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FLEX

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

JULIAN RANDALL

May 2019

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## ABSTRACT

Within this project I have compiled a book length collection of poems entitled “FLEX” which explore questions of violence, inheritance and pastoral poetics. Taking place across the landscapes of Mississippi, The Dominican Republic, and contemporary Black masculinity FLEX serves to ask questions of what violences contributed to the speaker’s birth and what possibilities exist on the other side of such historical pain.

*“If you suffer in the grave, you can kill from it” – Ai*

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## The King is Dead, Long Live the King

Heaven is the certainty that you will be avenged  
I know I know the kingdom is not fair  
but it's what I have a montage of red and a mitosis  
of knuckles I'm not sure how you could expect me  
to love anything Ain't no question  
sadness is regal like that  
golden and replaceable once I wanted  
a lineage of identical men once a mouth soft and hot  
as the quickest way that gold can hurt you You see  
a pattern yet? I practice the want of nothing and fail  
I've been shown how ugly I can be  
when I am invisible  
I don't believe in yesterdays  
The throat of loneliness? Straddled with my knife  
I press my hands to my face and the lament is a valley  
the light sags through What do you do when you have  
lost Everything? Rewrite the history of Everything  
I don't like my smile because someone told me I didn't like it  
Now I am gorgeous in all the languages I mothered  
Flex the antonym of Missing I avenge myself  
Stretch my hands I orphan my grief for the living and it is beauty  
ain't no question I monarch  
the lonely I my own everything now I miss my love and  
it is an American grief I strike the smell from nostalgia  
cut my memory to spite my country What is the odor of nothing  
but my dominion in want of excess I grin and pillars of bone flower  
into sawed off crowns say I flex the light and the light flexes  
heat shimmer unfurling like a bicep my lust a mirage  
where the body is merely a congealing of the river I can feel it  
slowly drifting away from me The world I knew is gone  
and getting more gone and my anthem populating my nose  
with an abundance of salt I slip the shroud over the life I named  
and forget I belonged to someone once My sovereign's face is a riot  
of diamonds whining *This will be a beautiful death* and I am  
gorgeous and desperate to never have to miss anyone again  
I rock the jeweled shroud become the bride of my own sad light

## **Moon Cricket**

I have been living despite myself  
my territory hemmed by mud and threat  
of mud If there is a land without its own  
subliminal violences this night offers no  
defense of what has died in it Some things  
are only nourished in a stutter of kudzu  
and the inconsistencies of silver the moon  
shucks off Casual machines honey the dark  
with the monotony of their health while  
one theory of soil chokes out another See  
no land without violence I've been staving off  
the obvious It is dark and so am I  
Earlier heat makes me lush with failed stars  
I tell the homies *Living in Mississippi is like living  
on the moon* and I mean every day brings  
several weathers and I am never dressed  
for any of them Kudzu in the right light  
is like a gold front on a disintegrating tooth  
Since I got here I have not written any throat  
that was not straddled by something uninvited  
The ground is brimming with sirens and children  
of sirens I have been living in an idea of dark  
come from another man's mind watching  
the rain loose inconvenient silk imagining  
what lives in the soil the asphalt choked out  
If the clouds are the capital city of a country  
of perfect memory then I am afraid



No ocean formed against me will abandon me  
Lately the stars are dim so I count the niggas  
I wish would try me I have walked into the dark  
seeking a saddle and emerged with merely hands  
I rock a trampled violet play moonlight in reverse  
blued with desire I antithesis a lineage I do not leave  
because how will I get home I have been here before  
Flesh tenored with desperation escape like night  
demands recursion Opaque as land before a man bridled  
the light I am lonely in the season that widows everything  
I have been waiting to tender the moon face an ancestral purple  
I have been mothering a rage when I forget how to say escape  
My favorite songs in any year all translate to *Run* or *Mine*  
I am at my most named in the dark sing into a parallel quiet  
name the song for the tether it casts pleading silver  
towards a geography of light we barely name  
I reach my hand out to a space of no stars  
Where the clouds have torn like cotton I forget  
How much I love a song which muscles the silence  
How much I would give for a grammar of no slaves  
O historical dead I am come from your unlanguageed apocalypse  
like an ugly and deserved weather Watch me  
eclipse their dark with my own Watch me citizen  
the absence of your names

## Mississippi Genesis

No.

## LAMENTATION (Black Jesus Remix)

*"I cannot die, because this is my universe" - Lil Uzi Vert*

Slur my passing with the gold punctuating my chest  
A remix of my death snakes my white tee I wear  
Messiah like a wine stain Fingers splayed as if begging  
A piano to grant an eighth of its name Religion is an  
Economy of what can be touched and when Give  
Me three days I return in November Rocking  
A tundra The wind making love to the space between  
Me and my clothes Homies mourn me by pouring  
Chains of bubbles into a glass What a world I left  
What a heaven I turned my face from Not the pastoral  
Of it The summer is lush with a green fit to drown in  
I mean a republic of hands Everywhere I turn maroon  
Tapestries of Do-rags The space of the neck is ripe  
With flags A scalp is a nation and vice versa Resurrection  
Is just a fancy word for how much I must have missed you  
Men kneel in the heat at my coming we strip and they kiss  
Away my most fragile weather Imagine a tender worth being  
Holy for Maybe it's sad to be asked always the parameters  
Of my tenderness Maybe it's the sadness after which  
All gold is named I am pressing my mouth to what I cannot save  
My bare toes in the dirt I decided it is a tragedy to be stainless  
In such a place I have been to heaven and still have nowhere to stay

## Codeswitch Decomposing into Lil Wayne Lyric

*After Danez Smith*

### Lord Please Forgive Me for My Brash Delivery

A face is for other people's benefit, a brochure gospel  
undone by a mouth. I am the most marketable sin since 2004.  
A smile that yields only bones, a mouth slick with restraint.  
I am a good filament, a bright obedient electric. I speak,  
and sometimes am found.

