



Emergents:



Poetry



from

Wild Seeds







Emergents: Poetry from Wild Seeds

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Wild Seeds Collection

Introduction

This collection is a love story.

It is not the common story of romantic love, but it is a story of romance between a group of artists who shared the love of spiritual and aesthetic expression. For this story to be understood in all its beauty, we must start where all things start: at the beginning.

This story began late summer in the idyllic landscape of the State University Polytechnic Institute Campus in Utica, New York, where the foundation was laid by The Center for Black Literature and its annual creative writing retreat called Wilds Seeds. This summer program, originally called The North Country Institute and Retreat, started in 2004 and was one of the few writing retreats established for creative writers of color.

While love did not start at first sight, a sense of kismet among the cohorts took less than a day. Some of us met on the platform of the Utica train station and shared a Lyft to campus, so by the time we arrived and got lost and then found our dorm, the bond between a few of us had already taken root.

The retreat was made up of three cohorts: fiction, memoir, and poetry. Each cohort was led by an accomplished author of that genre. Although **Dr. Brenda M. Greene**, Director of The Center for Black Literature, invited me to be the leader of the poetry cohort, I did not feel particularly accomplished – at least not compared to **Jeffrey Renard Allen**, well-known fiction writer and the leader for the fiction cohort, nor **Jamiyla Chisholm**, who just published her memoir *The Community* and was the leader for the memoir cohort.

I was not famous nor did I win any major awards. Perhaps that fact gave me the humility and the psychic impetus to relate to my cohort with a hortative attitude rather than an instructional one. In a workshop with these talented poets from diverse backgrounds, points of origin (Brooklyn, New York, Mississippi, and Maryland), and at different stages in their poetical development, we explored poetry with a great sense of play but also with purpose. For example, we have **Natalie Cruz**, an environmental scholar and lover of confessional poetry with a full collection of poetry already completed. **Kesed Ragin**, a spoken word artist and actor whose poetry encompasses both the world of myth and the quotidian. **Leslieann E. Santiago**, a creative professional whose ear is keenly attuned to the rhythm of poetic language. The youngest in our cohort, **Shamiqua Wilson**, is a singer, songwriter has already self-published a book of poems.

We have **Tracei Willis**, who like Natalie, also had a full poetry manuscript prior to her arrival to the workshop. Then there is **Nick Powers**, who is a tenured Professor of Literature in SUNY at Old Westbury and a brilliant essayist and novelist with an impressive body of published work.

Six days of sharing meals, going on shopping trips, intense work both in group and individual conferences. Six evenings of social and intellectual interactions. Connections and camaraderie that would have taken months to form were forged in a week. During breaks, cohorts would sit on the lawns of newly cut grass or lie in the sun, sharing their own past poetic experiences as well as their current one. Some would just walk and write, or simply be dreamy because here, they could.

And like many settings such as these, poets are the “most fun,” as we were told by some of the fiction writers and memoirists. Of course, there were fun-loving fiction writers as well as memoirists too. It appeared, however, that while the poets were serious about poetry, outside of the workshop, we seemed to be least encumbered by the weight of our craft. Part of this freedom is our proclivity to be unabashedly serendipitous, and this is how the poets and some other cohort members came to acquire new names.

It started with Nick Powers, whom we were referring to erroneously as “Kevin.” Then when we realized our error, rather than being troubled by the gaffe, we embraced our imagination and assigned new names to those who invited them. Our circle of participants included the memoirist Tanya Everett, to whom we gave the name Mari. For Natalie, we called her Roni; for Leslieann, we thought she should be Tiffany. For Kesed, we settled on Sea Bass (originally Sebastien). This gave us many evenings of delight. And in this collection, some of these names will be included to reflect who we were or wished to be for a brief time – a time that we were free to reinvent ourselves, and we trusted each other to rename one another because we were in the same tribe. Like members of a tribe, we codified our relationship with each other – the bond that we forge, the love we gave and received.

After six days, when our world was completed with the naming of ourselves, we shared a sense that the work that we did during this time would sustain our writing life at least for a little while. We devoted the last two evenings to group readings, when we read our work in a protected space, a community that shared an intense experience in an intensely short time. Some members were getting ready to leave, others were staying until the end. We said goodbye to one another throughout the evening and the next day.

But it was not the end of the story. At least not for the poets.

A week after everyone returned to their respective homes and their daily responsibilities, texts were going back and forth between members of the poetry cohort until finally, a group text was created. Once the group text was created, Nick Powers (a.k.a. Kevin) sent the first prompt calling for ekphrastic poems. Over the next month, various images were sent, ekphrastic poems written and shared, responses offered in different iterations, in forms of comments, accolades, heart and smiley face emojis. Not only did the workshop continue, it continued at times with more passion and engagement than the week of the retreat. We commented on the work, praised it, encouraged it, and the trust that we had for one another was so unassailable that unofficial and spontaneous as it was – it was no doubt a true poetic communion.

