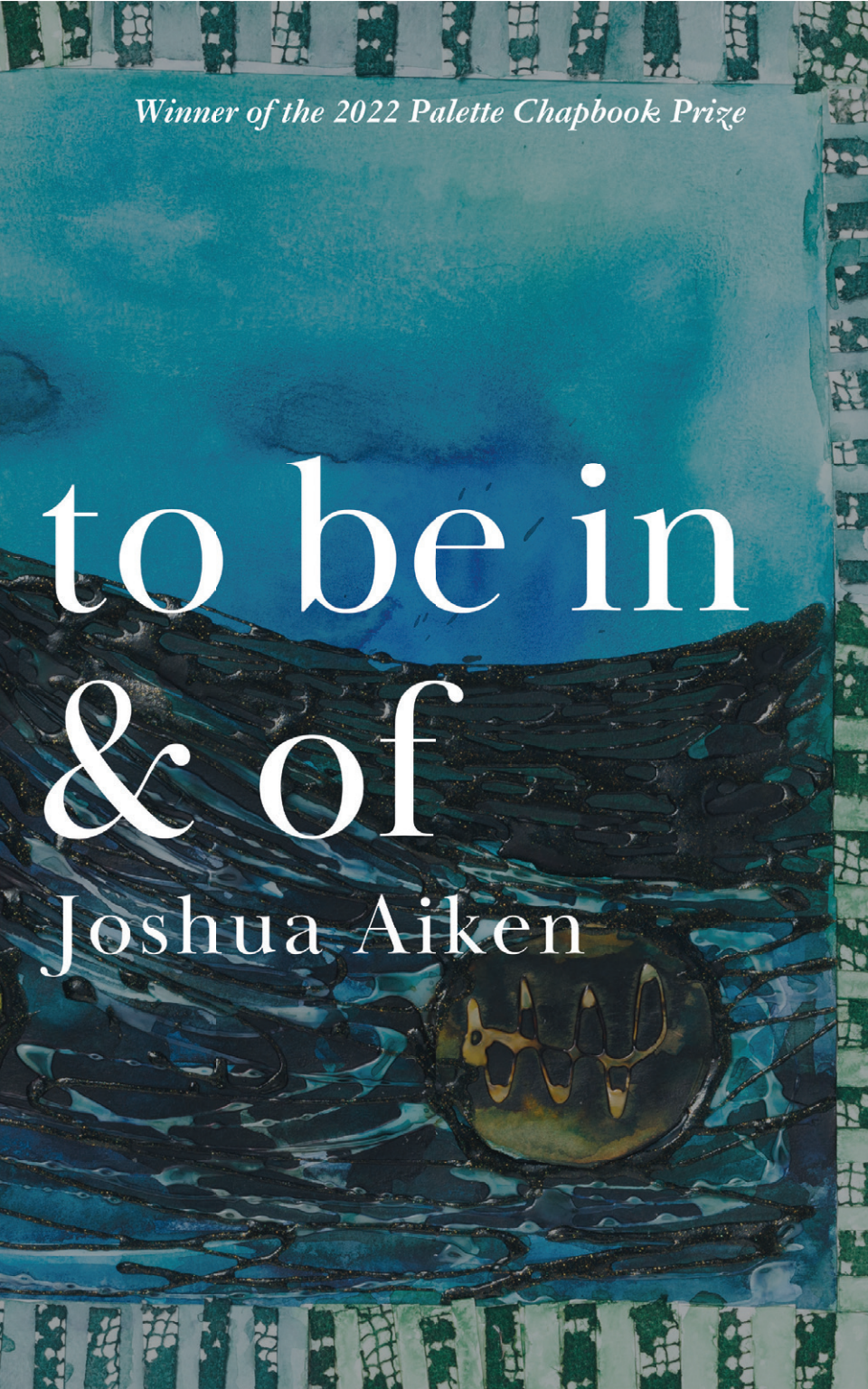


*Winner of the 2022 Palette Chapbook Prize*

to be in  
& of  
Joshua Aiken

The background of the cover is an abstract artwork. It features a vibrant blue upper section that transitions into a dark, textured area with black and blue swirling patterns. In the lower right, there is a prominent circular motif with a yellow and black, tooth-like or mask-like pattern. The entire composition is framed by a decorative border at the top and bottom, consisting of vertical white and green segments with a lace-like or perforated texture.

\* \* \* Judge's Citation \* \* \*

“So who is this healing really for?” wonders one poem in this collection full of wondering and wonderment, this constellation of poems spilling over with the vast aches of a heart so attuned to life, loss, and more life. To step into the world of to be in & of is to understand the in’s and of’s that shape an ever-shifting Black queer existence and imagination—how a preposition can be a position, a perspective, a power: imposed or em-braced, relived or revised. To step into the gorgeous, dizzying cosmos of this chapbook is to declare “we’re raunchy, we’re righteous,” to sing “we kissed, & for weeks nothing was my enemy,” and ultimately, to “invent a galaxy of sound.”

—**Chen Chen**, Guest Judge for the 2022 Palette Poetry Chapbook Prize, author of *Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency* and *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities*

\* \* \* Praise for **to be in & of** \* \* \*

“*to be in & of*: To be verb & noun. To be object & subject. To be Black & blue. Joshua Aiken is contemplating & exploding all the dichotomies in this tight collection of poems, putting pressure on language like he means to turn each word into coal & then burn it all down. But don’t be deceived: there’s a phoenix rising from these ashes—& ready to fly.”

