in my sleep i open my mouth shoot up
my father's night something horrible
like the june one i cannot turn loose
window open still salt air hanging in the black light
my bedroom door cracked enough for a whisper to pass
when he pushes against it or me i try not to think
of strange things
the moonshine in his breath his breath too close to my own
my body pulled into itself like a still black shell
he takes handfuls of my night as though i were a grab bag
of flaming blue marbles shifting weight

he comes erect as a wall shadow

the moon stiff against the dark her keen eye

and full mouth my only witness

but does not slink or squeal to a soul

hymn

set the pitch deacon and trouble my tone

make it slow heavy as day gimme a good psalm

gimme something to cling to get down low

growl hard and moan a hallelujah song

come grease my sin-sick soul be my balm

till jeezus get back and heal my cry hear my plea

he listen close and take his time he come

to make me whole i fall on my knees

oh sing down low chilren if you believe

oh hum real sweet and lean on faith

roll me like a river leave my burdens by the sea

and gawd gone give me peace fo alla my days

revive my soul savior keep me sanctified

come now holy ghost i'm ready to be baptized

consecration

he eats canned peaches from a cracked white bowl

leaves the juice to tongue the blanch bellies

shrinks into sterile pillows

flushed and finished

he hates canned fruit

those peaches floating belly up

like unfed fish

in front of him

the gentle current of syrup

his eyes ebbing with the tow

while no one watches i pluck each sopping wedge from the juice

lick my fingers

i braid his hair

shuck the fruit down fork to mouth

i kiss his lips

gloss the dead skin with sweet concentrate

eyes closed

i know he is not watching

his rust face ashen and still

the rise and fall of corseted bones

i line up cans of peaches crack open their tin lids
pray over the lot
each sharp tooth mouth full of sweet sinking meat
what if i pour out the stilled fruit
bless your drying body communion and oil the itch
your cracking skin if i rub your purple red sores

once i read
a leper cast out and faithful
fed for days on peaches
shed scabs and hard boiled skin
danced in praise while shouting holy

tell me you know the parable/miracle

show me the magnificence of peaches
peel back your lids and let loose
your near gone limbs
while god is watching

we wade in a river

troubled with peaches

ballad in blue

margie with your skin so fair
musta got it from your papa
his blond skin and blue-eyed stare
made him a wild devil in georgia

heard his daddy was a knight rider
masked in crisp white sheet suits
hanged darkies and set lawn fires
in macon and forsythye county too

margie with your porcelain cheeks
bet your mama tried to keep quiet
cleaned and cooked but didn't speak
bout what caused such a riot

in '37 when you was barely two
your papa and his blonde boy skin
was halfway drunk down at the juke
slapping bones and sipping gin

soon the dark start thinning out
and your papa put on his coat
he lit a smoke and paid his lot

then headed toward the road

he didn't see the rough silhouette

leaned against his ford model t

he woulda gone back in i bet

grabbed a pistol a cue stick or three

instead he walked out in his haze

stepped to and stared at the man

who raped his mama and set a blaze

made her crazy and charred the family land

your papa had his daddy's blue eyes

and his daddy could hardly bear to see

so he beat his boy till no one recognized

the bloated body swinging from the tree

margie with your daddy's smile

forgive your mama in her woeful rut

she was only tryin to spare you child

bout why your daddy was strung up

because you were buried before i was born

after a wreath for emit till

what then have i to give you boy

your grave older than all i've known

what laurels how to tend your soil

your wreath all strung your mama

a dignified mess we've seen your face

the ol' poplar still stumped with horror

what have i to give you what will you take

orange blossom a white chrysanthemum

yarrow or chestnut heaps of willows

if i were a reaper boy i'd snatch weeds

from round your stone knead earth 'til

stalks of hyacinth pushed thru as if to say

forgive the whistle and howl of bitter night

callow fruit hoisted on a well known branch

the stretch and tear of swollen hearts

a cradled breath snapped into kindling

mapping

in santa monica a fat lipped clawfoot wants to suck my bones

the tub drain my curls my shoulder prints stamped in plum

painted drywall on hill street the corner cook

slaps cabbage on my pupusa the concrete

blushing piss and flicked butts remembers my face

there are floorboards in los angeles

my blood sour in their grain

on first street

off wilshire the let loose pot of grits

stains the back of my head

the peach shag carpet and punch-out

of glass front door

for weeks i vacuum and comb out the hominy

in oakland the skillet will testify

after a night of fried catfish and pickles

the kitchen yellowed and weary

the old oil crusting in the stove's

left front eye

a butcher knife bit into my neck

and dared not leave a crumb

soul brotha numba one

now here u come bustin outta augusta clay

face curler set conk an bouffant u come out

louis jordan's tenor swing and jump up

u come wit a bag of tricks buttah dancin

inna middle

of little richard's boogie woogie

talkin bout pleeeeeeze pleeeeeeze

for an hour man u come

out yo dusty mother of a truck into carolina

tire shot out window allover yo front seat

lookin for the ricochet the dope and

the pig that got u runnin

youza big mouthed slew foot sonofabitch

you make the girls wet woo the white folk

shoutin and screamin bout who u iz

an what u got u get ah feet movin u get ah heart

get on yo knees an grease the mic wit yo midnight magic sweat

yo bent low soul

back draped in glitter yo pulpit grit baritone

youza blk revolutionary sonofabitch

we wanna touch yo cape we wanna be blk an get loud

and get up and get nappy we wanna be proud and knot into fists

papa iz we together or we ain't u squiggle footin
cross the stage alladeez years cross so and so face
she gotta fat lip u gotta slap of pomade in yo hand
slickin back da kink

when u die it's a sold out show
allaharlem lineup and wrap round the apollo
way up to 130th street for days and days
mournin the power in
yo blk skin
 yo dazzlin cape
 yo sequined shoes
yo gold casket concert
televised coast
to coast the moans of blk folk
 pleeeeee man pleeeez

resurrection

uncle when they burn your body

i am only nine and believe

you have been properly blessed

let go in carolina

welcomed into the atlantic

i believe you will reappear

like a scroll of love notes

tucked into a soda bottle

you will foot it on other shores

a virgin island

or cayman the antilles

perhaps havana

perhaps you will fly back to god

like a sparrow or angels eye

for years i wait for an ash to wash up

for your ghost to crest like neptune

perhaps you will rise up and explode

become a super nova

a cluster of winking stars

uncle let me mourn your organs and limbs

let me plant what is left in my front yard

let the rain kneel in memoriam

let me find you in a shade flower

a bleeding heart or lenten rose

i have tended the ground

poured water over

dirt cinders and bone

tell me what will grow now

the great get up

let me tell you how it'll go down when the saints gather
and get clean neck ties intact white veiled crowns aslant
hands pressed into brownstone steeples oh the bowed and reverent
souls how they become a miracle and rise up like prayer
like lazerus or ancestors goin to glory in a faithful herd
the trombones gon sound some tambourines and hand claps
the sky gon peel back for the almighty to judge the secrets
he gon shut up the sun singe the stars and crackle in the dark

when the moon bleeds and cinders rain won't no rock hide a shadow
sinner your mouth an open grave your tongue a whip of deceit
when all earth belch a fire how far you gon get wit no travelin shoes
run and roll on like thunder if you want to go on and bare your teeth
in tribulation howl in the bottomless pit and burn with beasts and brimstone
while angels sing from new jeruselem oh rocka my rocka my rocka my soul