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The Black Mage Reader

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The Black Mage Reader

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Shaina Monet

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This is for the dreamer and the dream.

You and I are close, we intertwine; you may stand on the other side of the hill once in a while,
but you may also be me, while remaining what you are and what i am not.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Native, Woman, Other*

in the pull of gravity, which is not simple

—Adrienne Rich, *Twenty-One Love Poems*

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Black Études, a Preface

We all were sea-swallow'd, though some cast again
(And by that destiny) to perform an act
Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come
In yours and my discharge.

—*The Tempest*, Act II, Scene I, Lines 251-254

At the University of New Orleans, in a graduate class titled: #BlackLivesMatter in Southern Literature, we discussed William Faulkner's "Dry September." One person, then several others, expressed understanding the hazardous position of the white barber in the story, who doesn't want the black man to be lynched by the town mob—as he believes him to be innocent—but ultimately fails to firmly stand up for the man, or prevent the lynching. Awkwardly, they said that they empathized with the white barber, because intervening would put his life in danger too. I am not brave. However, when a classroom full of white graduate students in a class on Black Lives in Southern Literature justifies inaction—honoring the all-too-human instinct for self-preservation—I, a Southerner, a writer, and the only person of color present, don't want to be human.

For me, a wave of vulnerability arises from situations like these, where a person of color can feel seen and not seen—recognized and not recognized. This collection explores these paradoxical states of being, particularly through constructing and deconstructing themes of magic and the supernatural that I find inextricably tied to Black and African culture. In "Black Lives Matter & the Mo(ve)ment of Black Life in America," as she discusses the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the testimony of the police officer who killed him, Monica R. Miller notes:

In 2014, Wilson pumped countless bullets into the black body of Brown, later describing Brown as somehow still moving towards him (while being shot at) in a superhuman capacity— the mythological beasts white America often depicted them to be. Not fully

human, yet somehow imbued with superhuman ability—perhaps this is the condition that procures the “magical” ingenuity of clairvoyance, black conjuration, that Du Bois so aptly writes of in his work.

The concept, phenomenon, and tradition of masking, literally and figuratively, as well as these themes of storytelling and myth-making, permeate this work, as do writers and artists such as: W.E.B. Du Bois, whose theory of double consciousness Miller touches on in her article as well. Ultimately, the most challenging aspect of writing these poems has been the varying levels of performance and masking the work requires when playing with point-of-view, dialect, and African American stereotypes. In this process, the primary character of this collection—the black mage—came to life.

the “beau présent” series

In a sense, I attempt to raise the dead as a black mage would. Through family stories gathered during my genealogy research, this collection engages Western literary traditions as well as oral storytelling traditions, particularly in the first section. Census records, city directories, and hospital and church records from the last few centuries have made me more aware of the lack of historical attention to the lives of people of color. In this section, I use the “beau présent,” a poetic form that grew out of the experimental poetics of the OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) writers of the 1960s, to invoke the names and memory of my ancestors. This particular form requires every word in the poem to be derived from the letters of a person’s name, which serves as the poem’s title. By tapping into the power of names and naming like the speaker in “Madame Marguerite Joséphine Jean-Louis Pierry (f.w.c.),” who attempts to “replicate [an] innate sense/ of passing on” that defies death, these obscured individuals engage in a form of storytelling that she describes as a kind of “rite.” With limited

power and information, I take on my ancestors' imagined voices and the psyche(s) of their communities, as they might. In doing so, I wish to conceive their knowledge of diaspora into and as present.

Not the evil spirits that black mages or necromancers summon according to lore, these ancestors would have human rage, grief, and anxieties to settle if given time and chance, both of which the black mage embraces, indulges, and encourages. Historically, masking and other survival practices for people of color, particularly for women of color, as well as any person not conforming to the ideological values of white patriarchal culture and imperialism, allowed individuals to maintain a sense of self and culture in the face of a world determined to see them solely as the masks they wore. While the lives of people of color are difficult to track in 18th and 19th century America, it can be even more challenging to trace the stories of women of color, whose maiden names were often not recorded after their marriages due to the paternalistic nature of surnames and record-keeping. For this reason, I attempt to give extra attention to my maternal ancestors in this collection.