—**Evie Shockley**, author of *Suddenly We*

“What is there to say? These poems are excellent, lyrically athletic, brazenly honest, as sound as they are shattering. They move through you like winter wind, mark you like a cloudless summer day. As I read I found myself shouting or stunned silent after every poem. Joshua Aiken, how you see and feel the world in these poems, how you witness your life and life around you, is nothing short of genius. Reader, beware: here awaits a brutal and lush vision in which you too, naked and human, might also be glimpsed.”

—**Danez Smith**, author of *Homie*



**to be in  
& of**

Poems by Joshua Aiken

Winner of the 2022 Palette Poetry Chapbook Prize

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Mark Fleuridor

*Overwhelming then Silent #3*

Ink, Archival Glue and Collage on Watercolor Paper

-22.5" x 21.5"

2023

In this series of pieces titled "*Overwhelming then Silent*" the artist created collaged moments out of his mother praying. The artist remembers viewing his mother in moments of vulnerability where she would weep while praying. He often thinks about the release of emotions prayer may provide someone and uses these pieces to depict that emotional state. An Overwhelming rise of emotion but then Silence after.

- 1 || Disappearing Act  
2 || Sovereignty  
3 || Leftovers, pt. 1  
4 || The Trouble With Angels

\* \* \* **IN** \* \* \*

- 7 || I Lied When I Said I Never Have Dreams  
10 || [A]bsence is an [A]xiom  
11 || Scorpions in Bethesda  
13 || to love through what scares you  
15 || Demand  
16 || Hunger “While I Wait, I’m the Only Man  
Who Loves Me”  
17 || Leftovers, pt. 2  
18 || “History Never Repeats Itself—But It Damn Sure  
Can Rhyme”  
19 || As the Prairie Burns

\* \* \* **OF** \* \* \*

- 23 || Guilt By Association  
25 || Two Blocks Off-Broadway  
26 || Western Osprey  
27 || Portrait of Black Boy Not As Colonial Plaything  
28 || Leftovers, pt. 3  
30 || Bank Account of Many-Legged Longing  
31 || & On My Good Days  
33 || Working Naked



## Disappearing Act

*who did what*            *when*            */when /*    *how why* sings  
the owl strutting on the pavement.            *how*

*did it happen?* mumbled words            from    alabaster  
stones, crumbled limbs of bodies chewed but not understood.

when my parents call, tell me *baby someone shot Carlton*  
*/ Carlton's dead /* how the world spins.            truly, its axes

listen closely and gravity does its work and, truly, we have  
learned, how irrational it is that each gust of            wind knows

the funeral hymn too. so first, i found the picture Jonovan took:  
you at the grand canyon, the gutted canvas            where you wrote *da world*

*spin.* second, i ripped every track from your            soundcloud page  
before it's taken down, because us & the defying birds always knew

the sound of bullets because—*Isaac,*            because—we love flying  
falling things. music—like you, like me—stays about him: disappearing

before the seconds act. each final thing is this: Lord            knows,  
it is what is for you that is done to me. this life. this passive

voice, how putrid the lie. i'm tired. /            things / don't just happen  
for a reason. black helical beauts atop your infant head, pawing

figures which first reached out from auntie's womb: *this earth*  
*so loved her* that you happened and you (and you) were            borne

and, indeed, made. your / taking / yes,            ensnaring, yes, stealing  
yes, impoverishing / of life / it was done, and no reasons suffice.

no reasons good. instead just crows. just a nest. just twigs  
& planets. places to place / our love /            & you &

you / & /



## Sovereignty

All my registers say *hush*

A spider pushes each ounce of knowledge against the ground  
Her hydraulic soldiers

I hear wind scurrying through the walls

The night prior I had looked in the mirror  
Felt a splashing wound open up inside of me

Pressure Pressure is the only thing I think to feel

The spider climbs the glass-shoulder  
of a bottle of wine My liquid lobotomy

I keep asking for God  
    Tinkering my skepticism  
Grating my sense of self  
into a bowl

Little guardian of dusty apartment floors  
has danced herself a lurid nest

And she did it so quietly

## Leftovers, pt. 1

& give me the fatback & the husbands who left [ding]  
the husbands & the child [ding] there never could be &  
the bridge where he [ding] & this—that *nothing's ever ready*,  
*we just say things to bear what time decides*—is where we keep  
the grief & the grief doesn't & grandmama did [ding] eat  
fistfuls of cornstarch in her bedroom [ding] so it started  
to feel small & even though [ding] i barely knew him i'm told  
we [ding] look alike [ding] so i think i know granddad's absence well  
& it's the summer i gain forty pounds [ding] when knowing most hurts &  
i'm sober smell not of hospital & michelle flushed the pills [ding] i set the timer  
to breath—*four, seven, eight*—in lieu of knifing my wrists [ding] & yet i'm barren  
life [ding] not new [ding] live from the disciple's table & starved [ding]  
& *i'm not sure i'm getting better* [ding] & my family does not eat [ding] in excess  
we eat & fill what's missing with ourselves & is this not [ding] violence  
[ding] & its afterlife [ding] & *a microwave, a headlock, a spanking*, [ding] *a do you remember*  
& [ding] is this not how [ding] we get through life [ding] by taking [ding] killing  
[ding] into our own hands & [ding] *wash them before you*  
& forgive [ding] & get the collard greens  
[ding] wet with summer & bacon's grease

## The Trouble With Angels

*"We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers. Our power is in our ability to make things unworkable. The only weapon we have are our bodies...we need to tuck them in places so the wheels don't turn."  
- Bayard Rustin*

rub an empty pistol and beg it  
for a wish: piecemeal this casket  
back into that tree. then swallow  
their Mississippi whole. admit that  
where is just another war. thus  
black, our queer; thus, blood  
you left here—*& yet that face*  
still has your name.  
the rowboat and that river.  
what they couldn't steal.

tell me about the ghost that didn't  
drown. show them no closet, sprig  
no splintered door. tell us  
what you learned dying and living  
twice. kiss everything you are  
told to kill.