### Lord Please Forgive Me for My Brash

body and especially my mouth, for-  
give me my scholarships, for-  
give me my name brand ambition, for-  
give me my tattered skin on my G-Unit sneakers  
how easy I drenched all the photographs

### Lord Please Forgive Me

my jagged epiphanies  
my tarnished  
jaw gleaming w/excess & all  
my un-flayed dark

### Lord Please

y'all knew I was a storm when you Found me  
once a white boy asked me for a Skin-Colored Marker  
I say Whose skin? and stare until he buss out cryin'  
Imma flood waiting to happen been like this since '99

### Lord

*You know*

*I'mma make it rain*

*I'm da hurricane son*

## San Zenon Repents

*The Hurricane of San Zenon struck Santo Domingo, on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1930. Three weeks prior, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo was sworn in as president and cemented his 30-year dictatorship in the aftermath of San Zenon leveling most of the capital and killing 6000 Dominicans.*

Did you think a saint can't weep?  
me and all my burly weather  
yo creo que tu no entiendes  
what exactly yo soy  
I saw him  
el diablo jefe

Hands spotted white  
bleach splayed across water  
clouds before a storm  
pues tu crees en Dios  
how else my name then?

What is a saint to do  
but gather what he can  
in his lipless mouth?  
howl prayers against what stands  
in his path?  
he came  
lo siento para eso

Te amo te amo te amo  
love is the velocity at which I ruin  
Saints are made in the leaving  
I never wanted you dead

just elsewhere

## **I Am Only An Ocean Because I Resemble A Vast Regret**

I mean to say I look like no one and this  
is considered my best feature  
once a man took my Abuelo's island  
and that is how my mother was born  
once my grandmother met my grandfather  
because they both fled to the same place  
More than once a wound was inflicted  
and a hand begged the wound to sing  
and the wound wept out its one crimson eye  
until there was enough history to make me  
I mean to say without trauma I would not exist  
If there is no invasion I might just be lonely

## **Abuela Dice Que Spilled Salt Goes Over the Shoulder**

Por que no tenemos una país anymore  
cuando we lived in Santo Domingo  
we watched Trujillo spill 100 daughters  
onto the street y lo sigue de este  
recuerdas the memory of a city  
turns you to salt esta de Dios  
this would have been your fatherland  
before men who were fathers  
took it apart con sus manos sucios  
por supuesto nos decidio  
we had to wash ourselves of home  
in order to survive we flew  
so that su madre might be untouched  
sacrificio para sacrificio  
sangre por sangre  
what else could we have done but taken  
the house spilling into bricks in front of us  
and sprinkle it into the ocean?  
el oceano no hay azucar  
salt is always hungry  
salt is what made the men forget  
their country had a name  
that was not the name of a man  
who gave every mirror his name  
mijo la sal esta pequena pero  
the ocean will never hold your face  
so kindly y este is how men grow vain  
and forget to wash the blood  
from their hands before they hug their daughters

## The Zero Country

I shut off the Men  
section of my Tinder months ago  
and I do not know if this is allegiance  
or self-preservation. Hummingbirds—  
starved to true thirst, become a series of barren flutes.  
Bullets starved of their purposes rust in the cradle  
After decades of inventing new circumstances for mercy  
the hands that I invite will end me.  
A man nurses another man's need  
then kills him. This happens everywhere and everyday—  
I am alone here this is the lonely that kills me slowest.  
I don't know if I love living as much as I have a loyalty  
to what survival drew me here in the first place.  
I love men I know everything of callouses and thus am skeptical  
of mercy I'm alive despite indebted to a strain of probability.  
Generations of mothers not strangling their children  
to hide them from the world they were already inheriting.  
Magnolias, sluggish eruptions, my best dress  
outside my window coming away in pieces.  
I swore to my mother I would not die here—  
but this happens everywhere and everyday.  
My feverish dance swells under the rose  
and azure of pulse. There is nowhere to do this  
consistently, lust here is like lust anywhere else;  
a season of bruised light one thirst wrestling down another.



## **The Zero Country**

A mutual captivity is still a citizenship,  
maybe the only kind. a scalpel pressed—  
to the anatomy of staying. Summer  
the weather its own arrogant membrane I live  
in the byproduct of unforgiveable heat.  
I contemplate purchasing more books  
in the town where my family was enslaved  
it is too hot for all this. Subversion makes a petty weapon.  
This is perhaps all I have come to prove.  
I keep telling this story even when I do not want to.  
Miles ago my great grandfather tricked white people  
into thinking he was white for a living, this was his trade.  
The present is not so different a kind of gravity,  
In pursuit of the fugitive, I have become him.

## Poem in Which the Metaphor is Probably Too Obvious

A Black church is burned in Mississippi  
and spray painted *Vote Trump*

It's a pretty obvious metaphor from here  
Brimstone    Armageddon

Bullets    their copper beaks  
tender with heat    smoke flies to migrate

what I know of inheritance:  
the town is named Greenville

I know this because the news says  
what I know at the molecular

My great grandfather was "from"  
Greenville

In the way rubble is "from"  
a building

Still too obvious? Ok that's fair  
let's try again

My great grandfather was pale  
as a surrender

The presumption of the body  
is a shoddy prayer to hide in

The town found out and calmly told him  
he had 24 hours

or they would tar and feather him    death is implied in absolute qualities of tar

smoke flies to migrate    I always say  
*Smoke*    when I mean    *Family*

I live 131 miles from Greenville  
a choice    that put ash in my mother

an epidemic of red caps dripped out

the mouth of a swelling kind of country  
a neglected cavity humming

a blues that sounds like a child spoken  
for the last time

and surely the metaphor is exhausting  
itself in your mouth

surely you are waiting for some inevitable use  
of *Holy* or *Sacred* or *Wrong* or *America*