While many of the themes and imagery throughout appear in relation the supernatural, one could also say that they point toward a potentially non-magical, demystified world as in poems like "Oscar Joseph LeBlanc & Ophelia Louise Washington," which offers in the epigraph several other causes for Oscar's perceived mental illness and subsequent institutionalization. In "'The Power to Enchant That Comes from Disillusion': W.H. Auden's Criticism of Magical Poetics," Matthew Mutter comments on W.H. Auden's criticism of magical poetics, and other Modernists' attraction to these themes:

Magic is often celebrated for its subversive and revolutionary potential. Its metaphysical aspirations are ignored; what matters is its capacity to undermine disagreeable

hierarchies: mind and body, male and female, high and low culture, civilized and primitive, colonist and subject.

Although the black mage disrupts binaries and hierarchies in the manner Mutter describes, this character and magic serve as more than mere disruptors to jar readers. For many of these poems, magic often connects themes of creation, transformation, and the recognition of parallel worlds and multiphasic dimensions, which the poet has access to through the stories and memories of dead ancestors, and through the black mage, who assists in their summoning by providing a mask.

the black mage

Persona is the primary poetic technique I utilize in order to achieve the necessary distance required when addressing the sometimes personal and often troubling subject matter. As a girl and a blerd (black nerd) who loves science, sci-fi, and fantasy, my work draws from these interests, such as one of the first in this series of “black mage” persona poems, “Hazards of Being, a Black Mage in the 23rd Century,” which examines the stereotypes and tropes that tend to define these subjects in art, academia, and pop culture through a hyper-racialized and gendered lens. The black mage is representative of a kind of radical imaginary who actively plays into stereotypes and tropes, subverting and sometimes reinforcing them simply because they can. Performance is key. The black mage warns in this poem’s first two couplets, “losing yourself in this tome” could conjure “something entirely different from what critics expect.” In this sense, the black mage is also a trickster figure who negotiates with the poet and various characters, spirits, and objects. The black mage, as presented in “maleficium,” appears and reappears “outside of time,” as described in the poem’s final section: “tast[ing] every word.”

Capable of time travel and psychic access to other realms and minds, I use this figure to test constructs of time and space, and to deconstruct the etymology of words and ideas.

The relationship between artists and their art, performance, and the dramatic tradition I consider to be recurring themes, as well as the parallel between art and magic, particularly in the second section of this collection. Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of MacBeth*, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, and *The Tempest* influence my aesthetic, particularly their significant historical, cultural, and literary contexts: the rise of colonialism, British imperialism, the Transatlantic Slave trade, and the publication of King James' dissertation on demonology and the occult in 1597. Similar to those in various mythologies, fables, and folklore, my black mage appears and reappears as an equivocator, much like the Weird Sisters of MacBeth, who also tends to challenge conventional power structures with varying intent. Interestingly, in Shakespeare's works, his characters of color such as Othello and Caliban often simultaneously reinforce and subvert sexual and racial stereotypes born out of the imperialist project. After seeing the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 2016 spring production of *The Tragedy of MacBeth* in Washington DC, which featured a cast primarily of people of color, I delved deeper into the paradoxical representations of people of color in Western art and its social and political repercussions.

Capable of possessing and taking on various human and non-human forms, the black mage can imbue the inanimate with life. For example, "In Hamburg with *The Negro Avenged*," the self-conscious figures in the painting "find themselves thrust upon" by Füssli's world and vision. Similarly, in "On Menzel's *Atelierwand*" the speaker's observations that the "cast dissembles" and "laughs" at the "you," suggests that they have some form of consciousness separate from their artist/creator. In these and the other ekphrastics: "In Madrid with Picasso's

Guernica” and “*Gaspard the nightwalker*,” I attempt to further explore the politics of vision and artistic vision within the context of Western art, which artists and subjects of diaspora continue to contend with. In “His countenance, like richest alchemy,” these themes of vision and appearance present themselves through the poem’s title, an allusion to a passage from Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* commenting on these same themes, the speaker’s compulsive refrain of: “like the eye of the man,” and in the recurring eye imagery in lines like: “once you cheat, sleep/ with one eye open” and “the eye into widened puzzles.” Importantly, this speaker’s mention of “the distorted/ dimensions,” where the black mage happens to live and operate, also foreshadows themes of perception of time and space, as well as mental and social health, which come to dominate the third section of this collection.

