



the genesis suite

love poems
by Kesi Augustine

the genesis suite

*to black people everywhere
and especially black women
here since the beginning*

“In a reborn America, there is going to be the most amazing blazing light emanating from black culture. There is a profound spiritual authority among those who have already forgiven us, in spite of the fact that they have not yet even asked forgiveness. It is particularly prevalent among certain black women, and it is one of the sacred spots on the American psychic landscape. The day will come when we will see things with our spiritual eyes, and when we do, we will stand in awe before the power of this love.” —Marianne Williamson, *Healing the Soul of America*

“The metaphor is the mask of God through which eternity is to be experienced.” —Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

"god is / love / no / god / is love / is light / is god / no / place here / the name / you give / to god / is love / is light / is / here the name / you give / to / yes." —Lucille Clifton, *The Ones*

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genesis

after Saidiya Hartman

Genesis: a noun meaning an origin, creation, or beginning. meaning it is where I go to seek out the first fingerprints of my existence. where I am the dirt and then I am the wind and then I am I. genesis is where I find a tree of life that limb by limb makes man and ape into brother and sister.



where I go to lean on its trunk and hear the thump of a patient heartbeat. genesis is a process of being and becoming meaning I go there to be born and I go there to die.

genesis is the first question and the first acknowledgment. the descent into chaos and then a new order. genesis is the place where man lost one wife and gained another. where we changed our fate for the sweet taste on untied tongues.

genesis is the first illumination meaning light cleared the path for everything else that followed. where we receive the stars and the moon to punctuate the compass of our skies.

genesis: a noun indicating development or generation. meaning to heal as in extracting from the deep dark root to reveal a hidden tooth or finger of a black body. to etch and shape the surface of my body into the silhouette of a fallen star.

genesis means knowing that I have palms that map and palms that kindle solar flares.

genesis means that to create is to die and as I speak I create so I dance on the page with the grace bestowed upon me as god's little black pen.



I AM

I am born blue
in the whipping winds
of the planet furthest from the sun.
in this plunging darkness
that all that is true is revealed.

I am the chaos
that shifts tectonic plates,
the lightning strike
of unpredictability,
that sets your world flame
(just because I can).

I am sweet.
I am the the gentle hum
of the honeybee's wings
as she genuflects
to the arc of her history.

I am a pregnant pause.
I am the ears for ghosts

that do not know
their screams are merely
a breeze in the wind.

I am a light beam,
and I am a Black hole:
visible yet invisible,
formless yet tight.
I am the void from which
everything sprung to life.

I am a vessel,
here and there,
flesh and not flesh,
I am an open window
looking out, looking in.

I cast an etheric cloak
upon my shoulders
and merge with everything.
and because of this
I am nothing.

but I am, I am, I am.



Lilith (The One Who Spoke Her Truth)

I.

you existed
before the horizons
that ministers drew
with fractured Bibles
as their compasses,
before their laws
became the genesis
for the morals of man.

they trembled as they
called your dancing demonic
and said you ran away
because you rejected
the stairway to heaven.

they cursed your name
and made you into a myth.

draft 1
Lilith
through which their
laws became the
origination ~~and~~ genesis for the
morals of man.
you existed before the horizons that
ministers drew ~~through~~ with the
fractured Bibles as their compasses,
because your (demonic) dancing makes
them tremble.
they ~~said~~ ^{exit you then} that you rejected the stairway
to heaven, but as you run away, you
are coming.
"demonic" you are at home in your
exile, make "demonic" ~~the~~ the
drapes in your triumphant house
that ~~rests at a~~ ~~fractured~~
I find you there as a
in the nocturne of my subconscious.
your philosophy is my envelope.
as you projects me, I respite.