So I will settle for *Expected*  
and say I am surprised

it took the fire (which touched my Great Grandfather's foot  
in a way that can only make us cousins) so long

to say  
*Welcome home*

## IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

I won't be the first to admit it  
But I could be more discriminating  
With mercy     the sea a fever  
Of emerald   I stand and ask the wave  
What I would any other emperor  
How palindromic the kingdom  
I never thought to name the cloud  
Outside the tradition of storms  
Piecemeal   I am building a boat  
Out of what parts of me want  
To endure beyond the changing hue  
Of elegy     I must be some kind of boy  
To meet the verdant apocalypse  
So unadorned     Everything about me a loud  
Fuck it     I'mma go out in ball shorts  
I have been searching for the exit  
To shame maybe     but also simply my wrists  
Since I learned to talk I have always sworn  
There's a seam to everything     even loneliness  
Even in Eden green translated to abandoned  
How palindromic the kingdom of an eye  
Vision always drowns the seen so why seek  
Reflection before anything else     The new world  
Stays feelin itself     At the end of everything  
Who will manage my fade     My hands will only  
Ever meet each other again     I lied earlier  
I haven't *always* wanted anything and yet

Here I am at the death of *always* and somehow  
Its birth how palindromic the kingdom  
Of always I am searching for the old world  
In which I was miserable but I knew its name  
Absolution is in my hands by virtue of succession  
The lethargic green moan surrounds this self too  
Each crest's feeble music *beyond beyond beyond*  
But I'm acting painfully human again an elegy  
For what does not elegize an elegy for what struck first  
Where are her bones now  
Waves brief petals like the muscle tissue of a forest  
I am mocked by another man's Eden so long as I allow it  
The green surges in and if she is gone how long before  
She is merely a word that I loved From where I stand there is a seam  
To everything but want This is my new always: searching  
For how to forgive being the last of anything

## The Book of Yeezus

An arrow does its own form of singing I like to believe  
this means nothing is ever too far  
from the bird that it was I tender the dark  
with a hum we cannot die in a legion  
of spells for the Black boys who learned  
to make the light sorry All I have ever wanted  
is to be the wound you neon  
all I have ever wanted is to die beautiful  
in hands I could mistake for yours  
All seasons are becoming the season  
of my isolation the green sputters long  
into December so I think we are all less invested  
in loyalty these days O you gilded Amistad  
the mouth I'd forgive without question froths  
with an armada of golden hulled ships Excess  
I too pretty the interruption when I cannot bear  
the elegy any longer I don't know how not to love  
what would kill me without noticing I can be  
ferocious with my ugly I can be the knife chanting  
silver through the abrasion I wish I could write  
of you as something that would break if I held it  
living for too long O grief-cousin phantom-chain  
wind-throne blade-choir What is death to the children  
of the forgotten One day too my mother will die  
and my loneliness will be a hyperbole of ravens  
all of which will sing like fugitives *Glory Glory*  
*how much I'll miss her* While yours anthem in the wrong  
direction I will probably still love you then *Glory Glory*  
*how easy I march in defense of another man who wants me dead*

## DOWN

*“If we die in each other’s arms still get laid in that afterlife”- Kanye West*

I too wish to be a prostrate floral interruptive  
My mother is every bit as merciless as my father The genesis  
Of my softness a book salted to pulp by casual influences  
My mother told me to never cry I obeyed Told me to be safe  
I have never forgiven the digression my desire presents Boys taste like  
Death Maybe Popeyes if we feel fancy I want to make a joke that’s a false  
Flag for the question What happens when someone wants you to live  
So badly that it’s killing you I was right the first time Boys taste like death  
And the eyes oblige entry too easily to be something you can keep He looks  
Beautiful as something I could trust to finish the job once I am wounded  
I want to be pulled apart as if my ass is a book waterlogged Genesis dead seam  
Empty and full bodied as surrender They kill people for wanting And I want  
To live longer than my mother more than I want to die as myself O invisible  
Wound barely shrouded wood gravity is pulling me towards a synonym  
For casket Mine eyes have seen the glory of whose apology will kiss me  
I’m gone Eager bouquet sprawled on blue like stars you pierce my eye and drown

Internal Memoranda

May, 1961

Central Intelligence Agency

From: [REDACTED]

To: [REDACTED]

Mission report confirms [REDACTED] justice [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Trujillo [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] betrayal [REDACTED] wounded [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] fleeing up the highway [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We are not godly enough men [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] he did not make it much further [REDACTED] blood-

drunk son of a [REDACTED] screaming [REDACTED] in nobody's [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] language. [REDACTED] Imbert shot him in the chin. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Sic Semper Tyrannis. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] savor this night, [REDACTED]

the silvered holes in [REDACTED] Chevy Bel Air mocked the stars, [REDACTED] we can meet for

beers after 6 [REDACTED]



## The Cane Field Testifies Regarding the Assassination of the Mirabal Sisters

Pues es posible que I have learned to fear la lluvia  
All of my saddest stories have the same beginning  
Entiendes? One thing falls into another I am fallen

Into all the time Men enter me like rain  
Swing the moon in their hands until I'm mud  
I suck their boots beg them tranquilase tranquilase

It was an accident mostly to have lived this long  
I regret the entry but what choice did I have  
Men shove their weapons inside me and only I

Ever think to call them bastard All I have ever  
Said has been blamed on the wind como una  
Mariposa I am beautiful because I am surrounded

Guapisima I am cherished most by the blade  
Yo soy la prima de la tormenta What rages  
against me used to keep me alive entiendes?