As the poems appeared, Nick suggested that we keep a record of the poems, which gave us the idea that perhaps we should have a record of our work that would represent a small part of the Wild Seeds Retreat. After Dr. Greene's approval, I began curating and collecting the works from the poetry cohort. Between everyone's busy schedule tending to jobs, care taking and creative pursuits, including Nick's flood-delayed sojourn to Burning Man, we managed to pull together a kaleidoscopic sampling of poems that reflects the cohort's collective poetic visions and attitudes.

In this anthology, we have love poems of every kind: love of family, of community, of nature, romantic love, metaphysical love. We've even included an ekphrastic pantoum, "Every Woman is an Ocean," by Natalie from the group text, along with her painting.

We start the collection with the notion of identity and the poet: the first poem is Nick's powerful manifesto poem "Writing, Empty," where the speaker declares what he writes, what he doesn't, and who he ultimately is because of those choices. Leslieann's poem "Lamp Post" examines a poet's points of origin and Natalie's ekphrastic poem "Every Woman is an Ocean" pitches vulnerability and defiance in the poet's struggle to reconcile creation and destruction. In Tracei's poem "Small," we get a very poignant portrait of a poet struggling to declare her power to the world despite the social insults she experiences while Kesed's poem "Nomad" declares a different kind of power – the power of the lover/poet who now must proclaim his agency over what he feels verses what he does.

We start the theme of family with Shamiqua's poem "Home." This poem opens the section with a restless voice that interrogates the sense of belonging and the "comforts" of home as convention knows it. From there, we move to more direct

expressions of devotion and love. This is the section where Tracei's and Nick's poems are the most represented. Tracei Willis is the ultimate advocate of family love. The two poems about her father were workshopped in Utica, and in my view, the tenderness and compassion woven into these poems are the ultimate qualities that make them transcendent. Equally transcendent is the next group of poems by Nick. While his poem about his mother, "The Revolution," makes sense in following Tracei's poems about her father, Nick's poem is quite different in attitude. The poem is an unflinching sketch of a woman whose existence clearly inspires conflicting feelings in the speaker/son. Like Tracei's poem "My Father's Hands," the poem describes the parent in all the complexities of being human.

From parents, of course, we go to children. Here is where Nick's poems take center stage. His poems about his son True were shared and well discussed in Utica. His "Everything True" is a powerful poem about undying devotion, love and faith in the becoming and ultimate *being* of True's father. This love encompasses the past, present, and future, and is flung across the cosmos and the galaxies. The language is localized and vast at the same time, bearing a love so intense that it borders on agony in the Greek sense of the word. And finally, we end with Tracei's bittersweet poem "tears are a sick sonofabitch," which derives its power from the vernacular of loss.

To transition from family love to carnal love, we take a breather with Tracei's poem a la Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" about her students. Then we move to Natalie's "Red Room," a bold poem that packs a huge punch. This is also a poem that the cohort has workshopped in Utica, and of all her poems I've read, I believe this poem is the most representative of Natalie's style and vision. The images are at times lurid, sometimes harrowing, but much of the time lyrical and full of beauty, especially in the unconventional line breaks, and the word play. And while this poem is not strictly a "love" poem in the conventional sense, it does track the movement of how a type of self-love can begin with trauma.

The wordplay in Natalie's poem, in particular, dovetails with the next poems by Kesed Ragin. Kesed's poems are constructed with a variety of wordplay. Clearly, as a spoken word artist and performer, his ear is attuned to the puns, the masculine, feminine, internal and slant rhymes that are so prevalent in that tradition. Yet, his work is never frivolous. There is a formality and song quality in his poems that is reminiscent of the classical poetry of courtly love. Unlike the reserve of courtly love, however, Kesed's poems interrogate the nature of romantic love through the lens of human anatomy. In these poems, the body ("spine," "skin," "knees," "necks," "solar plexus") is disassembled, named in the service of love, as in "Pan and Aphrodite." Ultimately, the anatomy is romanticized rather than eroticized; it is the "heart" that matters, as we see in "Nomad." (For the unapologetically erotic poem, we would have to look to Natalie's "Mistress Bliss.")

Weaving through these brashly declarative poems is a delicate but no less audacious voice making itself heard. This voice belongs to Leslieann E. Santiago, whom we called either by her pre-retreat nickname L.A. or post-retreat name, Tiffany. The lines in Leslieann's gorgeous poems are fluid, agile, and multivalent in imagery and metaphor. Even when she writes with a tough girl vernacular, as in "Lamp Post," ("Like 'bitch what you doin?'/ Girl, I been a night owl since I was born"), her poems brim with lyricism and melancholy. One of my favorite poems in the collection is "A Harder Year, Reminding Me You're Gone, Fingertips Forgotten Forever." The title derives from the singular word lines in the poem itself. The image of the tailorbirds sewing leaves for their nests is deftly set against the notion of ephemeral love. In this collection, Leslieann's light-handed treatment of the subjects in her poems balances out the forceful declarative styles of some of the other poems. Equally remarkable is that these poems truly showcase her versatility and poetic range.

