

Collection of Poetry

From this collaboration's onset, our poets knew that this would not be a typical workshop. This project was meant to be a space for catharsis and unfiltered poetics. These poems are for mapping experiences and putting them on a page without censorship, editing, or critique. *This* is the space I envisioned for this group of Black poets here at James Madison University: a space of total freedom without suppression of any kind, where we exist within the margins while also expanding out of them, regardless of the matrices of domination.

In the words of Gwendolyn Brooks, "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond." This short collection serves as evidence that scattered seeds will grow; we will find a way to unfurl and intertwine. With these poets, I created just that and learned how much more I could do by carving out a place for us to depend on each other and to write about our desires, joys, fears, and exhaustion.

People

Ant Adkins

Xavier Adkins

Haylee Chase Edwards

Brenden McBride

Taylor Naufflett

Jordan Smith

India Williams

prose for black life

India Williams

what are you tired of writing about? i wish to compose a poem that does not involve systematic violence, systemic racism, or systems that oppress, or kill, or abuse, or displace, or abduct, or incarcerate or force folks into extinction; i try to alter courses, tell tales, and sing songs, i remember that black children are kept alive on t-shirts and those the trees that held the ropes that clenched the necks of black folks or the insects feasting on decomposing flesh in foilage-filled ditches that cradle the bones of black girls, leaving no trace or the water that wraps around the blue bodies of black boys and hugs them so tightly their corpses swell— with love.

Falling, falling

Ant Adkins

I've weathered storm after storm after storm— does it only rain?
When the fuck am I to be offered anything else?
Is it nothing?
I get it, so that's all I deserve

You're allowed to— no
Entitled to the continued onslaught,
peddled toward your foes
As you massacre the faceless,
the boundless, the voiceless
The troubled
To be delivered upon the softened,
battered backs of the weary
Do you see what you've done?
Their knees no longer
bend to respond to any will of their own
Each of their lips
Caulked shut— with human essence, made rotten
by abscess of their withering teeth
Your greatest achievements done to them, not for

My knees burn as the firm support of
previously developed cartilage melts
away under the radial pressure
I can no longer resist
My mouth hardened by the unrecognizable
build-up
Of what used to be a well-groomed,
well-rounded, and well-attuned character
I've been made weak by you.
Through corrosive inaction, locking me
within skeletal bars of doubt and self-loathing
And I'm supposed to thank you?

i could've had a pretty name

Haylee Chase Edwards

every day i wish i got a pretty name like my play-cousin, like “Krisha” who sounds like some kind of goddess, like she smiles with all her teeth when she says ‘thank you’ after aunties compliment her. like she knows she looks good in jewel tones and was taught how to match her foundation colors for every season.

or like my TT “Latoya” who works at Toyota, and i call her TT Toya because it sounds like bubble wrap and it was fun to sing it when i was little.

or like my friend named “Cherish” because her daddy’s citizenship was a gift in exchange for his hard work. or like our family friend named “Armina” which means something like ‘little warrior’ in her mother’s native tongue.

my mom gave me a name that’s spelled how it sounds.

the “hay” is self-explanatory, old english *heg* at one point.
the “lee” comes from *leah*, meaning ‘wood’ or ‘meadow.’

my name means ‘from the hay meadow,’ my name makes me think about the british isles and bright comets that don’t get enough attention because they only shoot their shot once a generation.

my name is simple in print, in cursive, and it’s easy on the eyes.

my name looks like it can work in group settings or alone.

my name has none of the consonants that get stuck in anglophone front teeth because my name is from some dead man’s ledger at some point, i think.

my name’s not as pretty as it could have been, and nice enough for my circumstances...

it’s just that it also means ‘hirable’ ‘well-read,’ and ‘a good one.’

at least, that’s what my mom told me when i asked her why my name isn’t something prettier.

Downside Up

Haylee Chase Edwards

Every day nauseates me the same
Because I sleep rough, live ugly, I'm cracked
And I force my bloody eyes shut tighter
I drive home, dive into bed, cheek to satin
My lashes are shiny, dew-dropped and itchy
It hardly matters because the world's hungry—growling empty.

How much I offered
(proffered like prayers from ripped throats)
(broke my shoulder blades, tore out the wings)
No matter how much I made for others
Somehow there was nothing left for me.

And I did everything I was supposed to do (done, sent, spent, paid)
When I fired off my objectives (checked boxes like inventory)
Sat for a call (it rang awful and long, and no one showed up)
When I hiked to my office and cried (brackish blush, snotty skin).
On the coatrack, in the cupholder of my car (or beneath it all)
There was nothing in the cabinet (not even behind the salt).

Who I was, what I knew.

I woke up wondering where I was.

Parts of 4

Ant Adkins

Born to the results of work yet to be done
Two of them, without rigidity, with nurturing,
and without resources. They were lapped many times
before knowledge of spectators beyond the track,
their minds far too preoccupied and enclosed
to ascertain the resulting form of those four.

Left to dictate over themselves,
many serpentine nerves tunneled through
their shared consciousness. The corrosion
of circumstance came to them as a blessing,
freeing them of the faith that encased them
in tangled, wired thorns.

Their children are a dimmed, unrecognizable
hope inspired by actions beyond the radial scope
of their colorless lenses. Twins, failed by the spirit,
then by bodies relocated to foreign gravel,
by listless breeze, by stream.

Inherited by them
is a victory yet to be realized,
only imagined.