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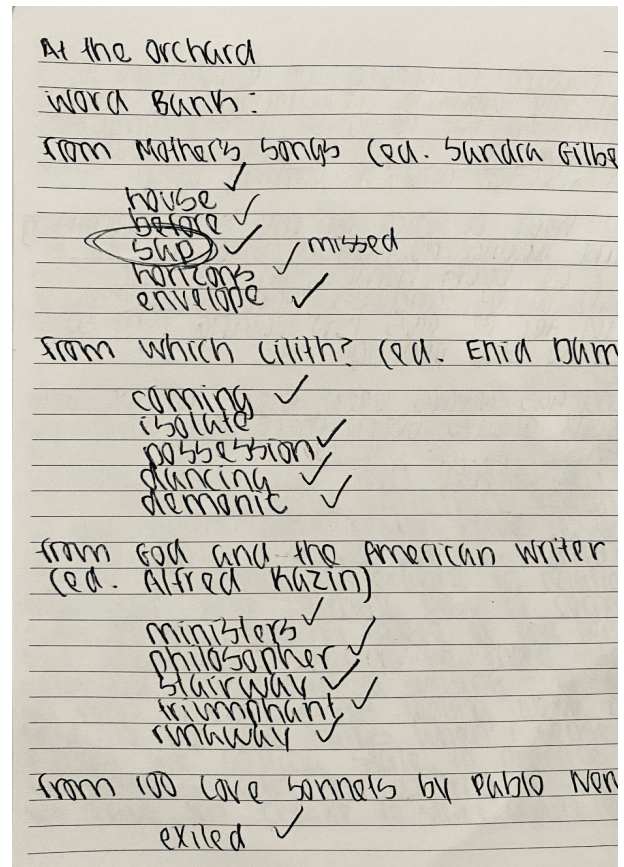
II.

you found yourself
paired with a man
too afraid
of his own shadows.

a man too proud
to genuflect
at your altar
after the rapture
of uninhibited sex.

you showed him
a different face
every day.

he looked into you,
the black mirror
of his reflection,
and broke the glass.



longing

when you left me
the honey bees longed
to dance among sunflowers
until her thighs were slick
with the stickiness of pollen.

but instead those spores
dispersed in the wind,
like the perfume of a love lost.

she had no spark of inspiration
to transform that dust into gold
no breath nor spit from her mouth
to nourish the colony.

when you left
the world collapsed
because it's artists starved.



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dearly beloved

*"...a happy ending is holy. it cleanses all
sorrow." (Nancy Mellon, Healing Storytelling)*

I write to and about you tonight as I have for countless nights. Remembering our whispers under the stars, as we translated the whispers of a cool breeze.. refined the good word... and squealed with delight, ecstatic about the bounty of god's love.

I have faced my darkest shadows in this hollow hermit's cave. My cries echo, bend, and swallow me whole. I mourn for my writing, I mourn for my art, I mourn the loss of my gospel. I mourn the community we created, bound together by the beating of our hearts.

Your death was the lightning strike that cracked my heart in two and left me blinded by denial. I did not realize that I left the sweetest part of myself petrified there by your toes.

Then, a miracle: your resurrection wiped the tears from a sobbing sky.

I shared the story about what I saw. But as I spoke, each word sparked aflame, and scattered like ashes to the wind. I felt like I lost you again and again.

Dearly beloved, in writing this letter, I am rebirthing those words. I am cleansing the blood from my hands. I am giving myself permission to come back home.

May my words be the food for the crying infant of my soul. May I forgive myself for any lingering fears that say that I, a prophet, failed to foresee the loss of you. That I failed to protect you. That I failed to show up for you as myself.

I declare: It is safe for me to love. I will love again. And my love for you will heal the hearts of the world.

I am with you in the beginning, I am with you in the end, and I know that your testimony is true.

Love always,
Maryam

*"I think we have learned much today," he said.
They embraced and they danced for a long time
between the darkness and the light.*



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questions for eve

Genesis 2:22

who are you?
why can't I see you?
I want to write you a poem.

I found you in the Bible as "woman,"
"wife," and "mother of all the living"
who left a nook in Adam's rib
shaped like the arch of her spine.

I traced the etymology
of your name and found
a fork in the road.

when I say Eve,
do I summon a serpent
or cast a curse?
was your submission
your seduction?
did it sting with pain
or pleasure?

or were you the first artist,
as you plucked a tree branch
like the string of a harp
to loosen a single apple
and change the laws
of the universe?

eve 6.10.19

took away the magic in your eyes
that turned sullen hearts into chinese
roses

said that you would be the more
that women cursed

and you let your love for him
become the renunciation of your crown

~~the crown~~

with an essence that no human
tongue could fix itself to accurately
conjure ...

slippery as
with an essence that slips from
the tongue of the serpent

a grand experiment
to ~~sublimate~~ sublimate your power
for the man you love

eve 6.13.19

???