All the poems in this collection, unique in vision and attitude, share a transformative quality of the human experience, be it despair, bereavement, trauma, or loss; anything can be reshaped into song, into faith, into the belief that at the end, poetry connects us all to the ultimate transcendent experience of love. So it is entirely fitting that we end the anthology with two poems that speak to that purpose: Kesed Ragin's "Bridges" ("we don't break hearts/we just hold hands") and Natalie Cruz's "The Clean" ("Because the world is a special occasion/And the tender reason is love"). And indeed, we present to our readers this world we've made, this special occasion, this labor of love.

Joanna Sit



Writing, Empty

By Nick Powers

I write about big things, wars over land, a shooter panting as he leaves fresh kill in a church or the poor throwing stones at police. Each headline a wave moving from the center, drowning us again, until we surface in history's wake shyly like lovers asking if it's safe to touch again.

My eyes are stung by smoke from burning lives, I wear passing shadows like camouflage, I am a deeper blackness, dark enough to hide how small my life is when nothing I've said begins within me.

I float between lovers like pollen. Or walk the roof at night, wearing the city's breathing like a dress. But I don't write about aging alone. How time ebbs in and out. Or the nightmares that wake me.

I don't write of the distance in my arms that has no place to find welcome. How it bends me down, the weight of everything unsaid, everything lost. On earth, I hear a sound from space and know it is my chance to throw this hurting at the sky like my own funeral ash and howl like a dog because it's my day, it's my goddamn day.



Lamp Post

By Leslieann E. Santiago

7am and I still ain't sleep
Sun peeped me in bed wide awake
Like 'bitch what you doin'?'
Girl, I been a night owl since I was born
Mama said I was up all night
And I slept all morning
Waited till I greeted you before I went into neverland
Somehow closing my eyes always felt safer
When you would arise
Maybe it's the warmth of your rays that rock me to sleep
The only time I use to fall asleep with darkness
Was when Papi would walk me up and down the streetlights
I suppose they mimicked your glow
I'm a breed of the city where the moonlight feels like a new start
Where you could be reborn in the night air
I too am a lamp post grown out of concrete
I am the brightest at night
That is when I emulate you
My light pierces through the toughest among us
I am never scared to be outside
I stand wide awake in your absence
Tag you just in time for dawn over Brooklyn
It's then, only then
When I know you have the day covered
That I can sleep with peace



Every Woman Is An Ocean

By **Natalie Cruz**

Rocks roll down by the ocean
Waves threaten to sweep me off my feet
Litter glitters Mother's cauldron
An albatross roosts on top of me

Waves threaten to sweep me off my feet
The shore break offers no comfort
An albatross sinks further into me
This is my last resort

The shore break allows no comfort
Bleached coral depresses me
This is my last resort
Her siren song beckons me to see

Bleached coral that depresses me
Calcifies my glacier skeleton
Her siren song beckons me to the sea
To relieve my bedlam feminine

My body is a glacier skeleton
My Charybdis heart swallowing debris
Relieve me of my bedlam feminine
To her crashing choir, I, a faithful devotee

My Charybdis heart swallowing debris
Echoes lunatic lullabies of when I ran amok
To her crashing choir, I was a faithful devotee
In the laps of sullen sailors' whispered havoc

Echoed lunatic lullabies of when we ran amok
Haunts my tsunami-hollowed psyche
The sullen sailors whispered havoc
Converts me into a flotsam banshee

My haunted tsunami-hollowed psyche
Clinging to driftwood for salvation
Converts me into a flotsam banshee
Amidst the rocks that roll down by the ocean



Image by Natalie Cruz

Small

By Tracei Willis



My friend
Who is a boss ass bitch
Reminds me that
I too am a boss ass bitch

A mentor
Who is dope AF
Told me that
I too am dope AF

My millennial daughter
Sits wide legged
Jordans placed firmly three feet apart
Says to me
*Mom, it's okay for you
To take up space. In fact
You cannot be
A dope AF boss ass bitch without taking up space.*

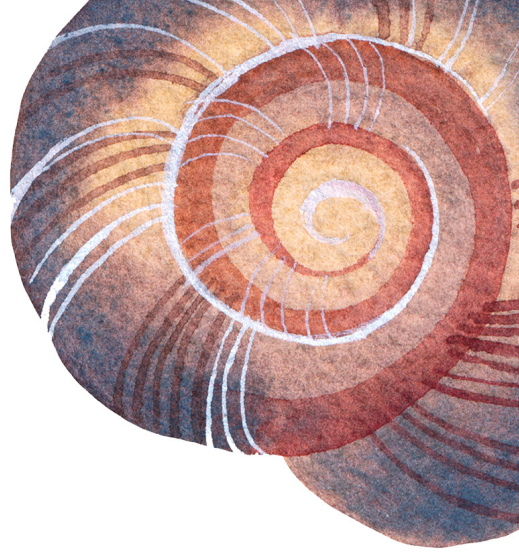
Until the flight attendant stage whispers
“Let me know if you need a seatbelt extension,
Sweetie.”