**\*\*\* IN \*\*\***



# I Lied When I Said I Never Have Dreams

after Richard Siken

1. In this one, I die in a car. Rain comes down like pearls, the sky jabs punches at the earth, and the sports-utility-vehicle goes a little too fast. There is a boy who I could say I slept with and regret, but would rather say there was just a boy. Do we not all have this dream? The one with death and he who pushed you closer to it? One where you promise: If I survive this, I'll never take from the pomegranate tree again.
2. I crash. I crash and the game is over and the blood has won and I'm telling the truth this time. So spit in your hand and let's shake. Please? *Honey, please?*
3. In this dream, our mothers meet. It is then, in a barren chapel, with a casket covered in hydrangeas. They are telling stories that rest behind our ears, reminders we are more than just boys. One of us plays dead.
4. Here, I die in a car driving home from prom. This dream was true once and it was not me or my body but it was a boy who I imagine was like me and who I imagine had not suffocated just yet and I thus envied him so. That's what all the end-less tears are about. The car, the lurid moon, the night I cannot resist putting myself in.
5. It's a different car this time. You're driving. Say, a Honda Accord. *I hear that black cars are the most likely to crash*—says I, the black boy, to the boy I love. Tendril vines for fingers, we lean in and kiss. The dream zooms in on the rearview mirror and you can see our paired skulls, gracefully framed, by the headlights coming our way.
6. *"[T]he threshold test indicates that black and Hispanic drivers were searched on the basis of less evidence than white drivers. We assessed racial disparities in policing in the United States...analyzing a dataset detailing nearly 100 million traffic stops...[w]e found that black drivers were less likely to be stopped after sunset, when a 'veil of darkness' masks one's race, suggesting bias in stop decision."*
7. This time, the black boy dies. There is no car, and if there is one the seatbelt must be long as it is (to be used as) a noose. If there is a car, it does not go too fast as the parade route is not long in this town. I die because someone will kill me and my mother will cry and tomorrow breakfast will taste exactly the same.

8. This time, the black boy dies. Maybe there's a car, maybe a gun, maybe a hotel room, and maybe another crumpled body in the street. These dreams are mine; don't forget.
9. I die because I crash into a deer. Poor thing. All it gets to be is added to a list of casualties and a list of dreams.
10. In this dream, I am the deer. And I am so in love. Those eyes. The damn headlight eyes God gave you.
11. I am hit by a car. I do not lie there, but rather truth. I do not die there, I am simply dying. There is no bright light. It could be a fire truck or a steam engine or a tank or a police car or a plow or a brick wall or a chained-to-a-fence something or any other way our bodies are disposed.
12. In this dream, I am shot in the back. I look over my brazen shoulder and dramatically say: *You're lucky someone else didn't beat you to it.*
13. In this dream, there was no one. I promise babe, *no one!* Well there was that woman on TV who used antifreeze to kill her husband, but besides that.
14. There was just me and my unnamed pain that I nurtured like a pet. Me in the garage. Me pouring myself a tall glass of something not-so-nice. In this dream, empty was just a feeling and not the boy who kissed your neck.
15. This time, I die in bed. Not mine. The boy I never loved is a corpse in tall man's clothes. The boy I did not even really like has given me something to help me sleep—and now, clutches my side. Death's touch feels like sniffles and a cold. The boy did not leave. This is when the dreams stop or maybe where they start. I press rewind. The fast forward button disappears.
16. I die in my own bed.
17. A plane crash.
18. The day after my mother. Caskets made of a pomegranate tree. We both peek out and look around. She whispers: *We can be so loved and still die so easy.*

19. This time no one. I do  
not die. Not mother. Not you. Death  
stays home sick. Poor thing.
20. Not a nightmare. Just another jeweled surrender at night.



## [A]bsence is an [A]xiom

call my tongue a snout  
& my body will : i will eat  
i will : but i won't : stop  
making the same : scar  
twice : sorry : that's too  
bloody a scene : there's no  
villain in this play : give me  
a name and i'll sing :  
here's the lonely deal  
my body is where it's not  
here's the not : my body is  
inside itself and clawing at  
the wounds : here's the knot :  
here's what i can't : call my  
liver a liver : and i'll know  
everyone sitting at the bar :  
call my lung a lung and i'll  
have the whole pack : these  
are conjectures not truths :  
remember i eat : i starve :  
gorge: i lunge : i be : for the  
slop : i look for the mess : that  
is me : here's the deal : the  
tame beast : fills a void : the  
white space : grabs me : the  
pup's affirmed command : is  
me : the loud bark : the sealed  
mouth : i be : i be

## Scorpions in Bethesda

*Scorpions are small thirty-five pound "precision" glide bombs "probably no bigger than a violin case" used by the Central Intelligence Agency.*