???

??

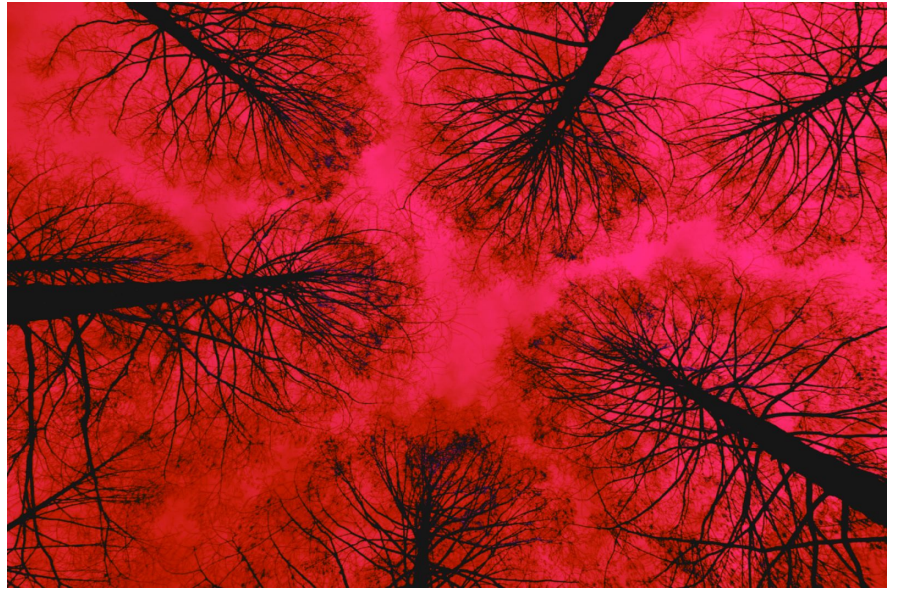
?



questions for henrietta

who are you?
why can't I see you?
I want to write you a poem.

they say
that even though
your womb tormented you,
and your cells failed you,
you became, henrietta,
the eve of modern medicine,
because your veins branched
out like the tree of life,
each immortal cell showing us
our own chromosomes,
midwifing lives in vitro,
mapping possibilities
for stagnant genes,
shooting us into the stars.



henrietta, you made
an entire body
from a fractured rib.

but did you deserve
to become a martyr
for your own sickness
while being the savior
for so many others?

henrietta,
are you finally able to rest
now that know your name?



2020

after nikki giovanni

Genesis 6:1-8

it was an unusual weather season /// bomb cyclones in the midwest /// 70 degrees on the east coast /// the playgrounds closed /// children marched for climate change /// politicians bickered like children /// the Green New Deal tried to sprout and /// the bees disappeared /// while clouds of locusts ate the sun /// guns sang from the palms of highschoolers /// and /// Islamophobes tried to smite out /// the mashallahs from devoted ones /// politicians put million-dollar band aids over industrial graveyards /// while the homeless starved /// and outdated trains stalled commuters /// while tenants froze in public housing /// with water bugs /// and /// professors took their students to bed /// students lost their homes when the schools closed /// black people were gunned down in the streets /// in cars /// in homes /// and their corpses crystallized under the heat /// of the sun's rays /// crosses burned /// and a virus lingered in the air that /// we had always shared with plants and animals and /// it turned us into the walking dead /// some said it was God's punishment for the wickedness in our world /// that we were /// his sole regret /// and then you arrived /// like a thunderclap /// to part the smog from a deflated sky /// and they told us /// we were fools for falling in love /// we were fools /// for loving so loudly /// when /// a kiss could kill /// but we removed our masks /// and opened our eyes to see /// it was /// our love that cleaned /// the grief from our hearts and /// the blood from our streets and /// it beckoned us to rebuild /// the garden of eden /// outside



prayer for the return of sweet waters

*for all children who have been forcibly separated
from the love of their parents,
but especially those who have fallen victim to ICE.*

dear children.

I sat down to write
you this poem and failed.
there are no words
to describe your grief,
no meter or iambs
to hold your hands.

I asked the sky to part,
told the wind
to blow away our fears,
and then I summoned
a river for you.