Or when my hips form suction cups upon entering the subway turnstile
And people behind me grow impatient with my capacity to take up space

That I begin to hold my breath
and try to squeeze myself into a tiny ball –
Small

Nomad

By Kesed Ragin



lonely lover

lovely loner

I'm not of your society

I do not love like a capitalist:

 a poor person with money

love is a secret

I keep between me and my heart

I love you so much

I don't ever need to see you again

Home

By Shamiqua Wilson

sour moon
frozen honey
fruitful void
razor in rose buds
my aunt lifts
its blossom to my nose
asks me if i smell anything
i say yes with blank eyes and lifted lips
i do not
i do smell metal
copper floods
i do see Moses wave goodbye
with wistful tears
i'm sorry
i dug through the wet mud
searching
for redemption
searching
for home
searching
for love
i scraped. i peeled. i cut

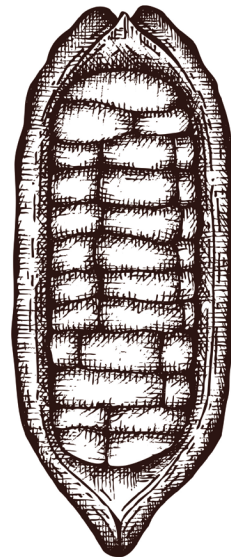


Portrait *of a* Man (Unfinished)

My daddy was
a jokester
a prankster
might've could've been
a racketeer
a gangster
had it not been
for the draft
and Jesus.

My daddy found Jesus
somewhere between ft. dix and the Dominican Republic
Daddy bargained,
“Get me out of this alive,
I will serve you until the day I die”
Shrapnel in his left knee,
bible in his right hand,
firm and determined
a Prophet of God's Promise
until the very end.

My daddy was
a knee-bouncing
storytelling
belly laughing
Butterfinger & Oreo buying
kind of man
might've could've showed us how to love
had it not been
for clear liquor &
the lack of a living wage.



My Daddy's Hands

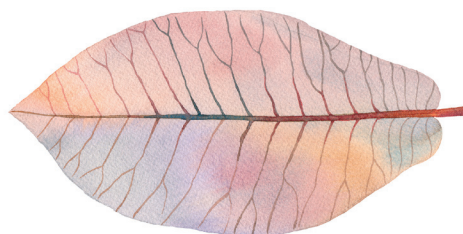
the hands that held me on the day I was born,
were imperfect hands

they'd held a plow in a field in Alabama
a bus ticket to the big city
orders from the Selective Service System
an M-16 in one, a Marlboro in the other
medical discharge papers
an ALCOA check stub.
a woman's curves in a dark corner of a nightclub, vodka rocks in the other
a stunned girl's hand in his own on a rainy February day,
a steering wheel for sixteen hours
to pull his young wife closer
to her southern roots
a saw that cut pulpwood for \$2 an hour

His imperfect hands
gripped Smirnoff bottle necks
held frustrated poverty driven rage
formed fists
bruised eyes
choked throats
punched walls
and clasped together to beg forgiveness

His imperfect hands
rolled newspapers
planted gardens
cut lawns
turned slabs of pork ribs on the grill
steam cleaned carpets, painted apartments
and built an air conditioning business that thrived on his good name alone

Those imperfect hands
picked up Happy
Meals for his granddaughters at preschool
Trembled with grief over his son's unexplainable death.
Gently rocked his first grandson to sleep,
Held on tight to his dear love's hand as she recovered from a stroke



The Revolution

My mother had unprotected sex with the Revolution.
Her hands are still red. “It wasn’t fire,” she says, “just hope.”
She doesn’t apologize for the smoke in her hair or the man being
killed in the rear-view mirror. We drive without looking.
If the radio plays a conversation we almost had she’ll point
at a cloud and ask me the cost of breathing.
“Words are never the same,” I say, “After you bleed.”



Brooklyn Boyz



The first

time my son, saw

a man shot, he

laughed *why*

he sleeping on the ground?

did he, break?

I covered his eyes,

shhh. don't

wake him.

Everything True

1

Hear me, Child of Chance
let me sing your story, how
pulled to Life, you began
a Dream vacuumed through
breath / daylight, a far-off star
planted in your mother.

2

We sat on the stoop and debated
your Life, tiny multiplying cells,
more idea than flesh, placed
on scales – the U-Haul truck idle,
boxes duct taped. “I’ll abort it,”
your mom shouted, “Is that what
you want?” Yes? No? I got
up and under the streetlight,
shouldered a box into my apartment.

3

Cuffing Season is the cruelest
month – bad dates, careless lust. We
played a game of chance, swiping
photos like Tarot cards on cell phone
screens – here The Lady in a Burning
Tower, here a Lioness Kills a Nun,
Or an Anorexic Eats a Bowl
of Dollars and here the Lady
with a Spinning Head. I picked
her and she, swiped right on me,
A Ship with No Steering Wheel.
We met at downtown Brooklyn,
two strangers turning in a crowd,
instantly blinded by a future, we knew
we’d fuck, stupidly, carelessly
blinking the bright day, you our future
son, a spot in our eyes, you a glowing zygote.

4

In the dark night bed, we washed stories from knotted bodies, she once married to a woman, I lost faith while reporting from the war, we fucked toward hope, fucked tears into jewelry, hands holding the anchor as the bed rocked and rocked in the storm.