*Under the Obama Administration the use of drone strikes were significantly increased, claiming a significant reduction in civilian killings. The Administration used an estimation method that involved "count[ing] all military-age males in a strike zone as combatant...unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent."*

calling a hole -- a home -- is to murmur  
-- in morse code -- is -- to reject --  
the scattering of a place -- to cough up  
debris -- far away firewood is a tickling  
mother -- firewood just a frightening  
ghost -- death just the aftermath -- the  
unaccompanied result -- if you crawl  
from underneath  $x$  you must be within  
-- or subsumed -- by  $x$ . it follows --  
one could say -- that an ordered strike  
-- from a drone -- invokes the feeling  
-- that comes -- after kissing -- a child  
goodnight. dangerous particles --  $x$   
must accept -- might graze  $y$ 's skin  
-- before -- the world -- turns bright  
again. it -- comes with -- the territory  
-- it being -- violence -- it being --  
the forest floor. venom is a healing  
substance. it -- the subject of our  
bodies -- is the re-armor -- it -- the  
generous poison -- saves us -- from  
ourselves -- it -- the bare life -- relies  
-- on the notion -- that -- the shepherd  
clothed -- us too. my empty -- nest  
-- burdened -- above -- holds a knitted  
blanket -- my destructed -- is casted  
-- lesser evil -- my destructed -- is  
not -- made of -- my brothers' limbs  
-- my destructed -- is -- not the same  
-- but the shell. if death -- be in my

name -- what explodes -- but -- the  
baseball bat -- grandpa beget -- the  
rubber tires -- beneath -- my mother's  
oiled dragon -- barreling -- across turtle  
island -- and the beetles -- the bison --  
the violins singing -- "mercy" -- all  
while -- all the while. there are inflamed  
-- arachnids -- piercing -- *Pakistan. (Yemen?*  
*Somalia? Afghanistan?)* -- the frightened  
-- thundered -- unsound -- sky.

## to love through what scares you

let's drive somewhere because  
when i try to be the boy who  
does beautiful under the moonlight  
glow of a steak & shake, i always  
begin in tears & end up reviving  
some buried bad feeling that i know  
is nestled up close with one  
of the ones i want to recall. ones  
that i want to crawl back in me  
& to save me from the country of men  
who smear their spit  
& blur truth  
in order to                   blow  
the heads off despair  
all in the name  
of not sanity but safety. whose?  
never mine. safety being that which i try  
on whenever a man or a bruise gives  
me anything & so  
in my dreams i do everything but try it.  
in my dreams i call my mother routinely  
i quit my job & drive  
past the gone-by down-sun towns  
& their lines drawn in the  
past-present sand & just before  
the willing  
fertile ground, i stop  
en route,  
because i want bad food  
& corporate soda to  
laugh-cry into, just in case  
love is just a person  
who stands in for forgiveness  
but actually comes through—  
because it's high-time we  
got what we were looking for.  
if i know anything it's that  
what's holy sits next to what scares  
the right-wing of the eagle

& the left-brain of you.  
you can seek sanctuary but this is  
everything, this is everything that the  
age of tv dinners killed but can't undo.  
this is the only buried promise,  
which the smell of grease  
comes past the counter & covers up,  
but us sweaty can't-grow-ups who must spoon-  
feed ourselves myths to stay alive; we catch our own replies:

drive  
drive fast  
drive fast toward skylines  
fast toward skylines kissed by a lip  
color called joy

## Demand

Slapping my palms on the pavement  
when no gold coin ever appears.

Skunking my face inside out constantly. Glory  
running the day nobody must see me for me to be me.

I'll begin without a beginning;  
I didn't want to be here to begin with.

No, I've been an epistemic catastrophe.  
I've asked him to knock me out, to run me over.

I've asked to watch as he does. I've asked  
to be nothing—my blue-wish of anticipation—

done this as to be a proxy for his  
care. I am a rickety vessel.

A seaborne surrender. I've asked to be this everywhere  
as grocery stores in this world are loud oceans too.

All I've wanted is to paint every TV screen  
black and thrust my fist through the glass.

Now I long to play my life: minus errant scenes  
without all this produce up for sale.

Me? I'll pick up the joystick.  
I'll weather every encounter if it means

not having to sit and stay. I'm seeking  
excess. I'm wanting more.

Wanting some other universe where I do  
more than seek and hide and bleed.

## Hunger (“While I Wait, I’m the Only Man Who Loves Me”)

after “Homocide” by Essex Hemphill

I spent my grief on you, but fault myself for making of everything  
a currency. I fixed myself underneath a STOP sign in the rain,

but I was in your arms, feckless, because someone I love was dead  
again. This time even the funeral was too far away. Distance

always a metric of distinction; me readily lost in your chest,  
your breathing, crumpled, as you offered to carry me home.

It was mackerel, prawn, monkfish—a menu—before my eyes  
after I told you *I’m good, but should eat*. I told you, *I can’t be*

*an experiment*, & we kissed, & for weeks nothing was my enemy.  
You’d come home sweaty from sport & cook peanut stew,

& we’d take turns being weary, you of prescription and divinity,  
me of my fingernails, the pitch of my voice, of how easy I am to win.

I don’t know what you needed or need, but I smoked menthols,  
spilled whiskey, lied to everyone, made of my mourning a stage, a stature,

condition, a state: the prized jewel wants in between  
our knees, won’t take me headless—I’m useful, I’m discreet.

Listen, I forgive me. You loved me in sorrow, love sorrowed,  
& I loved sorrow eagerly. I needed a place to be. A harpoon doesn’t

wait for a squid to get lonely. I spent months there, in bed with your window  
open, unsure of the day. In practice, you’re kind & so am I

thus, we’re prone to being prudishly cruel. I was. I am. Familiar with,  
not undone, by men who precisely want me

off my feet.