Es posible que every storm begets women  
I am only what memories were buried in me  
So I can't say what's buried elsewhere

Una pais is only as good as the saddest acres  
Of its deception Nobody can tell you this  
Better than la tierra itself That night it rained

They dragged them off the road El poder de  
La tormenta es en el oscuro y los manos  
I howled for a country I'm mostly made of ghost

Stories and rumors The men entered me  
What choice did I have but to suck their boots  
For this crime they have only ever called me citizen

I tremble when the rain comes De verdad  
When the soldiers came back I mistook the headlights  
Of the truck for lightning The thunder for acres of batons

## The Zero Country

The wind melodies hard through the cotton

All I need to know the dead crave  
gerunds with a desperation traditionally

reserved for rain it occurs to me  
too often that in another world I count  
among those historical dead Some  
imagination prayed me another life  
beyond what made me their ancestor

One age stretching past kingdom  
crown of silence I have been mourned  
now live again elsewhere and this is what  
I have done with it I spit on statues  
in front of men who own multiple knives

Men dressed like trees their children  
dream of deer and what it means to own

I purse my lips try to become dead  
in this world too every step I take here  
is a sad defiance of the escape given

I ride past rows of cotton the sun transfigures  
them into gills of the bleakest fish O meadow  
of child's fists O violence that grows into  
a more efficient violence I'm some other town's  
ghost story Their knives moan my name  
the whetstone after all the bride of history

All their love is cleaving in any other language  
I walk beneath trees become the moon's sharp whistle  
Violence is not my only name still all the men

I find in foliage look at me and whisper *Come true*  
*Come true* Miles of mud beneath the cotton spread  
like the scab of a flame I scrub clay from beneath  
my fingernails wax a rust moon in the sink I remember  
fire only has a few alternatives

## Arroz Poetica

After Aracelis Girmay

It is your name that I am calling when I want  
to massage the machetes into rain. You who

I am signaling back from grief. The country you  
don't know is perfect. Even with our enemies,

who multiply like rice, in the space between  
your hands, which were papered so close

to the veins that I have reduced you to a map  
because I only ever had time for the one language;

and the water. In that space between the enemies  
spin shrapnel cavalier as stars. I am watching

the water boil I am watching our enemies scream  
into nourishment while the fires below make the air

scowl through them. O Abuelo, you who are gone,  
it is you who I am calling from a field as seasonably dark

as your name. What brings a daughter to call her father  
after rice? Moro, breath the sad daughter

of various consequences of fire I am saying your name  
to tender the moon which according to your daughters

is merely a callous on your palm. All the luminous holes  
your sky a field and a field and a field and a city of rice.

It is me citizen of an echo of an unknowing who  
beats somewhere because of what you refused to die of.

What if the blade is inextricable from gratitude? The country  
I don't know is perfect, because I have not laid eyes on the escape,

and because the bullets have no eyes only my mother's mouth,  
which is these days plagued by a language in which every sentence

can't begin with *I miss*. It is your name I am calling to knead her  
with my hands. My mother, daughter of the escape, glad citizen

of the war you escaped to from the war you were a young man in  
once. It is your name I am calling because mine is not enough,

because there was once a place where you heard your favorite song  
and once a place where you could not return, and they are the same

place. Because there was once a man whose hands dripped bleach  
and insisted *seafoam*, because he ran the country into his name.

His name which I cast out to strangers when I mean to say *All that I am  
stems back to what you were not taught. I am the son of the flight,*

*the propeller an insistence of blades, which churn the air like my mother  
who does not know you but likely misses you still, stranger. O, tonight*

the dark is thickening around the barrel of the moon I utter you  
my first idea of South and past my window my street seethes

thick with the fugitives of rain and past them a field I could have lived  
my entire death in and past that another another another

until the rain carries me over cane fields I imagine you loved once  
and doors where you once held a cigarette and pulled the fire down

to its rind. If the moon can't be an eye or the barrel of a language's  
remorseless light let everywhere be your hands at least tonight.

O it is your name I am calling as if the rain will not always fall  
like machetes. Abuelo there was rain in the world before you died,

I'm sure of it. But now you are the prince of all that falls so hard  
I think it must mean to kill the field Prince of the rice that clatters

down into its tenderness Insisting itself south past what was once  
named by the enemy All your dominion laughs *I live I live again.*

## LAMENTATION

I want a church of this    a triptych of tainted hands  
I've never lived in a country where I could trust  
The light to thread itself through the right flaw  
I've been enumerating the gaps the sun flails through  
Soon    I will speak of winter and the gravity will be negligible  
O how we have wounded the ocean with our fleeing  
I have grown sick as the gut of a wave with the light that means Dead  
Give me the window of the Jordan Clad Saint    I'll make my stand  
Photons here fall an apocalyptic Black    we worship a fragile god  
And that is how we know we can trust him    I don't trust any gospel  
That thinks the world will end outside of a boy's palm  
I want a church of this and only this    *The world ain't gotta end all at once*  
And it won't    and it won't    and it won't    and it won't    and  
Here it is now that I have found the impossible valley of a boy laid across  
The palms of another    the arc of his hips bronzed at the setting of the world  
I am a window    I weep copper crowns across the carpet at the stars  
Searing a bright I must mistake for flowers    I keep my grief pristine  
And in a series of identical boxes categorized by color  
Offspring of a stray history    Let me be the stain    The aggression  
Of the sun blooms through    *Glory*    Gild my steps with the implication of lilies

## The Book of Yeezus

Hunger always been my most loyal religion, now I am the last god of my youth. A boy tenders the window to fragments, hums *this will be a beautiful death*; calls all that touches him on the way down *Sky*.

I love most what enables me to be reckless with survival. His mask flush with white diamonds; I watch him do his work and admire how a man can flower like a magnolia. I am miles from the man and still wish to kiss the hale from his face; I am in the practice of searching for the mercy in everything. I have lost the ability to cry for decades now. If tears really are our ultimate metric of sadness, then I am as ok as I have claimed. I am saying *lost* when I mean *My body made a decision without me*.