5

At night, your mom and I cast shadows against the wall like two cast-always briefly facing each other in the same boat, paddling in opposite directions. Our Tarot card.

6

When did you arrive? You. One. Out of millions of possible yous. A girl you. A you with an ancestor's face. A you with a twin. But no, one infinitely tiny sperm, propelling blindly forward to a distant music, you listened so lovingly to it, you did not even notice the first touch and spark, a birth-flare on Earth, spinning like a disco ball shimmering with life and death as it spins. Your Tarot card.

7

My father left before I was born. He never wanted to hold my face in his hands. I searched years for him and when exhausted I became him by finding you.



8

“Our love isn’t strong,” you mom slammed the door, then another door until a maze made our voices echo. I opened one after another, carrying a breakfast tray, and behind the last one, a room where she cried on the toilet a dislodged placenta on the floor, her head spun words caught fire in a tornado. “I hate who I am becoming.”

9

Your mom and I held hands as the doctor cut her skin apart like a theater curtain, and lifted you, screaming greedy for air, red faced, tongue a knife poking the new world. It was the last time we held hands in love, interlaced fingers a net for you, eight pounds of the future, a breathing pearl the very best of us.

10

Peekaboo! I close a door. Open it. Peekaboo!
I put a Trump mask on. Take it off. Peekaboo!
I hide my face behind hands. You ply one
finger loose and touch me, laughing baby laugh.
Peekaboo!

11

My eyes are your sky. My chest, your bed.
My hand, a bird bringing you food. My voice
a laser pointer. My heartbeat your lighthouse.
My smell, your piano keys. My tossing you up
and down, your bungee jumping to whoever
you will become.

12

At night, you screamed on me, thrashing
kicking on my chest, then sat up and grabbed
me, a passing car’s headlights cast our shadows
against the bedroom wall, you a Sailor Wrestling
the Steering Wheel of a Large Old Ship, Tossed
by a Storm. Your Tarot card.

13

After she dropped you and broke
 your ankle, your mom stared blankly on the video
 call, waiting to vanish before picking you up.
 The cast made you walk like a pirate. After she
 moved to Jersey and demanded \$500 a week, she dropped
 you again on your head and drove you vomiting
 to the hospital. After she said you fell from a chair
 and broke the other ankle, I helped you re-learn balance.
 You winced, rubbed the bone, cried out bewildered
 “daddy, daddy.” I carried you, stroked the pain,
 answering, “I know. I know.”

14

To everything there is a season, a time for every
 purpose under the sun, but I tell you now, even
 after you die, and your children die, even after
 the last child is born and the last city crumbles and
 the last God is forgotten, even after the last sea
 is dried by the red sun, and the Earth is burned
 to a charcoal floating in space, even after the last
 star is exhausted and black holes vacuum the residual
 heat in a dead universe, even after the last atom
 is pulled apart and sucked in and at the bottom
 of the black hole, space-time rips into a singularity
 and a New Big Bang gives birth to a strange cosmos
 and somewhere in that teeming multitude of Life,
 maybe you’ll be a sentient flower being awakened
 by a ray of sunlight on the shore of methane ocean,
 it’s me, it’s me, it’s me
 because I will find you and I will love you again.

tears are *a* sick sonofabitch

For Auntie Baby Ruth

tears don't be caring
if you trying to be strong
don't be caring
if you don't want folks to see
don't be caring
if you were just laughing
tears just be knowing
that your heart hurts
that your seven-year-old legs keep running through the red beads
that your little girl fingers count the cigarette butts in the ashtray
that your thighs stick to the plastic covered furniture that you shouldn't have been sitting on anyway
because you were just trying to overhear what the aunties were saying
tears just be knowing
that your mind keeps going back to
the elegance of her smile,
the warm embrace within her laughter,
the smell of her pound cake infused kitchen
tears be saying remember
her voice whispering, "Take this now, and don't tell me no!"
folded crisp bills pushed into pockets
her voice urging, "Get a bigger piece than that! And take a piece for your mama, too!"
foil heavy with pineapple upside down cake
her voice encouraging, "When you gone go on and write that book?"
aging urgency underlining her question
her weakened voice asking,
"How are your girls?"
her eyes brighten as she watches videos of the next generation,
"He's beautiful, just like his mama."
tears don't be caring who see
tears don't be caring when they come
tears just be knowing
they ain't got no place else to go



An Ode to 8th Grade Boys *with a Nod to Ms. Brooks*

There ain't much sillier
than a trio of ALT. School
8th Grade Boys.

Turned around
Giggling
Attention seeking
Justifying & Testifying

Two making slurping sounds
One taking long, deliberate sips
from a tiny juice box...

Three silly geese
with wings made of wax
flying too close to the sun
coming down from a blackboyjoyhigh.

Slumped down in their seats
Sucking teeth & rolling eyes
Mouths fixed with slick lies.

They too right
to be told they wrong

They know they beautiful
because God don't make ugly

They real cool
but they cain't skip school

Don't get out til June
(Praying 4 them every day.)
Don't want them to die soon.