## Leftovers, pt. 2

& my college therapist says *not that many people die of natural causes* [ding]  
four funerals that i managed [ding] to attend in twenty-two months &  
even a classmate springs [ding] to correct me [ding] *well, hypertension doesn't "run"*  
*in families* & mind you [ding] both of them were black & [ding] i was  
with them [ding] i was in it & at the funeral the dessert was brought by [ding]  
the middle-aged white folks i was staring at & my cousin's cousin explains the [ding]  
*white babies grandmommy brought up* & they brought apple-cobbler &  
[ding] the black boys that killed isaac are behind bars [ding] & america is not  
[ding] & it is quiet [ding] at the table of complicity & guilt & *you're still in*  
*school?* & *you're still in school?* & with whom [ding] do i socratic method  
what's roosting [ding] in my teeth [ding] a metal taste from the last [ding] post-funeral  
church meal & [ding] that one was paper-plated & wafty napkins from piggly-wiggly  
& all reminded me of eggs, grits, & south-carolina-sausage [ding] accurate nostalgia  
& the difference between pumpkin [ding] & sweet potato pie [ding] is a lifeblood  
[ding] & joy is a microwave [ding] & somebody's brother's ministry is logbooking  
the menu at these things [ding] & he's *glad they fried the goddamn bird*  
*this time* & it's fucking funny [ding] that  
this time [ding] i agree



## “History Never Repeats Itself—But It Damn Sure Can Rhyme”

*after “An Open Letter from the Original Black Panther Party To Black  
(Hip-Hop) Artists Who Have An Interest In Our Community”*

freedom knows enrapture, freedom as the  
contours of  
wondering how we might make real  
the interrogatory’s  
sweat; freedom from being told we don’t  
understand, freedom to say  
it’s fascism all the way down; freedom  
to say *fuck* when you see  
approvingly  
a Malcolm X quote  
painted on a prison classroom wall; freedom  
as beings  
matted to a bedsheet; as being with yourself—  
sticky with yourself,  
angry that the only way you stayed alive  
today was forgoing  
the sun  
light, water, cereal, bent spoon, touch  
the answer in  
the bounty of unwillingness:

21; freedom as intense culpability, as freighted  
possibility,  
freedom as both. freedom as pyrrhic cycle  
fractures, as not being—  
get the predatory fear,  
living within your years, as in, there is a way  
out of no way. knowing no way  
we make it this way again; freedom  
to free our expectations, link  
we forget,  
to hum indiscriminately  
indemning the disconnected sigh,  
and undone by the heat of errantry  
cooled by the heat of unremarkability  
for the active unearning of sound  
: the act of learning the side ways of silence  
is lush entanglement; freedom *as*  
forgoing; freedom as what keeps you up at  
night; freedom, as the risk of knowing  
that which never, we always, can choose

## As the Prairie Burns

### *the fly:*

It's in the hot-spring (the sulfur pool, the crude oil) where my leg kisses my leg and I'm less alone for once. A mating dance with floating debris, with my broken bits, with everyone else's scattered sense of time. My gadding wings licking all this honey-coated warm, licking every winter still inside of me. No matter how short your life, seasons come—

### *the fire:*

What if you knew of everything that died the day they proclaimed you alive? Borne of the yet-light, I wait, you call. I don't come unto terrains that do not invite me. Martyrs do, unforgiving thieves too, but I sing the saint: sister-twigs, mother-queen, I name the darkness, I am no king. I'm the feeling that this—*this*—is nothing new. Now let me twirl for your indiscriminate touch. Let me be and not be blamed when others bring you slick harm.

### *the fly, again:*

I'm not lonely. Don't refute the company my shattered-glass coat brings. I'm not lonely, I've got movement, I take myself to-go. I'm not lonely, I love myself best when I'm left alone. I was left, see, and soon I'll go home. I've got my living, I've got my wings, I've got my own heat. I'm grateful for it all, but I've always been complete.

### *the flames:*

To cut a body open is to recognize the body as closed. To abuse the ground is to act as if it was not made of dry bone. To say *yes or no* to life is to imply someone will ever ask. Move, lovely, through our hot undoing. What's the use, sticking it out, when it's an empty world you roam? Trick question. To clear a field, all you do is scrub, silt, and clean a place: again and again.



\*\*\* **OF** \*\*\*



## Guilt By Association

How am I supposed to act around all this fight? Respond to dizzy  
hornets, silly crabapple trees slapping smirks & eyebrowed delight  
up on me—there is a daffodil threaded up in a shank of curl-sponged  
hair. Apprehend this sunless afternoon. The such sweet glaze within  
galloping hills of green clashing downstream; haughty  
pedaling drops of music last night plowed me into a good sleep  
—& take me serious. No matter how shortened my life,  
my Uncle's barbecue exists & I had it; I was lawlessness: I was  
brushfire, the bug bites, box braids, porkloins in the pavilions—me  
myself, & I, make an adjudicatory scene. *So, call the cops. Do it. Go ahead,*  
*you've done it before, you've always been doing it, you're doing it already, don't you—*  
I didn't kill them. Just last week I found a crew of ants circling  
a grain of rice that had leapt its way to the kitchen floor & I didn't kill said ants,  
though I'm told I could've; I didn't kill them, despite their illegal enterprise,  
& even still I didn't push the little invaders outside, where it's said they belong.  
I didn't. Whose good am I responsible to? I blink *infinite susceptibility*.  
& that triggers something in you, or so it seems. Here.  
Those ants. This world, right? This one wherein my Mom buys four bags of Christmas  
-blend coffee even though I won't be home till June. A barista grinds the beans knowing  
no better—unaware the grounds won't be "fresh" when used—but, by grinding

they are now party to a corruptive pursuit. Look, I won't explain the forethought criminal  
nor rehash the snags of visual fear that constitute the carceral prism of public space. I  
still don't know how to spend my life outside of debating whether or not I'm a yapping grave.  
But tell me—have you seen a stripe-tailed scorpion try climbing out of a swimming pool?  
I too am disturbed: contentment finds me, stupidly, immaculately, staring up,  
out: into; down. I spend most hours of most days—& have nearing most  
of the years of my life—not wanting to be alive. I don't know what to say.  
On a metal park bench—a lawn chair by a river—I'm Vermont, Cincinnati; February,  
June. A smile has parked itself briefly on my face, after the morning tears, &  
this summer my mother expects to see me. She wants to tell me what door to exit  
at baggage claim, hear me breathing as I buckle my seatbelt, watch me  
the next morning drinking a hot drink under a hot sun, & her,  
an accomplice to any tidbits of caffeinated glee.