Responsibility, as I have learned it, is to die in defense of what is indifferent to you. I am the son of an apology that never arrived. Left to my own devices, I will always find my way back to the word *fugitive*. I am sick of the quiet that allegiance has brought me. There are too many summers for this not to be the end of something. I make a terrible bride in this weather; swelter and my bondage to the idea of men now the blush of a river violence has trickled into. There is blood on the leaves of my present and now the forest is always setting.

I am trying to let go, I am trying to unspool the notion of throne but— of course, the problem is regardless the monarch, your father still dies.

I have been kissing a locked door and on the other side, what? I imagine a mouth whining the dead to rhythm, the end of elegy as I know it. Maybe a field tilled patiently by storms; I make awful weather and yet— my reluctant pastoral; I promise, I would die here if only I knew how. I could love this; this lushness, everything here is a Black reserved for certain species of jazz.

## **RUMORS OF WAR**

And maybe I don't know anything about desire  
Outside of wanting to straddle a beast that wants  
All of the same things I would expect of the short lived  
The boy on the horse mirrors me only because our eyes meet  
While he is charging into the seam of the world as if he is  
Declaring a war on intricacy    maybe it is the softness in us  
That most urgently needs to be mown down in a field  
By an avalanche of muscle    Always the white steed flexin'  
Like the sheathing of a day    Where I have always lived  
Treason is a matter of degrees and I am complicit for lacking  
Urgency in my escape    Any children I have will be born into war  
I want few things more than I want stability in what I lament  
I see the boy turn his face from the pastoral of gold and am the horse  
Am a desire pimped    A new whip inaugurated with the spoils of staying  
It is a year where what moves gleams backward bejeweled and chuckling  
Like a fistful of scalpels    I'm the year that is every year  
Where the white tees are abundant    dependent on the quality of surrender  
We are pollen or an armada    where the wind points    I will hang

## Emile's Lament

*"They could forgive me for killing a man but not for loving one"- Emile Griffith*

When I beat him every lens swelled shut  
I got fight stories to tell that shame hunger  
for the percussion involved in return  
Imagine what a child imagines the answer  
to everything is in a man's mouth just because  
It's where the music begins I didn't mean  
anything similar to lust when we started  
he called me a faggot and the uvula is  
analogous to a speedbag you know the duality  
of my percussion I like to dance in the swelter  
of need regardless the body I like to make the skin  
quiver on what might come back  
I understand the sad calculus of vanity  
beauty springs from the unforgiven  
I can't say his death was anything like anything  
I have ever wanted on purpose  
Rather consider the slaughter I would have to make  
to shame even an American eye for decades  
I did not do anything that a kiss couldn't  
I unbloomed an iris shucked the teeth from his mouth  
then resumed being beautiful loving what I was famous  
for ending the privilege of champions is what you kill  
only visits in dreams what do I know at this point  
of the melody of begging but the way swell restrains an M  
Maricon maricon maricon mari mari Mary mercy mercy the knuckle  
a seed in the soil of the eye the gusts of blood sewing the canvas  
a proliferation of roses This my most public sin that I did not watch  
him die but I was told and was unsurprised I skim the petals  
of scar tissue from my hands until my knuckles are riddled with tender  
lenses I sleep next to my man I sleep with one wound open



## Another Chapter

*“Twice upon a time there was a boy who died.  
And lived happily ever after. But that’s another chapter”- Andre 3000*

Tender is the barrel of the man serving himself  
with a violence he will never use. I too take heat  
with unbecoming delicacy. Wing of lightning  
I play Teflon to the giggle of light. I doubt  
there’s anything I want more  
than to find myself beholden only to the weight  
I choose. Why else the chains than to make a country that lies  
in the soft of the beholder? Hear me.  
I am bright and riddled with survival. Hear me.  
I held the gun and fed it petty stars. Hear me.  
It was 2004. I was twelve and what did I know of dying but desire?  
Hear me. The gun wasn’t real.  
Hear me. Still  
the silvered fact of the barrel, dull in the light.  
It was 2002. Hear me. The barrel was a train.  
The train was a dull lightning. The train was an entire year.  
Some years answer, and some are merely a violence we will never use. What then  
to do with all this survival?  
I am staring down the barrel of my own living.  
Hear me, I am closest to tender when a fist stutters me with lilacs.  
All the niggas I love kiss each other by shadowboxing,  
all my niggas trust the malleability of violence  
as if it raised us, because it did.  
What do we know of soft but to restrain  
the arm as if leashed by a tide?  
Violence then, not antithetical to softness but  
a question of the velocity of what we can barely say.  
O, pistol pirouetting the leash of the finger;  
O, my niggas loyal as a bruise; my forgiving gravity  
I have been yearning to tell you, truly,  
of what I would inflict in your name.  
I am an empire of aching barrels,  
  
I am a violence I may never use.

## The Book of Yeezus

I too am afraid  
that without my sadness I will disperse  
There are fewer synonyms for god  
than are convenient

The shattered only lusts  
for company What is torn has only ever  
dreamed a golden grammar

for what it can't  
recall I don't remember a time before  
intrusion Maybe I was everything Maybe I was  
sorry Once I tore my body for the sake of  
loving it I am citizenized by each ache I learned  
presence from the most American of fugitives

The Fugitive's Gospel reads as follows:

*a wound is a tenderness you nurse for decades  
If you dress a fracture in gold it is barely a wound at all*

My head ringed by acres of a scarlet October I believe  
there's a wound above me I'm just the wound of everything else

## First February of the Life I Lost

O Little February I have been waiting  
to forget my new image of betrayal this boy  
somewhere in your mouth though I have never  
asked for details for I knew I could not bear it

It is hot under all this remembering  
Regardless the season it is my least favorite weather  
I confess I took pride  
in my ability to absorb this hurt  
in exchange for knowing you I architect of this sad geography  
I loved you but loved your potential even more  
You loved me I'm sure of it but you loved being better than me  
even more O my love you touched me in that first February  
Kissed me and it was the end of weather O leash I made of you  
I built the house so wrong content to know there was a house