on New Orleans, ghosts, and setting time and place

In the French Quarter, a neighborhood constantly promoted as “haunted,” tourists revel in listening to ghost tours, believing and disbelieving. Living there for five years, I didn’t feel the full impact of the oddity of my being the only person of color in my building until I unearthed the history of my New Orleans ancestors, and then actually read through their shopping receipts, last wills, and succession papers in French, Spanish, and English. Many French Quarter residents are renters working in the service industry, as I did for a period of time, while those who own the buildings are generally of the older white demographic. Whenever I took the bus home to my place in the Quarter from campus, the black bus drivers who didn’t recognize me would ask if I was on my way to work. The French Quarter, historically a major economic port and point of entry for the slave trade, reduced to cliché and flooded with nostalgic tourists, is where many literal and figurative points meet and cross in this collection. In this hyper-romanticized setting, the often obscured racial history, the fear and violence yet to be reckoned with, and the

perpetually silenced meet the speaker in “time traveling through glass,” who hears “curious sounds on dark, warm nights/ in the French Quarter,” as she and the black mage first begin to negotiate with each other and the ongoing challenge of storytelling and performance for people of color, particularly in this region and climate.

the black mage reader

In her preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa defines “borderlands” as: “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where the lower, middle and upper classes touch” (21). I relate the “black” that characterizes the black mage with the liminal, intersectional, and queer spaces that Anzaldúa and others explore in their creative and academic writing. I have never been considered properly “black” and I do not intend to be, so much of my work explores how “blackness” in all meanings of the word is and has been performed. Similarly, the “reader” must be considered in multiple ways as well. As any effective reader, unlike the Dick and Jane series that originally featured only white characters and perspectives, the black mage reader acts as a kind of tome, or educational tool that takes on language, writing, and learning as subjects along with the subject of “blackness” in terms of race and perceived malevolence. Therefore, I write for the subject: the reader, a student of the world, and the object: the book, “this tome” from “Hazards of Being, a Black Mage in the 23rd Century,” which, as an inanimate object, can claim no universality.

One of the epigraphs to this collection, taken from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Native, Woman, Other*, describes identity and experience in a way similar to Anzaldúa: “You and I are close, we intertwine; you may stand on the other side of the hill once in a while, but you may also be me, while remaining what you are and what i am not” (90). Feeling, as Minh-ha does, the odd

sensation between the “you” and “I,” our proximity, I try to locate my poems in these spaces. Thankfully, I am not the first, nor will I be the last. Minh-ha emphasizes the transformation and devaluation of women of color in the Western world’s hierarchy in this passage through juxtaposing the capitalized “You and I” with the “you and i” in lower case. For the most part, in this collection I only capitalize proper nouns, which is only one example of a critical and aesthetic choice I’ve made inspired by women writers like Trinh T. Minh-ha and Gloria Anzaldúa. Other stylistic influences include: Lucille Clifton, Ai, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

While capitalization varies somewhat across the poems in this collection, the “I” is always capitalized. As noted in “Caroline Belle Ross,” with its floating and fragmented lines, the “I,” in this poem and elsewhere, “belie[s] all.” Of course, there is danger in my capitalization of the “I.” Morally and psychologically, no Self can nor should remain fixed, which is something I like to think the speaker obsessively ruminates over in “Étude in Radial Colors,” as mind “twist[s] one/thing into another.” In that same chapter of *Native, Woman, Other*, Minh-ha goes on to discuss perception and identity: “Not One, not two either. ‘I’ is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. ‘I’ is, itself, infinite layers” (91). Particularly in the third section of this collection, which shifts in style and point-of-view more than previous sections, I attempt to move beyond a singular and fixed I/eye, to “peel off” and study these infinite fractals and layers, through fluctuating speakers who recognize and struggle with these ideas in their own ways.

Throughout this collection, the poet tends to address a “dear one,” as seen in “time traveling through glass” and “Caisson,” who is fixed and unfixed by the conjurations and voices of the past, present, and future. I am convinced that if a person admits the past entrance in all its

problematic incarnations, as the poet does with the aid of the black mage, making room for and recognizing its presence, then one individual can become a vessel for memory, an aid, or “mnemonic remainder” for those meeting the future. However, moving around the whirls of printed names and dates as I investigate these histories, presents, and futures, some words continue to return to me, as if to pull me back, a specific part in the first lines of my fourth great-grandfather’s last will and testament in 1843, which I now wonder if he worded himself. Nevertheless, for conclusion, I offer a rewording of them: I, daughter of daughters, “being weak in body but of sound and perfect mind and memory...”¹

¹ The first sentence of The Last Will of Richard Travis: “In the name of God Amen. I, Richard Travis of Sandy Lake township, Mercer County Pennsylvania, being weak in body but of sound and perfect mind and memory Blessed be the Almighty God for the same do make and publish this my last will and testament in manner and from following (that is to say—First and principally I recommend my immortal spirit to God who gave it in hopes of a joyful resurrection and my body to the earth.”

