

Jamie McGhee 1

*Black boys die  
on blackboard streets—  
They become chalk outlines,  
and are erased.*

emanuel

Yes, Sir, I am calling in sick  
because my people are  
dying on their knees  
with their hands in the air,  
praying to a god  
who prefers white skin;

and the last time  
we went to church,  
we found our pastor's blood  
in the communion wine  
but unlike God  
he did not turn into bread;

and the last time  
we dipped our hands in holy water,  
an officer shoved us in  
and choked us under  
until the water turned black;

and the last time  
we tried to breathe,  
an arm clamped around our neck  
and forced us to the ground  
so we could hear our lungs explode  
in our collapsing chest;

and the last time  
we tried to stand up straight,  
our spine snapped in two,  
and when we tried to run,  
our back ate four bullets,  
our heart ate one,  
and when we asked to be buried  
in that same little town,  
a pale-skinned terrorist  
carried out the will of God;

and maybe, maybe I could  
make it to work,  
but I'm afraid to leave my house  
because corpses hang from every tree:  
corpses from a hundred years ago,  
corpses from a hundred years from now,  
corpses from this morning,  
stripped of their names,  
swinging in a stale white wind;

and you expect me to act normal,  
to smile wide  
and assure you that my people  
are just exaggerating  
about our own bullet wounds,  
but even Uncle Tom  
died at his master's feet;

so, Sir, I am incredibly sorry  
to inconvenience you,  
but my people are dead  
and my heart is sick,  
and I'll need a lifetime  
just to cut down these trees.

for carefree black girls

Here's to the carefree black girls who make mistakes.  
To the girls who drown their depression  
with one too many shots  
and throw up at their ex's feet,  
the girls who champion natural hair  
but tug at their 4c roots, wishing it were  
long,  
straight,  
*good.*

Here's to the girls who might like girls  
and who tell other girls  
that **'It gets better!'**—  
Meanwhile they're healing  
the bruises of their mothers'  
**'God can change you!'**

Here's to the girls who have stopped  
going to church  
but not stopped looking for God:  
to the girls who lie awake panicking  
that they're going to hell.

Here's to the girls who can't bring  
themselves to watch Sandra Bland,  
who've stopped reblogging Black Lives Matter  
because they've gone numb.  
Here's to the girls who clench their fists  
when white people walk by  
and the girls who secretly wonder  
if black girls deserve it.

Here's to the girls whose mothers  
have given them containers of  
sticky yellow skin bleach.  
Here's to the girls who use it  
'only to clear acne scars'  
but who relish in the fact  
that their new skin glows in the darkness.

Here's to the girls whose acne scars  
form angry red constellations,  
the girls who sleep in makeup  
and the girls too afraid  
to wear short sleeves;  
no one told you  
that those scars can reach the elbow.

Here's to the girls who wish  
they were boys  
but never want to be men,  
and the girls who squeeze their legs together  
whenever a man walks by.  
Here's to girls who flinch in the mirror.

Here's to the girls who are so damn tired.  
Here's to the girls who are so damn manic.

Here's to the girls who are so damn fat  
and so damn skinny  
on the same day.

Here's to the girls who can't go on  
but go on,  
who preach forgiveness but can't forgive themselves.

Here's to the carefree black girls  
whose freedom comes at a price.  
**Here's to the carefree black girls  
who never feel carefree.**

she breathes on my chest

**I don't do feelings**

her skin smells like cocoa butter

**and I'm too selfish**

shining like black gold from her bright eyes

**to stay faithful.**

to her round thighs;

**I find excuses**

any girl can provide sex

**at the bottoms of bottles**

and I don't believe in making love

**and don't realize what I've done**

but holding her in my arms feels like

**until her voice cracks**

God on the seventh day

**as she sobs,**

admiring his creation:

**choking on my name.**

*It is good.*

book of acts

We speak in tongues  
between your legs,  
sipping communion wine  
between desperate gasps,  
crying to a god we pray  
isn't watching  
us desecrate his altar.  
—*Oh, God*—  
You tear my hair,  
I suck your skin,  
and your holy water rolls down  
my chin.

iago

To everyone who loves me:

You do not.

You are infatuated with the version of yourself  
that you see in me,  
because you do not realize  
that I've been carefully trained  
to be a mirror, mimicking the rise of your  
voice, the wave of your hands,  
the way your eyes light up and your smile quirks.

And because humans are vain,  
you are already searching for yourself  
inside of everything you see,  
and are delighted to find  
that I am the closest thing;  
so when you beg me to stay, it is not  
as a husband drawn to his wife,  
but as Narcissus to a mirror,  
and are no more in love with me  
than you are with the glass on your wall.

boyhood

I am a broken brown boy  
bound together with Ace bandages:  
I am the confusion of my lopsided face  
in the mirror  
as I tug one eye closed: Why are my eyes so  
crooked? Why is my jaw so round?  
My chest is flat in my favorite picture.  
I fold my arms across my stomach  
and turn my cheek,  
so no one can tell the difference  
between me and my

father says I am his first daughter,  
but I know I am his second son.  
So my only inheritance is his thick lips  
and anger outbreaks, and as I write this  
my right hand types slower,  
three knuckles splintered apart and scabbing  
from where I buried them in the wall.

My story does not end in testosterone.  
My story does not end in phalloplasty.  
My story does not end with my fingers  
stitching golden half-moons across my chest.

No:

My story chugs on in sports bras and muscle shirts,  
and in Jersey dresses and curly weaves,  
because if I could just be pretty enough,  
yes, if I just looked like all of the girls  
I wanted to sleep with,  
instead of like their boyfriends...

The last time I slept with a girl,  
she called me Father,



but I know she never felt satisfied.  
My muscles did not look like her father's muscles.  
I spent my bank account on clothes for her,  
jewelry for her, red wine for her,  
and, for me, a hookah pen  
that filled my mouth with glass and ink.  
As she pulled glass out of my gums,  
she said I didn't need to write anymore.

They say artists speak the truth,  
but I don't have any: I can't write the bible\_  
on masculinity or the manifesto of femininity\_  
or offer any pointed Platonian platitudes  
\_for merging the two;  
and although Plato pondered whether a female body  
could contain a male soul\_  
my tongue can't fathom that sticky word.  
*Soul.*

I am the awkward masculinity  
festering at the bottom of a wine glass.  
One day a man will scrape me out,  
tie me into a white dress  
and call me the beautiful mother of his children.  
And when the Ace bandages fall like ribbons  
to my blistered feet,  
I'll run a hand over my crooked ribs  
and cringe.  
And I'll say to myself  
when I say to my girlfriends:  
Don't you look so beautiful, baby girl?  
Don't you just look so beautiful?

young/black/zie

*// for all the young, nameless, homeless  
black, queer  
victims of hate crimes*

When nothing fits  
except a baseball bat to a nonconforming backbone,  
who will phone the parents  
of the motherless  
to claim the question-marked shaped body?