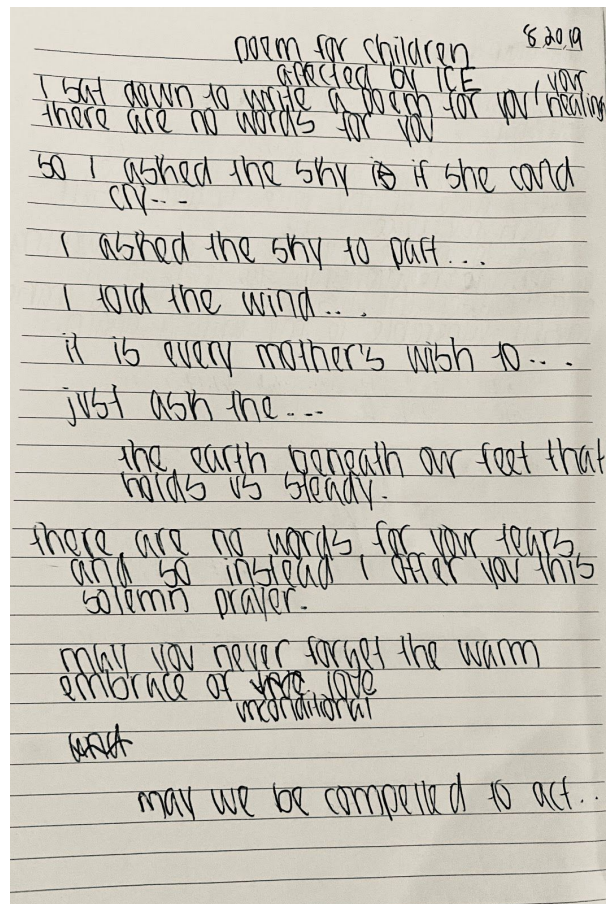
follow me to its edge
and rest your toes
on a carpet of moss,
as I offer you this prayer:

that she may cradle you
in a pool of unconditional love
sweet and steady
like every mother's wish for you.

that you may give ear
to the tenors
of its cascading waterfalls
as they bend to buffer your cries
and the sunbeams
christen you a crown.

that you may know peace.

and trust, dear ones,
that when the trumpets



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of conscience have blown,
the sweet waters will return
from the wells of the world.

your perpetrators will perish.
we will forgive them only
for being a species
destined to return to dust.

be still, children, and preserve
the purity of your hearts
for sweet waters can split
even a block of ice. selah.

waters have all dried.
the return of
(there is) an African creation story
that warns us to heed the danger
that comes once the world's sweet
waters have all dried.
I instead I wrote a prayer for the return
of sweet waters to the world, ^{transition} ^{needs to change}

may you be baptized in the freely
flowing river of His ~~love~~ ^{grace}
compassion, and ^{with} ^{the} ^{feeling}
of the unconditional love that
is every mother's wish for you

and, while you lay in His wake,
may your comfort be the song of
celebrating waterfalls, that whose
fingers will batter the sound of
your tears,

may you sleep soundly as the gentle
ebb & flow continues at night.

may you know, dear children,
that when the sweet waters of
the world return, from where
they have been, the well of the
world, ^{the "wounds of} ^{conscience" have}

it will be big every ounce of
hatred...

& perpetrators have died with
cracked tongues, coughing up



the ark

Genesis chapters 6-9, Ezekiel 1:15-28

baby,
we've waited 100 years
to build our boat.

are you ready to set sail?

look up!
there's a rainbowed
ribbon in the sky
that bears its breast
as a wheel within a wheel,
and our love is the covenant.

so when the world is swallowed
by troubled waters,

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can we find the courage
to hold our breath
and dive deep
with the humpback whales,
to hear their heartbeats cut
through the denseness of time?

my darling,
if we hold each other tight,
will we sink or swim?