No title

Taylor Naufflett

It's one thing to know white people are the majority,
231.9 million and 75.5 % of the Population

But it's another thing to *live* it
Sifting through a sea of white
Brandishing the “other” badge that
I can't seem to remember when I put on

Nothing here was made for me
Taught in buildings named after enslavers,
That the history of my people (if even mentioned) are stories of failure,

I guess I ought to be thankful, yet

The glances and the looks don't go unnoticed
The stifled smiles and laughter don't go unnoticed
The condescending comments don't go unnoticed

Dreaming of escape won't change a thing
because is this not the same as the world around me

Buried underneath deadlines and assignments,
I was truly distracted by what I was being trained to be.
I'm not a foreign policy expert, nor am I fluent in Spanish.

But I do know how to sit in my discomfort.
I keep my anger on a leash.

And most of all, I'm an expert in silence because as if anyone would care if i spoke out
otherwise.

Rock

Xavier Adkins

I became hard.

I became strong.

I became reliable.

I became dangerous.

Rocks do not feel.

They don't need to be respected,

They don't have voices to beg to be heard,

Rocks can be boulders.

They can find themselves too large for the comfort of others,

They can find themselves in an immovable object,

Rocks can be stones.

A rock with the ability to take action is only a weapon,

A rock with the agency to move can only cause harm I did not choose to be a rock,

I have feelings, a need for respect, and a voice to be heard I'm tired of being a boulder,

I never chose to be this large

And who decided that I alone could shoulder every burden around me?

Why must I be a stone?

Recovering people pleaser

Taylor Naufflett

I write my desires in shifting sand,
Fluidity—my guiding principle,
adaptability—my cherished font
Swift as the wind, they are gone.

Another futile effort.

HOTBED (emulation of Nikki Finney's hotbeds...not the official title)

James Madison University

India Williams

Before parent-teacher conferences, my mother performed her infamous ritual in the school's parking lot. She would dab her thumb into the moisture of her mouth, then tactfully trace the crusty crevices of my eyes, cleansing them with a gentle touch. After, she would take a heaping scoop of Vaseline to lather up my face. With a command, she tells me to *smile*. Some words scrape my smile away. I watched as my teacher reiterated what she said in class about her justifying Trayvon Martin being murdered before I cut her off. She told me I was too young to know what racism was. My mother pinches me to get my attention; once she had it, with tight lips and flared nostrils, she whispered, *fix your face*.

Eleven years later, with seventeen-something years of schooling, the world remains stagnant. No one ever talks about the unique racism you face in academia. It is cunning, creative, and full of power. Much like heaven, academia is depicted as white. This is hell—infernal: scalding prejudice, seething bias, greedy inequities. Oh, but remember that you smile while having racism hurled at you. Taking college classes about your mothers will teach you something more than the content ever could. It reveals the true nature of people; they don't see us, and the continuation of our existence is limited.

You have to work on your poker face, she, a white woman, says. Point.aim.shoot. Tone policing. Those wielding words code for smile. It pulverizes you and subtracts the historic struggle of your skin to nothing. It catches you off guard, but never again. You have trained for moments like this. Watch how the merits add up, but they don't count for anything. Soon, you learn that these safe spaces are only havens if you look like the educator—the majority of the classroom.

Liminality

Brendan McBride

The one left to roam.
Lest the one without a home.
Yet I am here,
I'm never really here nor there.
I am liminal,
But enriched within my subliminal.
I've been given the gift of eternity,
Yet, I struggle with proximity.

Traffic Stop

Jordan Smith

Police pulled me over the other day, and when I showed him my driver's license, he said, "You've lost weight."
Didn't know pigs were so health-conscious nowadays.

11:10am

Jordan Smith

So I'm sitting there, and I'm watching people call eye-dialect written by racists "Aye-aye-vee-e" and listening to the professor call slavery "cancer" like "cancer" is anywhere close to an unavoidable system meant to exploit. And I'm raising my hand, and my friend is raising her hand, and we're--nicely (not that we should have to be) but nicely--asking people to change their language and consider the historical context because this isn't *Pamela*, this is Harriet Jacobs--this is a nonfiction narrative detailed the trauma and abuse a Black woman faced at the hands of white people. And we're met with these sort of blank stares and mindless nods that which seem to say, "we come in peace," and I feel like an alien. I'm so far from home, and I'm trying to blend in and be agreeable, but it's so hard when your teacher decides that the middle of the semester is a great time to explain that the underground railroad wasn't actually a railroad. Or when he waits until the middle of the semester to add supplemental readings to the syllabus. Supplemental readings that he definitely read, he totally did not search buzzwords like "black futurity" and "capitalism" in MLA International Bibliography. It's watching people shop for Hokas as the professor shows images of Emmett Till's brutalized body and his mother crying over her baby's casket. It's being the only Black person in the room too many times. It's the professor remembering your name immediately *because* you're the only black person in the class. It's listening to your classmates call black hair "kinky and coily" and your professor smiling at the oh-so-apt description. Again, it's having to watch your classmates call eye dialect written by racist white people to purposefully misrepresent the speech patterns of black people "aye-aye-vee-ee." It's cringing because the girl next to you, with her whole chest, just said, "I'm like...I don't want to sound rude, but like...they sort of look like monkeys." and if it couldn't get any worse, the professor agrees with her. It's having to stay in an hour and 15-minute lecture while the professor calls a black woman "a piece of chattel" and liken slavery to cancer and finds every way to not refer to black people as people "black bodies," "black subjects," "big strong slaves." It's your friend's friend coming up to you and telling you, unprompted, that "the guy whose house we're about to go to says the n-word, but I've never corrected him because I'm afraid he'd beat me up." It's sitting in class, walking around campus, going to the grocery store, and feeling like an alien. So far from home and unable to communicate. Just a black girl in the middle of the mountains having big feelings about being Black.