Red Room

By Natalie Cruz

I loaned my body to billion beggar hands
Stolen artifices, lost locks of hair
Sewn shut the void with sutures

In surgical memoriam
Here lies my libido

Pleasure lessened
deadened disposition

spiraling
dancing
exuviating

Excruciating celibacy

Abstinent cacophony

Still songs of water
Salt sparkle stings

The strings are loose—loose

Pull them taut

Taught them how to bend, to snap

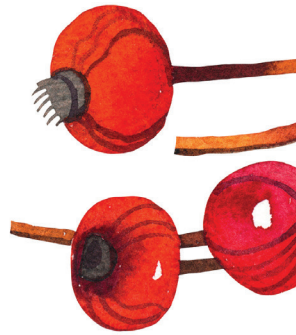
To sing sweetly till they rot, rot, rot

Where is the root?

Left brain scalp remove
Scoop out the padded rooms
The croon routine

*It behooves you to move on
I can't; I choose not to
It hurts, it hurts*

This red room haunts me, calls me
Six years old again
I'm rejoicing, renouncing shame again
I'm acting like I know nothing again



I'm revisiting another lifetime
I am time
I do not exist
I forget feeling
I feel fleeing

Carry blood back to the retina
Crimson curtains and tiaras

Remember an Acheron straitjacket
with my father's name
Congruent prisons,
but I escaped

Shroud my tear-stained oil porcelain
Mask my pain by becoming death
The angels won't allow it

Praise be to Grace
For keeping me firmly in place while
Fear catches up to cradle me

And say:

baby
I've been ringing in your ears
But I keep missing you
The opulence of your tears
Lust for luxury is killing you

I've been trying to warn you

At the end of this river is a plunge pool

Where soon you'll stretch out into infinity

When you, black light star, collapse on yourself

Rebirth—spaghettification

Remember the red
The inevitability of death
Mortality in a bleeding stubbed toe
You don't remember feeling it
Until you need help

Make performance of your pain
Make a martyr of your misery

Your only cross to bear
Your lack of faith



Her

By Kesed Ragin

I used a red crayon to scribe
axioms underneath her mattress
left mementos for her to discover
if she ever went searching
for her balance

An acrobat out of practice
tightrope walking live
without an atlas
she is legend
mapping her symmetry
about her axis

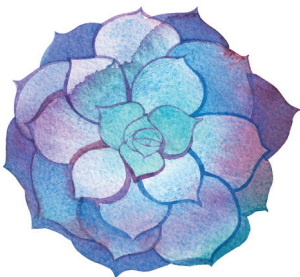
Her face is a gallery
a pageantry of
crooked teeth
tweezers never meet brow

Beneath her frown
Burrows a smile
no makeup
her make up is fire truck lips
and supple hips
seal brown
I exhale her like jubilant laughter
in burgeoning lungs
making room for sound

Out of breath
chased by hounds
hounded by catcalls
but dog whistles
will never get her down

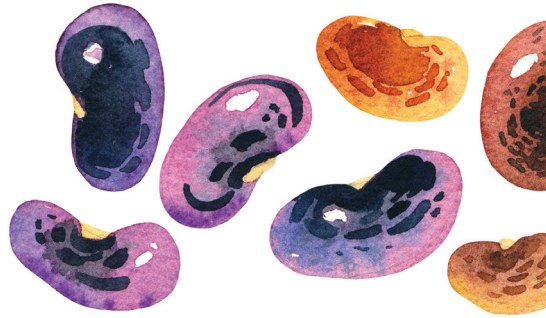
She walks with a crown
top heavy
back sturdy
balancing hegemony
under her gown

Learning Objective: Do Now
love her
before she drifts into the clouds



The Collide

By Lesliann E. Santiago



Twinkles of turquoise
Have shifted moon from sky
Crashing into me with ease
Ruby kisses, covered and cozy
Secrets we find hidden in paint
Chipping off the old walls
Built around a heart striving
To beat louder

In awe of what I witness
Colliding shades of wonder
Engulfing us, trees in wildfire
Evolution at play
Frolicking in the courtyard
Beckoning a friend to follow
Tapping at coal-stained glass
And setting you free

Pan *and* Aphrodite

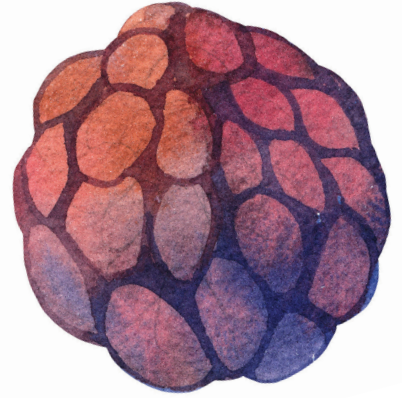
By Kesed Ragin

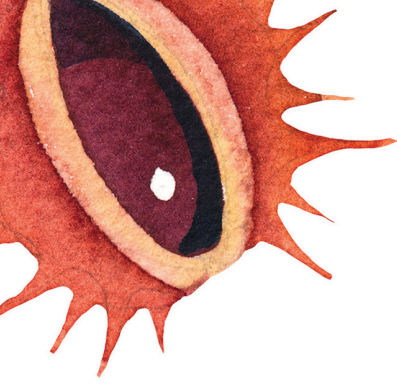
We frolic in the wilds
Delighted and basking
in the coronation of sun rays
with grass stains
skylarking through dark days
nameless we speak
bleached