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59.

I.

last night
the dreams of my mother came
knocking and when i
opened the door
they tried to explain themselves
and i understood
everything they said

—Lucille Clifton, *an ordinary woman*

time traveling through glass

for my cousin, DeCarlo, another storyteller

Self, I say, thinking again—hearing
the oddness of address. here,

in the French Quarter, curious sounds
on dark, warm nights crawl up, shiver

and break through my courtyard, each stair,
the pipes, and sink. what seems missing:

all. though, not my typewriter: a 1934
Royal KH. not my hands. even

memories in objects and words, though
distilled, appear now, pressing

hard—keeping me awake.

this is not *Star Trek*, I finally say.
you are not Ben Sisko's Benny—far

beyond the stars—you simply can't sleep
once one or more cells sound in sync

with the mechanical clicking of the AC
unit. this sensory world of yours—not quite

the quietus you imagined—through
screen, book, or image. in a split

second, your camera shutter snapped
to capture the wallpaper-less Katrina

watermarks, where the clocks caught
in place (as you would be) in every space

you live after sixteen. we strike a bargain.
you travel back in time, and I'll stay

here for you—acquire a new
language. history, in a name,

person, or thing—like the ribbon

Mama Lillian said lured our twin

African girls to the boats
that would bring them to the Port

of New Orleans—to this second
story window.

at first light, they glare out—and I,
right back, touching the glass—

their prints. call this: present.
one gift, like a broken word

that crosses the Atlantic, wraps and warps
time—even peace for you, dear one,

like glass. take it.

listen. I can tell you this. the ribbon
runs out of ink almost as fast

as the mind does its story.

bastards speak

after the murder and murderers of Gibson Gideon Chavis, and their progeny

Gibson Gideon Chavis (1737-1777) had a racing horse named “Black Snake.” After another successful horse race, his losing opponents killed him at what is now known as “Gibbs Creek” in North Carolina.

—Kianga Lucas, *Native American Roots* blog

I can feel a man
in my body—in my chest.
and no, he’s not

there to rest with my red-
bone skin.

I, a woman, can sense
man—a woman. the suffering
suffix, always fixed

to orphan, married to
some nobody’s child.

who should be spared
the hoax—this coaxing
of history?

that one’s horse got past him.
Black Snake “won him a lot
of money,” source says.

but—did he take account
the cost—this creek?

name and skull would
weaken, crack, and
simply sink

once murderers
thrashed him. I have

a thorn inside: a bänkling
a fils de bast, a bantling—
something building in me

that could kill, or bleed.
momma, if a man made me,

could I break him too?

Madame Marguerite Joséphine Jean-Louis Pierry (f.w.c.)

“belle-presente” for my 4th great-grandmother born around 1792 in Spanish Colonial Louisiana

In 1876 Marguerite Joséphine Pierry (née Jean-Louis) won her petition to the Second District Court of the Parish of New Orleans to become the administratrix of her husband’s estate after creditors attempted to seize their property on Bayou St. John.

appear pregnant, I dare
myself, mum in the mirror.

it’s eighteen thirty-four,
that woman said, *when a guerre*

and a girl disappear in a swirl.

an age from now, she said,
in clouded crystal. fortunate.

it’s eighteen thirty-eight
already. in our house on St. Jean

my children, they promise me
to sleep: Hippolite, little Marie,

and Francois, the last of whom
will watch this room as if some

stellar phenomena should pass through—
as though it’s eighteen ten again, and I

at that moment when she showed me
they’re mine. like a helium star, I’ll guide

them, until gangs of men appear,
garish in gore, resigned to settle a score.

at eighty years old, years after
ma marié gives himself

to God, I’ll go
through his papers, signatures,

a legal Louisiana just
to replicate this innate sense

of passing on. this rite.
I must right it. I do.

a guerre. my sons and daughter
sit inside and appear stagnant

as white men away the furniture—
as we yield our receipts (once claimed

unfit to read)
to the Second District Court of New Orleans.

I can read⁺
a man's face well enough when I say

our name⁺ correctly, which I see
these men misspell intentionally, thinking

their tools will fell us, thinking
the letters, my name, will not

impress in a woman's hand.
they do.

wand the sage. dear woman,
I'm eighteen. I'm ready.

here, jealous thing—girl.
gear. almost a sphere

spun, luminous
into a star. *my child*, she said,

your name is a mnemon—in one
hundred eighty-two years only—

the mnemonic remainder.