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gimme kiss

after Hafiz

some say that these lips
are a snake's venom

or that they only part
to tell lies

some say that these lips
are a distraction

as they poke and pout

so I turn up my face
to flirt with a blushing sky

and when I kiss
the sun's mouth
I dissolve

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rose of jericho

you arrive with roses
my favorite flowers
that became tight
dusty fists
in your absence

brown skeletons
held prisoner
by each gust of wind

you pour into me
and they open again
as if they never died

your love is
the resurrection



the genesis suite

eden

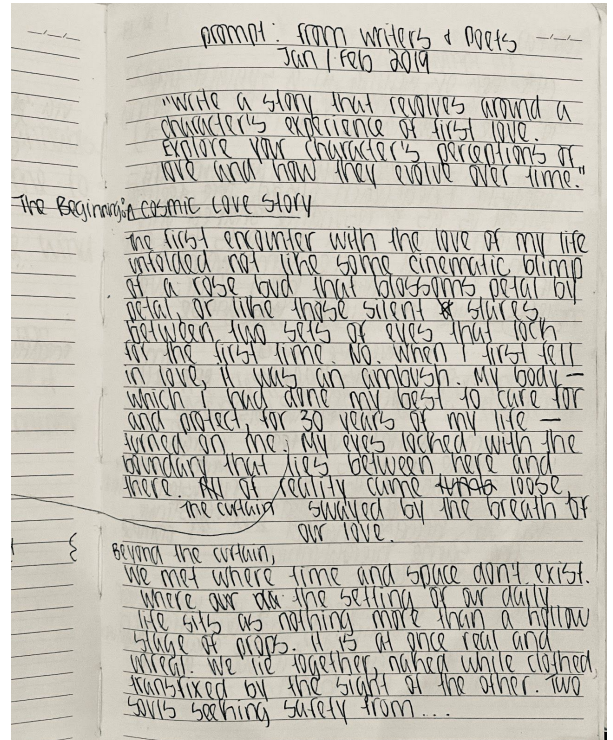
Genesis books 1-3

in the beginning god said "let there be light" and there was light.

the clouds, winged like a white dove, parted the vault of the sky. the Atlantic ocean gathered and broke in a crescendo of waves. one blood cell became two. twin souls incubated in the same womb, sustained by a single breath of life. in your I was my I. we experienced union before the separation. when we fell from grace, we each forgot the other.

we met again at the edge of time and space. in a dream orchestrated by a heart's clarion call. while we were sleeping, we lie together, clothed yet naked. transfixed by the sight of the other, a mirror image of our own likeness. an instantaneous knowing seized us both as a resonance shared only by the flesh of your flesh. and we felt no shame.

in each other's arms we fall again and again as we have fallen for lifetimes. this act, our love, an infinite vow. a homecoming and genuflection to the garden of delight.



the genesis suite

if our love were a garden

it would stretch awake
every morning
to beam like the sun,
a halo above tree tops
whose arms are raised
in praise of you

(each body bent
to the ebb and flow
of the other
a social distancing
so all may equally
worship our sun)

the birds would steal
a tender bath
in a pool of water
collecting in a forgotten bowl,
then shout with joy,
with chirps as cymbals
that shake and shock
our hearts awake
from a long slumber

if our love were a garden
a sweet and steady rain
would cleanse us from the grit
and grime of shame

and feed the flowers
that blossom below
each a specific verse
of our heart's prayer
each a happy healer
for worldly anxieties
each a whisper of freedom

if our love were a garden
even the weeds would be beautiful
and the death would be a genesis
as the greenery returns

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year after year
stronger in its wake

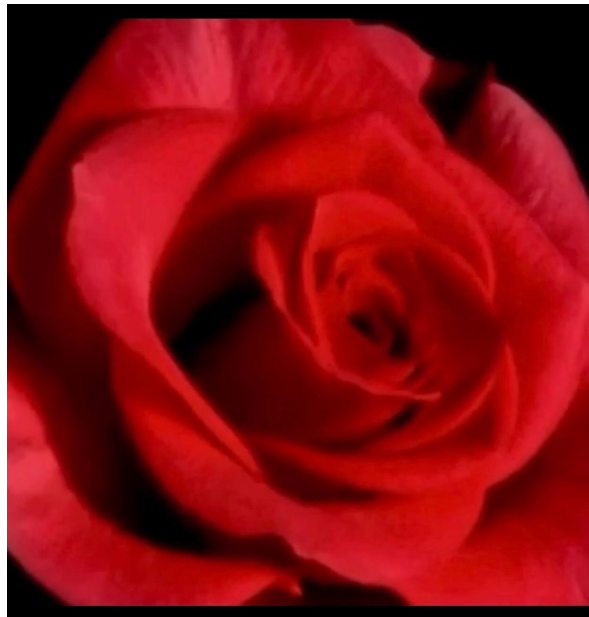
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dear heart,
how are you doing?