## Two Blocks Off-Broadway

lonely      shows up at his apartment  
wearing clutter like a wedding dress—  
like a hundred set pieces for a cancelled  
show.                      he positions clown faces,  
disco balls, and a pearl white bombé chest  
so they layer the apartment's walls.  
   begging the world  
to eclipse                      what is already gone.  
that's the old bedroom, he says—pointing,  
locating the only place here i'd call clean  
   and full at the same time.  
white noise                      pressed against the walls  
and how i miss you                      for him  
the vacated space, the ghosted stage  
   the now familiar scent of what's gone—

*] to be his roommate in death [*

yes, there is the scorched naked wood  
beneath the blue kitchen cabinet, and yes too  
the patent leather scuff marks left behind on  
the train-tracked floors.                      so-called testaments.  
benumbed things that only confuse, that only  
send him reeling—almost lost him once—into the  
dusty,    into the paint peeled corners that never  
change: the dark parts of a gaunt place  
where men like us first learn to live—love  
still just a funny shadow.                      and so  
   he pulls,                      he yanks the curtains,  
dims the faint yellowed lights. acts as if he  
was the only one ever here.



## Western Osprey

If nobody hears the soft call,  
the presumptions of a sound and a bird die.

I can't make it easy.  
There is a cost to learning every thing.

If I keep speaking, in lieu  
of a glacial melt: I will stay a hollow rock, smooth.

There is a petrified forest that implies a paused morality.  
But colors thump skulls there; this

is the work, both bloody and aligned.

I'm trying to say that I'm thinking  
if you hide forever, the walls will still be tall.

It's natural to want armor,  
hard to love what you've had to forget.

Dear claimant of an underworld: where birds skid dirt,  
and wooly animals cloud the sky—it's yours.

Your hour of feeling your cinderblock tongue.  
There too is an entire forest of unborn, fat-

tailed sheep, weeping. They too invent  
a galaxy of sound.

## Portrait of Black Boy Not As Colonial Plaything

the subject looks for an object. violence looks for its home.  
a little dog sits on the stoop. a man looks right through me.  
the subject looks for the object. the object looks for a purpose  
and finds one in him. the subject is also a man. the subject  
is also me. the object asks: *so tonight, what'll i be?*  
violence also asks: *how do you want me?* the subject tears  
the filter off a cigarette. smoke and mirror-stage. the object  
doesn't get the point. a man looks right through me. this  
is the point. the object looks for his glass of merlot. violence  
becomes me. a person uses me. phrases are objects too.  
one need not be a man to make an object a subject and an  
object again. i'm a beloved neckpiece. a real gold tooth.  
the object asks: *is this all i'm for?* violence rearranges the living  
room. now, the subject is seen right through. a foreground  
is constituted by a background that nobody wants to see. little  
changes over time. the object is time. violence hides in me.  
*whose furniture is this?* it wonders.

the subject explains:

there are objects in me. all objects are mirrors. there are  
*mirrors in me*. violence looks at itself. the subject frowns.  
the mirrors steal the show. violence craves a way out.  
violence is the furnishing when the furnishing is me. all  
that's in the past, a man will say. *the past?* i say. *the past*

does not escape me.

### Leftovers, pt. 3

& it's what the microwave doesn't do [ding] no wings brought back to flight  
& [ding] i am still [ding] whispering the terms & conditions of forgiveness  
into every bite & look [ding] yes fam, my fam [ding] there's chitlins  
& *denial* [ding] *anger*, sure & [ding] spare me the process [ding] the first question  
for a man in sheep's cloth [ding] is who he would be without survivor's guilt  
& remember [ding]: whenever you hear a question, ask it from whom did it run  
—breathing exercises are the bargaining [ding] stage, right? & [ding] *wait*,  
*these aren't grandmomma's placemats, you bought these new?* [ding] & if i'm  
no *guest or special case*, how can i prove i'm also not about this life? [ding] &  
what's a death-wish but upset at the joyous cry? [ding] & i can't weep loud, though i need to,  
so who is this healing really for? & [ding] jessie's getting out after twenty-years  
& [ding] we're noisy amidst [ding] the new-new pandemic & back together  
in the epidemics [ding] & another of ours is dead [ding] & i talk the difference  
between pumpkin & sweet potato as if race is biology [ding] [ding] but i mean  
to say that teri got laid off [ding] & martin has a tiktok where  
all he does is scream & i love our noses & [ding] how unsafe safety  
instructions can be [ding] & we're outside pat's church [ding] my plate of just  
cornbread & half-eaten pie crusts [ding] summoning the flies [ding] &  
we're not at anybody's house [ding] & i'm with my brothers on the porch

out front [ding] in midwest-cloudy-april [ding] humid & too warm & [ding]

reliant on an inconsistent breeze & christ,

[ding] i want to sprint indoors & find my cousin [ding]

kayla, in the church kitchen, & ask her *who's that*

*by the fridge* [ding] the shadow telling the machine [ding]

*stop:*

*stop humming so loud*

## Bank Account of Many-Legged Longing

Today, a beetle next to my foot  
pattered slowly, so slowly entire  
hours must have had their way

since said beetle broke my line of  
sight. Help me steal a sentiment  
from all my looped time. It has been

a year: a whole year watering my  
loveless, slight slumber. How many  
tiny voyagers must run through me?