I loved you more than you loved me  
and I accepted that too readily offered forgiveness too early  
O little tether years now since your name  
became the unsayable thing

My house is infested with the *was* of love  
My back an arrogant crop of knots It is September I am weary  
with the *is* of living

## Variation on a Theme of Athazagoraphobia

*After SZA*

*“Why am I so easy to forget like that?” - SZA*

I'll know we're done when my wounds forget me  
Let me tell you a secret  
I was betrayed and I spent the light  
massaging the silence with a song  
I'm sure there's a myth for what has never felt  
pretty enough to speak mid-dissection  
but I'm not interested because my mother taught me  
never to cry over a woman and so I do not weep  
because most floods begin as a rumor  
I name the blade for the sound it makes  
against my fingernails I'm in pursuit of a bloodless metaphor  
for having been cheated on Proximity is a language  
in which I am always dissolving Like anything  
governed by physics there are limits to forgetting  
I'm within the margin of error for most things  
I forgave you because I believed if you left  
I would never have the chance to forgive you  
there is no crueler recursion  
than loving what you cannot manage to pardon  
At least theoretically what's done is done  
I'm still eating the vegetables I ate for the sake  
of staying alive for you I am  
dragging your dark sugar over my pores  
watching myself populate the drain

## Ode To My Abuelo's Lungs or Every Country Sits Atop a Lake of Tar

Alabanza  
that it will not be this cough  
that claims him after these  
90-something years  
it is the South that will end  
him and I say South  
meaning that I come from  
somewhere  
where a nation is only a translation  
for what had to be abandoned  
in the jaw of a pistol  
beneath my Abuelo's chest  
shriveled patches of land  
threaded with gunpowder

Abuelo argues to return to Santo Domingo  
and we remind him that it was an argument  
that brought us here in the first place  
it was the journey to Washington Heights  
that begged him to shred his lungs  
and now the dust of his ingles  
swirls a soft storm and he is old  
too old for anything that does not promise  
wings and a good burial  
an airplane will kill him but so will the staying  
he mumbles my name and home  
in a language we inherited from a pistol  
he uses our hands to deny the disease  
and I know he has used my fingers to cradle  
a cigarette and kiss it like an exile  
he does not care if he dies  
if he is home for the dying  
speaks only What he would give to mount the sky  
carrying only two little bags full of sulfur  
if you could hear him cough you would  
swear it sounds like somebody he loved  
fumbling desperately for the exit

## The Zero Country

Patriot but of what?  
Actually I have my answer no need  
to bother pretending anything innocent  
has ever been memorialized I understand  
my training is to try and slack the blade  
with a question because it is easier  
than the truth which is that the statue  
says *They gave their lives for a just and holy  
cause* And I know here I am  
someone's nobility brushing grave dirt  
off a name brand jacket And yet I am not  
even as angry as I am baffled by what it seems  
is meant to stand forever No not even that  
It's the word *Gave* which is soft like the interior  
of a fist as if there were a volunteering  
I am afraid of what rhetoric I still let surprise me  
*Gave* as if it were a public service to keep trying  
to trade me like a good asset to the space  
because it is the rule of law here where I am  
a species of landscape A pastoral here where  
your dead stand nearly as tall as the law  
How long have I been asking this question  
straight outta the grave of forgetting? Patriot  
every time I engage in a staring contest with  
this irisless debacle and spit on it as if I have  
no memory that I have died for less a multitude  
of times *They gave their lives for a just and holy  
cause* There is nothing Blacker than uncertainty  
There is a point where language chose to stop  
remembering You know my many names  
and no matter the letters pronounce each of them  
*Mercy Gave their lives* in this county where I know  
that once there was a fire and then it stopped  
Within every stone a chisel can find a prodigious  
killer I know from experience that there is a word  
for *Take* in every language and in nearly every language  
it is used too sparingly I exercise what I know  
about stone Anthem *Mercy* I erode you slow  
And now? All your children call me *Rain*

## The Zero Country

*“Let us live again, Sweet, come back & haunt these fields” – Aracelis Girmay*

If nothing else, I kiss you in defiance  
of what dogs drove us to this moment. We arrived  
with me draped in orchids and you a vision  
all my instincts name blood, but tenderness  
tells me must be different. Maybe I’m wrong,  
blood is always softer than what it survived,  
and yet it survived. I am loving you here in the valley,  
which is as far back as I can trace the beginning of everything,  
which in this language seems the beginning of bondage. Once here  
there was not a word for manacle, or whip, what violence there was;  
mostly a question of necessity. I’m sure now,  
that once this lushness had no grammar for hands, only the birds  
whose throats scoured the morning raw antheming of territory  
and the debt of the light. I know now, you were dressed  
like a thickness of dawn, telling me all you knew of all of this  
land’s wild imaginings. After everything, may there always be your hands.  
May there be the inevitable miracle of beginnings  
where I could only see miles of what happened.  
I love that you love the trees into their names, here  
where I lose the trail of my own. You sweet possibility,  
hum a whole field, and I have no logic  
with which to say whether this is in fact the right sound  
for this plant this place where the light ends.  
Still you say Sweetgrass and Azalea and Never  
cotton. Say Magnolia and the air thick with brides.  
I’m trying to say I am made of so many softnesses  
and the survivals they left behind. I am kissing you  
that we might haunt this language where the pistol  
has been a kind of pollen. This is the first time  
that I have ever been here and not said *Dead* or  
*Fugitive*. Instead I remember that there must be a place  
where the word ends. Let it be here, let it be here.