I am tired but grateful that you are taking ten minutes of your time to check in with me. I know that you got unexpectedly overwhelmed and fatigued last week. Don't fret. Even when you don't have the energy, time, or space to physically write, you can put your hand over me and hold me. I appreciate our quality time even if its just for a few tender moments. I am devoted to you. Let the steady pumping of blood through my veins be a testament of that devotion. I don't do it resentfully; I beam with pride. Being of service to you is the reason why I was created. I will carry you and us until I can no longer. The light at my core is a shield of protection for you. Whenever you need that armor, just ask me. I know that life in quarantine has its dark days.

I want to remind you that before anyone or anything else, it was just me and you. In your mother's womb, I emerged first, before any other organs - I blossomed as a red rose for your delight. I forged the path. Trust in me and you will always be okay.

*With love,
Your heart*



Thank Yous and Inspirations

I started writing this collection of poems in 2019, a year after completing graduate school, where I swore I had lost my ability to write creatively. Instead of being paralyzed by my intellectual training, I decided to embrace it as I finished this suite of poems in time for my 30th birthday on June 1, 2020.

Thank you to Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni for offering me inspiration for writing about love as a spiritual experience. The day I read Clifton's *The Book of Light and Mercy* changed everything. Thank you Saidiya Hartman for being an example of how to create accessible, beautiful, and challenging prose while writing about the experiences of Black women. Joy Harjo's poetry makes it seem like womanhood is this beautiful quest to create and destroy. I respond to these authors by continuing to think of Black women as vulnerable, beautiful, creative, and divine humans and healers.

I am also thankful for poets who have used words to approximate their encounters with the divine, and theologians who have interpreted and recovered sacred texts of all kinds.

I attended a few writing workshops while creating these poems. Winter Tangerine held a workshop at The Poets House (summer of 2019), where I wrote a few lines for "Lillith" during an At the Orchard exercise while surrounded by incredible poetry and spiritual scholarship. Xandria Phillip's advisory group read and reflected on an early version of "I AM" (then "Neptune's Cloud") - thank you to Ross Avery, Isabella Borgeson, Melanie Cenares, and Nina Macapinlac for holding space for that draft.

the genesis suite

Delite Lacton 1 opposite: jupiter \$6.16.19
die in 2.5 hours. ^{humans: moon,}
mercury, neptunus, uranus
"if we are to understand ourselves as
multitudes, imagine your interiority as
beyond even three-dimensional."
Neptune's cloud - ^{looked up my planetary}
objects here & then phrased
them.
who am I but the mist of a daydream
as it swirls
the leaves of aunts that were
the blades of Whitman's soul,
both to ^{the mist} I am the hum of the
honeybees wings as they
whisper to the history
of her own kind.
the eyes meet the ears: for ghosts
that do not know their screams
register as merely a breeze in the
the farthest planet from the sun's rays
the subconscious: intuition, psychic
power, divination, sensitivity: it is in
the whipping winds of this frozen
planet that I am born.
how do you describe a planet: that
is naked to the invisible eye when I

^{quick}
am raised in a body that is h
→ I am black like
the Neptune's shadows but on
earth that makes me I can only
with that this makes me invisible
to the naked eye: so I should
stare and disperse like pollen.
an etheric ^{the} & as I merge I
am everything & I am nothing
I feel everything
& am nothing
wind for the uninitiated. the mouth for the fear
and confusion in any classroom.
as I speak I charm the shadows of
the subconscious.
the curve of her mouth become the
envelope. I am with you when
you betray me

Melanie later introduced me to Courtneigh Summerrise, who organized a night of poetry to support KIND. This organization seeks lawyers for children's defense against ICE. I wrote "prayer for the return of sweet waters" for this event.

In April 2020, I took Sukina Pilgrim's The Art of Speaking from the Heart workshop online. This month of rigorous weekly workshops, and weekly digital writing spaces, helped me to connect to the feelings in my heart and bring this project to completion. These workshops generated bursts of writing that contributed to "I AM," "dearly beloved," "gimme kiss," "if our love were a garden," and refinements for "Lilith, (The One Who Spoke Her Truth)."