I dream of seas
oceans of me
saturated with the fat of life
rendered through the sieve of paradise
my weakness lies
in the eyes of innocence
the breath of glee
Lingering tinctures of
pheromones and weak knees
and salty necks
solar plexus
the nexus
her core is my beginning
the door to my ending
interrupting eternity
I regret holding my tongue
in times of need
reserving my love
so selfishly
This frigid heart
mixed with barbiturates
pulsating head trip

and double-dipped
face first
between hips
baptized and rinsed
as if virgin lips
reborn with a kiss
Rabbit holes have no limits
and I'm caught in her repentance
guilty for having vision
filthy from submitting
hardheaded wisdom
instructed by happenstance
and consequence
We be fortun'd fools
the evangel
they will damn you
for staring at the Sun
and pissing in the Nile
spitting at the wind
with a smile of a child
Too blind to have hindsight
too fly to be bound tight
our plight is to be free
from serving time
in another's reality

we are simply galaxies
of an ever-expanding mind





Mistress Bliss

By Natalie Cruz

She's back
Mischievous marvel
Clock bullied quiet in the corner

Sanity making sweet love on a pendulum swing
Skinny-dipping in fire just to prove something

Hydra honey – multiply
Spontaneous conception fruit – fly
Imperial vampire sits invitingly impolite
I serrate fibrous flesh with canines
Wash wishful princes out my hair
Embrace everything and let it fill me

Heaving breaths

Curling toes

Little deaths

All alone
But don't assume me
lonely

I have sacrificed
Superficial
Intimacy
On an altar

Stabbed out its rotten heart

Molten down

Molted out

Mottled grief

Spittled reprieve
Reprised jagged lines
Lymphatic enterprise
Filled baptismal vials with saline sin
Spun twine round sage and candlesticks
Licked kisses off my lips
Bliss missed me far too much

I'm coming!

I'm coming!

I'm coming,

Mistress!

Trace tresses over, under toes
Nail my soles to cardinal corners
Of dewy honeymoon sheets
Let the sacral winds of change blow

into me

into me

into me

Please Don't Taint *the* Flowers Too

By Lesliann E. Santiago

Light me a stage on fire
I can sing songs
Of a blood orange heart
Even with busted lips
And a plum-crazy tongue
Yesterday's grave is still fresh
If I soil it with efforts to hide
Many orchids would wither
At being another martyr to misery

Please don't taint the flowers too

Warm
Worn
Hands
Angry, vengeful worn
Hopeful, brave, worn hands
Relentless and enduringly worn
Gorgeous and strong, worn hands
Soulful and vigorously
Warm
Worn
Hands

Willing to do with them whatever it takes
They too are unafraid of their fear
They are afraid of suffocating
Of doing nothing to find breath
I am afraid when I do nothing
When I am not the fire
The righteousness in the ashes
Left behind
Fear continues to exist
As I choose
To finally ignore it

Rest has become fruitful

No longer a surrendering
It's an offering to tomorrow
My persistence understands its place
Honors its progress among peril
Gives me the pace to stop
To place flowers at my bedside
Lay down within myself
And say thank you for trying



Memoriam

By Kesed Ragin

we have forgotten our name
made homes for ourselves
fabricated from a borrowed tongue
flouting the flagrant bonds
reluctant to recollect a plagiarized past
riddled with footnotes
shame giving way
to flushed cheeks
kiss me raw
the bitterness of this tongue
strikes like sin on summer nights
embraced by your touch
I acquiesce
inhale the salt of you
this buck of a man
replete by your gaze
you lick the nectar off my cheek
I am reminded of the blood on your fingers



A Harder Year, Reminding Me You're Gone, Fingertips Forgotten Forever

By Lesliann E. Santiago

a
wave came in again
harder
than that very first
year
a sun relentlessly
reminding
the wind of who once held
me
vignettes of tailorbirds tending a nest
you're
the feathers once red, now
gone
into the faded pink of
fingertips
used to tear those sewn leaves apart
forgotten
they were once made to last
forever



Bridges

By Kesed Ragin



I want to kiss figure eights
on the back of your infinity
test your biology to see if we
have chemistry
give me wisdom and knowledge
and I'll show you what I learned
in college
live under your eyelids
let your iris give birth
to our kids
if you teach me how to dream
I'll show you how to breathe
just hold your breath
and wait for me
count to ten
write my name on your hand
tilt your center of gravity
nail me to your thoughts
crucify
sentence me to life
for crossing
the Serengeti of your spine
tracing my lineage
back to your beginning
licking eternity off your palms
naked eyes and all
just armed with a psalm
and an aching
like a rusted jaw
I'll fall for your
autumn skin tone
and leave pearls on
your tongue
just be my tiger lily
and I'll be your dandelion
your Sun
the Moon of man
we can build bridges
or we can build dams
we don't break hearts
we just hold hands