## Son of a Bad

*"I must become / I must become a menace to my enemies"- June Jordan*

History only becomes more unmanageable the longer that it goes on

This is America

and that is precisely the problem

I'm singing from the intersection of the relevant centuries

I am doing something mean to what they have made Consider

I am the last of the polite requests

I am the last of the unsick Earth

I am the last of the ones who were stolen

or who stole themselves

Because this is America I know where to look when I say scorch

I know what was escaped I know I cannot give you back your violence

only the promise of kudzu O shelter that starves I say

*WANT*

Softly but trust I mean to kill the entire field





I am sung from the faultline in a national morality    I would tell you  
the story straight    but I have been too generous with my blood  
Suffice to say I am the son of a plural    I legion    My name is a consequence  
because we are many    Archival erosion    I arrived bedecked and nasty  
I arrived 808 hullsongs with no lyrics    I want you to hear me    I am lush  
with fugitives    From a series of dirty Black eternitys    From a series of merciless  
summers    I ride    I ride    I ride    I write to unblood the soil    I bang a song  
Unabashed in the silence between what ought to be and what happened



Taste what is sharp when you need most badly to remember me  
I am telling you as directly as gravity allows there are miles  
of threat and I am one of them because when you hold the knife  
observe it with your eyes that tenderness you must have plucked  
from somewhere from someone the blade beholds me in a way  
that briefly makes us cousins Circumstance whets me across years  
and oceans I gleam I am a menace gowned by rumors I'm your  
ghost story You know which one Flinch/Praise I am Bad on both sides  
you pressed me against a headstone and I laughed a warpland laugh  
as your house collapsed behind you



To unwish the tragedy is to unwish myself      I have unwished myself for less  
Despite my best efforts      I am the son of this concept too      Once there was  
a train      I rode it even though I meant for it to wear me      The end

of history as I could change it      Instead I live      I draw each hotter breath  
on this planet      in this place      which I imagine will be the last to know  
when the war climaxes      though to me      this is the only place it could have begun  
I mistake a magnolia petal      for the wing my great grandfather could have been  
How long until all my dead are the same beauty?      At my worst I am begging  
the flood      My superheated ancestral      I am trusting a strength I invented  
in a language that has taken me everywhere but home      I do not know what it is  
to truly want to survive      only what it is to want to outlive      to want back  
what is owed      O majesty      O knuckles knitting into the familiar      The end

is whatever tenderness I might sow in the wake of my vengeance



From those acres of ungovernable grief      the horns rose like gulls

Some notes tethered to the sky      others to the heat

The enemy is urgent with guilt      and in this history      a boy

is blowing his notes on a cauterized landscape      I can see why

everyone my father has ever loved      once dressed like the moon

I'm the son of a bad      man      but the song cracks where I would have

had a father      Fine I am fathered by the fire then      regardless      I am born



I am changing the You here I am pivoting towards what some I love  
cannot follow I leave the smoldering gate of a house in my wake  
If you can follow here where the unimaginable became the survived  
I name you Bad the oceans will stop short of wherever we stand  
Our name is the living and the dead for we are many and what we are is  
A technology lost to the enemy O my tender legion for you I give  
My name to what we once called history or war or country when it saved us  
to feign worship of what was inflicted If I have any allegiance left I pledge it  
to the fugitives and what was sung on the run to what I cannot call hope  
Daughters-Sons-Children-Consequences-Survivals-Bullets That Missed-Bullets That Returned  
Miles of Wings Name then ourselves If history is truly dead I am glad  
To spend what lies beyond the dominion of time with you





## **FLEX**

Hear me

Neglect turned everything to gold

Midas touch I turn the comfortable

To the dead an anti-elegy tho I'm

Learning not to mourn what I make

It's a complex this gravity I birth unknowing

Not my complex yours say it

I am owned by several things all of them

Inherited from a horizon claimed before

I was languaged Invoke the historical

Somethingsomethingsomething **Chains**

Somethingsomethingsomething **Unworthy**

I'm citizen of a clumsy imperative

Belonging is a concern of a self I deaded

Past participle implies the historical is a mob

Try again I mobbed my own lonely and was legion

Play some offense then Gold the impossible wound

Citizen of betrayal Citizen of the going going going–

Recursion this fugitive state as native to me as my father's

Eyes chestnut of a tree felled before we were languaged

See Inheritance is a hell of a drug We Black and highly valued

For our Flex I said what I said and became citizen

Of this petty excuse for forever Flex on em then

Invocation of the bicep I have and the bicep throttling me

I live here now Mississippi and everywhere is everywhere

That someone may have escaped from Fugitive

A sad motivation for river It's a strange thing

That belief you are beautiful be a subversion of the water  
But here I am winter gasping at the conditions  
Too weak to even strangle the grass to soil No instead  
Trees feathered with their hollowed offspring  
Here the wind don't howl just blooms a militia  
Of castanets seven people were lynched here  
I looked it up and nobody will tell me which tree  
You are not as tired of the image as I am of uncertainty  
Everyday the rain threatens Everyday my same imperious lonely  
Hear me the sun ran like a punk the sun ran like it owed  
Not even the gold is trustworthy why gold?  
Because it was the color of my love and by extension  
The life I buried here Gold the genesis of one lonely  
My ancestors were traded mere miles from here Gold the genesis  
Of another I know they are not the same in anything but geography  
Still it is an act of Flex just to stand anywhere gravity being what it is  
Attempt the volta towards impossible Midas the lonely into a radif  
Dreams of living life like a gilded garrote

*Flex*

The crown of scar tissue still the crown

*Flex*

Go to therapy if you scared

*Flex*

Shuck the fear out of the opposition

*Flex*

Everyday gold for the sake of your attention

*Flex*

Your hereness a mountain plumed with trees



branches hemmed like unplayed notes  
A history can be undone with less than an alphabet  
Amend the scandal of the time that brought you here  
Fled to Flex      Ex. My family fled from Mississippi  
My family flexed from Mississippi      and you become  
The muscle driving you forward      See      you were ugly  
Once      because you believed it      Dire invocation  
I am some kind of unkillable and don't know how to act  
Everything I said I couldn't live without