I tried to get outside: I touched the  
wood-paneled walls of the rooms  
still awake in me. I took my hands

& feet with me, when I trekked  
through snow. I want to have  
a past. You know the saying: make

the road by walking. But what if  
I wish to jet? To be in flight. I think  
I miss him, I really do. But I miss his

leaving ten times more. At least then  
there was a place to be; the not-really  
numbered nature of our days. Days

that are plump with brutality, that are  
brutal, slow. Make my desire anything  
but an argument waiting to be won. It's

not like half this bug's life has been  
spent in front of me. It's more like:  
I happened to just be sitting right here.

## & On My Good Days

for Frankie Knuckles, the Godfather of House

& on my good days, I'm that ready everywhere, pocketbook renegade look good, get the good, every me. That kick an Apple off your teacher's desk, every empty bottle of moscato, every yet-but-thing, every taste of medicine that goes down; it's outlandish and it's me. No day for old countries, this one's got a steel missile: always a sign of a violent ugly cold. Foreclosures redundant as rain, baby, & on the good, inflation is because homeboy took a knee. On my good days, my negro-knows it: a bloody bankroll always filters in. I'm talking the end of empire baby, I'm enacting the end of the World, the cornerstores are serving slices of grease and possibility, so forever is tonight. I've laced up my kicks, painted our nails black & emerald blue, & I'm that every me, building anew: already running laps amidst these guilt-ridden blues. So, let's dance ourselves. Let them dread being unable to forget us. For, on my good days, we be that rhizome loud democracy. We're here cutting up our suit ties, bottlecap sucking, seeing municipal sidewalks crack, throwing bottles of piss at CCTV, & it's all good: the scuff mark on your Razor's aluminum frame match your sometimes ashy feet. Laugh out loud, boo. It's me: play the juice box, iPod nano; glitch a livestream, it's fever speculative lawn-green backpack me, & on my good days I'm there & fine.

Be up in fake news, capital gains, & when September ends

—the good & the days are on & on. Baby,

how perfect our present-continuous: how anterior our pollen-kissed future how subjunctive the future because, yes, *baby wants to ride* but *the risk of inaction* is a butterfly's fairytale, is PC-MP3 on our tongues, is the dissociation station that kept the days in the good—in the *us*, alive. On my good days, a painkiller is a Clinton in a bush, is an *outpost of tyranny*, is a Clarence only in name, & on my good days we're in the millisecond land of a jolly rancher, the actual fallen droplet of sweat that says we did it, we felt, baby, we fell in love because the buses run on time in this town, because sweetheart, we showed up empty-handed, raced & unmoored, & that's how we leave, met, and meet, my baby & me—  
& hey. Hey.

When the world is a jackass walking down the street & coming towards you, there's only thing to do—tell him: *bitch, it's done. I'm good. I don't wear my body how I wear my body for the likes of you.*

Even if it's only in your mind, sweet one.

Even if you're eight, even if the mall cop at Coral Ridge Mall follows you into Spencer's, tell him by doing whatever it is that keeps you safe & always-good & in & of you—tell him:

*Watch this all you want, my flesh is no political data on injury.*

& having been it &  
 on the good, we ready? For it's time to go play some  
 notes in our own God's house. No choke, nor fury, we'll play in  
 that no man's land, where we're not choked in the street, where  
 we'll don a crown to burn it all down, & we'll play the game  
 where our lives are on the line but actually acknowledge the fucking line,  
 we're raunchy, we're righteous, we're down. & sure Jan we're down on one  
 until we're guaranteed our health, we'll ring-pop tax-break filial-equality,  
 & still, on my good days I'm talking about kink & slugs. Not reaching  
 across the aisle, talking my *Romney Can't Dunk* sweatshirt from '08: it felt *nice*  
 but not *good*, because, say it kids, "*a fascist dream is still a fascist dream,*"  
 so, let's summon imbrications of care. I'm talking spell-casters of inexplicability,  
 I'm talking many-gendered mothers of *that there* &  
*try it & you're worth that too.*  
 & on my good days, I'm talking about what we've got to do. Baby,  
 it's Frank's *cayendo*, Boukie's deleted tweets, it's SZA &  
 but, Janet's *CTRL*. It's us colored & queer firework-sketchbook baddies & boys,  
 after *Crash* (and also *Crash*), before *Moonlight* not after broke mountains:  
 loves who loved themselves out of the wrench of gendered ploys, us knight-  
 rioters, who found ourselves in chatrooms, as deacons of the dark parts of dark parks,  
 who put whole dreams in the *Sandcastle Disco* of black Noah's Ark, who  
 put whole sooners-rather-than-laters in each other's hands like pearls,  
 who felt pedagogy in Martha and the Vandellas singing  
*Dancing in the Street*, & takes any chance to say we just knew Marvin Gaye wrote it,  
 but girls are the heart of a good city's sound, & on my good days  
 baby it's us. Unwise uncompromised sites, we, reverberate a nature presumed,  
 inching us to that place our feet have been telling us they already knew.  
 We'll just use the music and a good God will have it move on through.  
 For Brother Frankie loved us baby. Witnessed us kissing mask-to-mask,  
 heard us drive the children across state lines, ordained the day in the fight  
 of us & good. Good what he saw because you can hear it: he said  
*let the music use you.* & you know this congregation sang,  
*a-fucking-men.*