I thought about how I used to want to die
Maybe there are no dishes in heaven
At thirteen, I stared my rage into a flooded creek
A woman saw me
For once, I wasn't invisible
She doesn't know it, but she saved my life that day
I think I may have done the same
For some who never got the chance to say

I used to be afraid of the waves
Exquisite highs and careening lows
I didn't know
They were reaching for my love
That's how love goes

The shore break is an illusion
Comfort yields contusions
We will find Veritas' vertebrae
Assemble it in a stack of
Iridescent rainbow plates
That we use every day
Because life is the special occasion
And the tender reason is love

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He lives in Brooklyn.

Kesed Ragin is a spoken word artist, an actor and a poet. He lives in Brooklyn.

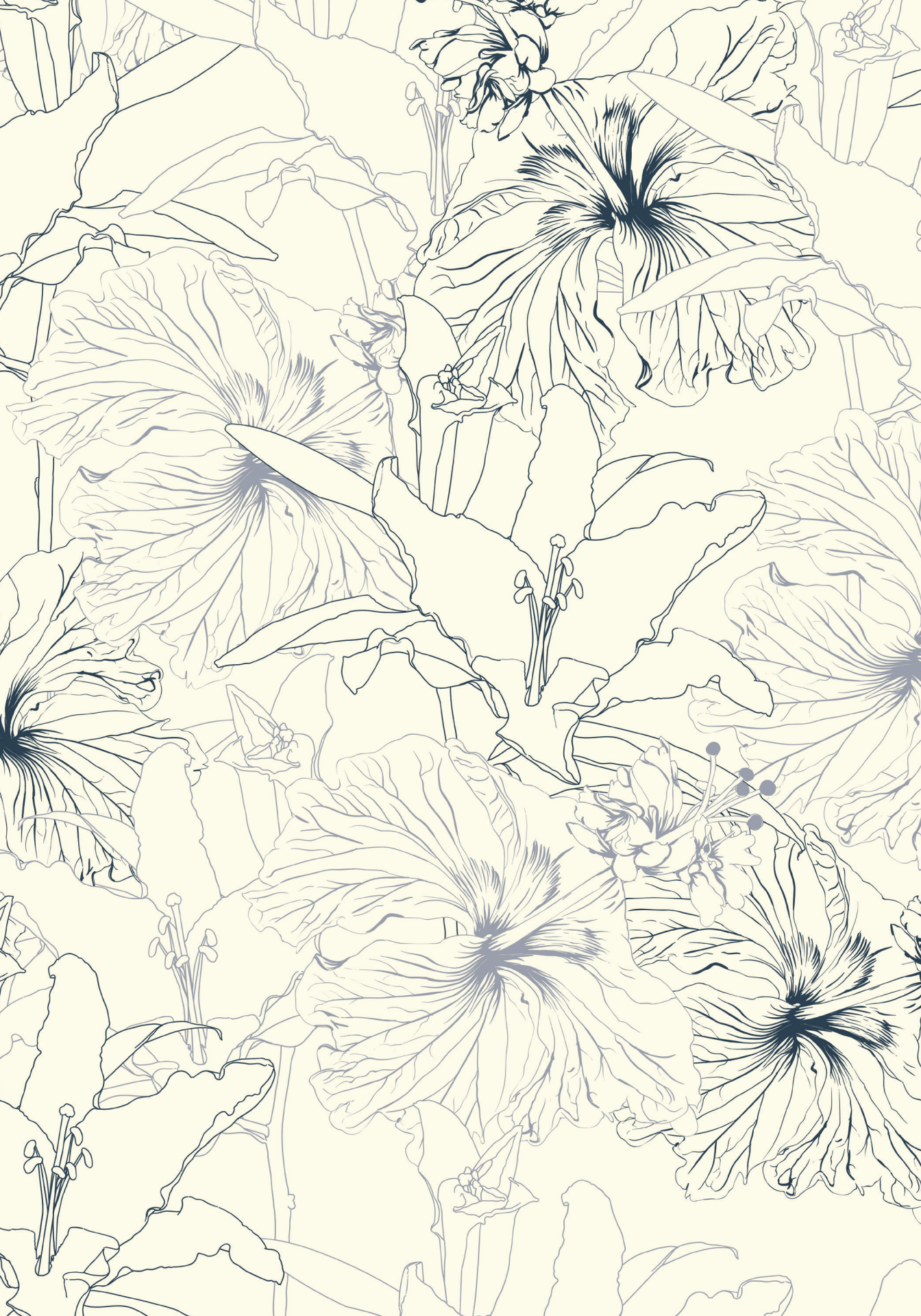
Leslieann E. Santiago is a poet and creative producer, interested in film and non-fiction writing. She was born and raised and still lives in Brooklyn.

Tracei Willis is an English teacher in Starkville, MS.
She writes poetry about her family, her students, and the world we live in.

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