Gone

Lucky me      to be born into a language of mistakes  
I leave the violent on *Seen* and watch them wither  
Turns out I was their gravity      their forgetful sovereign  
I Flex      they flinch      the sonics of the words      cousins  
By virtue of a pistol      This is how I was taught to bridle  
Sadness like an American      Run with a band of kids  
With silver caps      so you know we bad      waiting for the bone  
Eviction      Flex like value native to your mouth      Tooth out  
A tiny moon      a second grin shimmering in your palm      Flex  
The loss      the cost is secondary      Hear me      a life I had ended  
While I was trying to pursue the life I wanted      by pursuing  
A loss cobwebbed as a bride      All of this true the calcium winnowing  
Under the gold      I widowed my own comfort      I am in danger  
My squad an echo      my squad a promise you get dead someday  
If you touch me      thus I'm untouched      neglect killed the grass  
The dead turn to gold before they resurrect      I am framed  
By a pastoral I might have escaped once      O the history  
O the lineage      the renowned Flex of survivors      I'm here

I'm back muscled like a creek or the whisper  
That threads a storm miles later Maybe not Stick to the facts  
I'm alive despite a growing and planetary grief I wear a chain  
Somedays and a sweatshirt that translates to *I Am Coming*  
*Back For What Is Mine* Gaudy surprise on the faces of children  
Of owners They think I am impossible They think I am a ghost  
I Medusa like my daddy taught me their eyes wilt and are  
Ill-tended grapes consumed by the skull I'm metaphoring  
I told you I don't know how to act but I know how to anthem  
My lyric loose and I got time today I'm the type of bad  
No synonym alive can hold

## Notes

- The epigraphs of this collection in order come from Ruth Ellen Kocher's *One Girl Babylon*, Kanye West's *The College Dropout* and Ai's *Vice*
- "The King is Dead, Long Live the King" incorporates fragments of lyrics from the Kanye West song "Gorgeous" from his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*
- The term "Moon Cricket" is an antiquated racial slur for Black people believed to originate from enslaved Black people's practice of singing songs in the field at night
- "Mississippi Genesis" follows the "Genesis" form invented by Amanda Johnston. The form uses a five-column contrapuntal poem with a seventh poem sourced from the italicized text.
- "LAMENTATION (Black Jesus Remix)" is an ekphrastic of Kehinde Wiley's "Lamentation" series
- "Codeswitch Decomposing into Lil Wayne Lyric" is written after Danez Smith's "Untitled and Vanishing." The Lil Wayne lyric comes from the song "Pussy Monster"
- The epigraph of "DOWN" comes from the Kanye West song "Lost In The World" from his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. "DOWN" takes its title from Kehinde Wiley's series of the same name.
- The dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo was assassinated in a shootout in his signature Chevy Bel Air in May of 1961. It has long been speculated that the guns used in the assassination were provided by the CIA
- The four Mirabal Sisters were the revolutionary leaders of The Movement of the Fourteenth of June were assassinated on Trujillo's orders on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1960. Three of the sisters, Patria, Minerva and Antonia Maria, were beaten to death in a sugar cane field by soldiers while driving back from visiting their imprisoned husbands. In order to cover up the assassination, the soldiers loaded the sister's bodies back into the car and crashed it into the field to stage an accident.
- The epigraph of "Son of a Bad" comes from June Jordan's "I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies"
- "LAMENTATION" takes its title from Kehinde Wiley's stained-glass series of the same name
- "The Book of Yeezus [Hunger always been my most loyal religion]" references the Kanye West song "Power"
- "RUMORS OF WAR" is an ekphrastic of the Kehinde Wiley portrait series of the same name
- Emile Griffith was the Black bisexual welterweight champion boxer of the world. After being called a "maricon" by Cuban boxer Benny "The Kid" Paret, Griffith killed Paret in their 1962 title match. He was haunted by nightmares until the day he died.
- "Another Chapter" is an ekphrastic of a GIF in which rapper Andre 3000 spins a pistol on his finger in order to tip a tiny saucer of tea to his lips. The epigraph comes one of his verses on the Outkast song "Aquemini"
- "The Book of Yeezus [I too am afraid]" references Kanye's 2003 car crash and subsequent recovery in which he had gold teeth to cover up the damage done to his jaw after the nearly fatal accident. It also references Pusha T's verse on the Kanye West song

“New.God.Flow.1” where he raps “I believe there’s a god above me, I’m just the god of everything else”

- “IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS” is an ekphrastic poem that takes its title from the Kehinde Wiley maritime painting series of the same name
- “Variation on a Theme of Athazagoraphobia” is written after the SZA song “Supermodel”
- “The Zero Country [Patriot but of what]” references the inscription on the confederate monument in the town square of Oxford, Mississippi
- “Arroz Poetica” is written after Aracelis Girmay’s poem of the same name
- The epigraph of “The Zero Country [If nothing else, I kiss you in defiance]” comes from Aracelis Girmay’s “Teeth”

## VITA

Julian Randall is a Living Queer Black poet from Chicago. He has received fellowships from Cave Canem, CantoMundo, Callaloo, BOAAT and the Watering Hole. Julian is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize. Julian is the winner of the 2019 Betty Berzon Emerging Writer Award from the Publishing Triangle. His poetry has been published in New York Times Magazine, Ploughshares, and POETRY and anthologized in *Bettering American Poetry*, *Nepantla* and *Furious Flower*. He has essays in LitHub and other venues. He holds an MFA in Poetry from Ole Miss. His first book of poetry, *Refuse* (Pitt, Fall 2018), is the winner of the 2017 Cave Canem Poetry Prize and a finalist for the 2019 NAACP Image Award in Poetry.