## Working Naked

Loons cascade  
in the lake  
for a nocturnal swim.  
Once they start,  
they're all in.  
I  
droop low,  
low  
in the waters  
of singularity.  
I turn my back,  
on my back  
not myself.  
*Back there, I say  
is a stock  
of bad history.*  
Silk-screen  
thriller  
with every version  
of unexceptional regret.  
Yes, my bedroom-  
buckled knees,  
yes, my  
floorless afternoons.  
Out of breath,  
drunk, endlessly  
falling.  
Retreats from  
every bright  
moon.  
But I dare to be  
what I've done and  
what I do.  
I cannot look  
in the mirror—not now,  
not as the  
archive  
of other people's hands  
and my blood-struck  
eyes.



I cannot stop thinking  
about  
this,  
about me.  
I want to  
shake  
all my holdings out.  
And I'm trying to start;  
as loons  
don't really sit—  
they move,  
they plunge  
to swim.  
So, my want:  
a hot bed of needles.  
My want:  
to do more  
than disappear.  
I admit, I am  
afraid these days.  
Afraid  
there won't be anyone  
left to forgive.  
Anyone else to stop trying  
to hate.  
Afraid to be the bird that  
just drops.  
But who ever  
is ready  
to just leave?  
To just  
anchor-  
weight out a sky.





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- *Juked*: “[A]bsence is an [A]xiom”
- *Sixth Finch*: “to love through what scares you”
- *TENDER LOIN*: “Scorpions in Bethesda,” “As the Prairie Burns,” “Portrait of Black Boy Not As Colonial Plaything”
- *BOAAT*: “Demand”
- *Boulevard Magazine*: “Bank-Account of Many-Legged Longing”
- *Forklift, Ohio*: “Working Naked”

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\* \* \* Notes \* \* \*

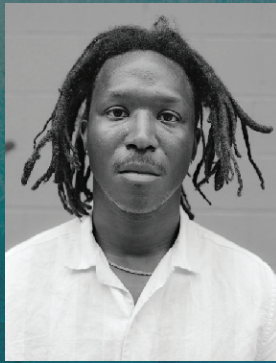
- Stanza 6 of “I Lied When I Said I Never Had Dreams” quotes the study, Pierson, E., Simoiu, C., Overgoor, J. et al. A large-scale analysis of racial disparities in police stops across the United States. *Nat Hum Behav* 4, 736–745 (2020).
- “History Never Repeats Itself—But It Sure Can Rhyme” is a quote from a June 2020 open letter written by several members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, including Panthers like Jamal Joseph, a member of the Panther 21. A group of Party members organizing in New York City, the Panther 21 were arrested in 1969 and accused of crimes related to the planned bombing of police stations and the Queens Board of Education office. The Panther 21—after what, at the time, was the longest, most expensive trial in New York State history—were acquitted on all 156 charges. after the discovery that undercover police agents were the primary instigators of the plan. On the witness stand, one undercover officer confessed “yes” when asked if he had betrayed his community.
- “On My Good Days” includes quotes from “Baby Wants to Ride” by Frankie Knuckles (1987), a speech by George W. Bush (June 1, 2000) regarding the “risk of inaction” with respect to the use of U.S. preemptive military force, remarks by Condoleezza Rice (January 18, 2005) referring to “outposts of tyranny” being countries that the U.S. had deemed had “fear” rather than “free” societies, and the club mix of “Let The Music Use You” by the The Night Writers (1987).
- “Guilt by Association” riffs on Michel Foucault’s call “to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures” in an interview titled “Friendship As A Way of Life” (1981).



**JOSHUA AIKEN** is a poet and black studies scholar. A Cave Canem Fellow, his poems have appeared in publications such as *Apogee*, *BOAAT*, *Copper Nickel*, *G\*Mob*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Nepantla: A Journal Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color*, *Pleiades*, *The Rumpus*, *Sixth Finch* and *Winter Tangerine*. Joshua was named a 2023 Writer of Note by the de Groot Foundation, holds graduate degrees in History and Forced Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, was the Policy Fellow at the Prison Policy Initiative and the Researcher-in-Residence for Artspace New Haven's exhibition "Revolution on Trial." A Teaching Fellow with the Yale Prison Education Initiative and supported by the Point Foundation, he is a doctoral candidate at Yale in African-American Studies, History, and Law.





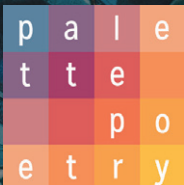


*to be in & of.* To be verb & noun. To be object & subject. To be Black & blue. Joshua Aiken is contemplating & exploding all the dichotomies in this tight collection of poems, putting pressure on language like he means to turn each word into coal & then burn it all down. But don't be deceived: there's a phoenix rising from these ashes—& ready to fly.

—**Evie Shockley**, author of Pulitzer Prize finalist *semiautomatic* and winner of the 2023 Shelley Memorial Award

What is there to say? These poems are excellent, lyrically athletic, brazenly honest, as sound as they are shattering. They move through you like winter wind, mark you like a cloudless summer day. As I read I found myself shouting or stunned silent after every poem. Joshua Aiken, how you see and feel the world in these poems, how you witness your life and life around you, is nothing short of genius. Reader, beware: here awaits a brutal and lush vision in which you too, naked and human, might also be glimpsed.

—**Danez Smith**, author of the Kate Tufts Discovery Award-winning *[insert] boy* and National Book Award finalist *Don't Call Us Dead*



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