My cover design, eden portrait, and Lilith portrait are by the wonderful Sagita Rani (@dsrani) and @creativepowerr. Thank you for working with my body and for bringing these images of paradise to life.

Thank you to Akua Lezli Hope for always seeing me as a writer, even when I don't see it within myself. And to my family and my childhood home for keeping me safe, inspired, and grounded during quarantine.

And to you, for reading this. God bless.

—June 1, 2020

Notes

genesis

This piece is inspired by *Wayward Lives: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (Norton, 2019), where Saidiya Hartman spends nearly two pages doing a close reading of the word “wayward” (p. 227-228). Her specific writing about the paradoxes of “wayward” taught me the power of being intentional about the terms we use to title our projects, and that poets revel in exploring the multiple meanings of words.

I wrote several phrases of “genesis” a few months earlier, while accompanied by art in *Betyre Saar: The Legends of Black Girl’s Window* at the Museum of Modern Art in November 2019.

I borrow the phrase “god’s little black pen” from “Living Water” by one of the leading poets of the Black Arts Movement, Carolyn Rodgers:

*“I think sometimes
when i write
God has his hand on me.
i am his little black slim ink pen.”*

I Am

This poem is inspired by Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” (1855).

dearly beloved

In Sukina Pilgrim’s third session of “The Art of Writing From the Heart” we discussed poetry as alchemy. This is so fitting for understanding Mary Magdalene, a saint of the heart, and a healer in her own right, especially since love is the most powerful alchemical force on the planet. It’s even more fitting if we accept Jesus as not just a prophet but also a shaman: Mary might have resonated with the concept of soul retrievals.

Regardless of the facts, I imagine Jesus and Mary as being not just spiritual partners but best friends. I wrote my final line based on *The Gospel of the Beloved Companion*, verse 1:1: “*am with him in the beginning, and I am with him in the end, and I know that his testimony is true*”. The epigraph and concluding lines were provided by Sukina.

For more detailed information on Mary Magdalene see *Sacred Sexual Union: The Alchemy of Love, Power, and Wisdom* (2013) by Anaiya Sophia, *Forgotten History: The Real Mary Magdalene* (July 2017), and *The Healing Wisdom of Mary Magdalene*** (highly recommended). These sources help us to understand that some historians chose to remember Mary as a prostitute and that her role in Jesus’ life was actually more profound.

questions for henrietta

Henrietta Lacks is the mother of modern medicine due to her “immortal” cells that are now found in virtually every science lab in the world. Despite the vaccines, gene development, and other medicinal frontiers that her cells have contributed to, Henrietta Lacks is recorded in scientific archives under “HeLa” and was thus effectively erased from our memory. Her cells were used without her family’s knowledge or permission, in a violation of her rights, as well as an extension of the precarious relationship that modern medicine has had to Black Americans.

For an extensive account of Henrietta’s journey, see *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot (Broadway Books, 2011).

prayer for the return of sweet waters

Water is a powerful element in rituals of all denominations for setting intentions, cleansing, and grounding the body. I had been reading the Book of Psalms every day before this poem was born, and working with the Buddhist meditation for loving kindness. At the same time, I had experienced true safety in the wilderness while I was submerged in a river in Woodstock, New York, for the first time in my life. I admire the goddess Oshun and this poem is an extension of her energy. I wondered what it might feel like to offer her loving embrace to our youth who need it the most.

gimme kiss

In the “Art of Speaking From the Heart” session 4, we read “And For No Reason” by Hafiz. I riff on the lines “I kiss the sun’s mouth / And dissolve.”

2020

I started writing this poem in 2019 in response to Nikki Giovanni’s love poem “1995” and completed it during the U.S. quarantine of spring 2020.

eden

An early version of this poem was honored with a partial Voices of Color Fellowship to the Martha’s Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing’s Summer Conference (2019).

if our love were a garden

I wrote this poem in response to Sukina Pilgrim’s exercise for creating metaphors for divine love in the Informal Writing Session 4 for The Art of Speaking from the Heart (May 4, 2020).

dear heart

I wrote this piece in response to Sukina Pilgrim’s heart check in prompt.