⁺ While both Marguerite and her husband, Pierre, are listed on the United States Federal Census Record of 1850 as being unable to read or write, the organization and specificity of Pierre Pierry's succession papers, which are composed of hundreds of receipts and documents dating as far back as 1811, suggest otherwise.

⁺ "Pierry" is one of many spellings. Alternate spellings include: Pierré, Pierrie, Pieri, Pierre, Piere, and etc.

Thomas Painter Ross

“beau présent” for my 2nd great-grandfather born in Mercer, Pennsylvania in 1843

Liberia, once described as “the terminus of the Underground Railroad,” was a 150-acre settlement established in Mercer by Thomas Painter Ross’ grandfather, Richard Travis, in 1825 for runaway people of color. To ensure the freedom of the entire community after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Thomas Painter Ross and his brother, John, evacuated to Canada with maternal family, as they appear to have had no relationship with their father, and their mother, Catharine Ross (née Travis) died in 1848.

meet them in Ontario.
men mean pain.

roam North.

home: a man torn past a tree
in rope. thorn: mother’s ire.

name paints a person—
not me—a map. as soon as some

one terror eases, another
pair of men, in tatters, meet them.

their memories stream.

some men mean.
same as throat can mean:

horns roast horse post

time passes, as a man
sent to shoot someone’s son

passes, in the street. then,
it hums:

none inanimate teeth

Oscar Joseph LeBlanc & Ophelia Louise Washington

“beau présent” for my great-grandfather born in New Orleans in 1888 & my great-grandmother born in Haiti around 1891

The parents of Lillian Lucille Stella LeBlanc, my paternal grandmother, lived together as common-law husband and wife in New Orleans for a little over ten years. Oscar spent the last twenty-four years of his life institutionalized at the East Louisiana State Hospital for the Insane. Some say he'd been hexed by a voodoo lady in their neighborhood who kept and cursed the band of his hat. Alternate sources suggest Ophelia struck him in the head with a cast-iron skillet, while others note that Oscar, perfectly sane, was held at the hospital against his will, as a source of free labor.

listen. the neighboring spirit ate
through his hat. put *LeBlanc, Oscar J*—

who is less and less a substance
to ingest at this point in the ritual—

in East Louisiana State to waste,
where we are wont to plague.

listen. the neighbor, the incantation, was
strong, stronger than a single spirit's. so

tell us who—how can a pistol, pearl
or not, help Ophelia. *help Oscar?*

in Louisiana and Haiti, a hat is a hat
is a hat? bitter? is the ash Ophelia's

ghost? we taste now.
one of Lillian's sons has a little

one: Shaina. now,
Ophelia, slip us a piece

of paper—people in *gris*
et blanc. signs, once begotten,

begin again and again in a hearer,
though—one can last. those who

hear can't see through the hospital
walls. the rasp. we spirits operate, sign

contraries, can recall—Ophelia.
no one slips through these people, this

paper, or can use a patient so.
but a beast? at least, til our potion

reaps one—til hue of ghost-pallor.
to bitter ash.

Caroline Belle Ross

“belle présente” for my great-grandmother born in 1889 in Bear Lake, Michigan

According to census records, Caroline “Carrie” Belle Ross was the youngest of her eight “mulatto” siblings: Elizabeth Ann, Robert, Mary Catharine, Lucy, Maggie, Celia Jane, Thomas Jr. and John Richard. By the time she was 21 years old, her father and all but two of her sisters had died. Of the dead, few reached 30 years of age.

loose a line. an illness.

call Caroline “carrie”

or sin. I belie all:

a cross a cell a sole

linear.

bones roll in a son’s rining.

none or nine? across a bar:

a lee a lair

so inclined.

no rose

nor belle cleans a collar—

carries:

an ill a lie

Josephine Ruth Walker

“belle présente” for my great-grandmother born in St. Francisville, Louisiana in 1904

According to stories, Josephine Walker (née Ruth) left her son, Isaiah, and two daughters in St. Francisville with their paternal grandparents: Christiana, a washerwoman, and Isaiah Washington Sr., a Baptist preacher. Said to have been searching for her children’s father: Isaiah “Papou” Washington Jr. (Isaiah’s namesake), she returned fifteen years later to find her children grown with families in New Orleans. Whether she ever found their father remains unknown.

wake her. shake her
open. I see her son.

write that she is not
a saint—not the parish

seraph, who seeks: He-
Who-Is-Not-There. she was

ripe with Isaiah, woke
to whispers:

who eats—
ate—to satiate one?

hone the truth. a son
seeks a Ruth. a prophetess

who returns to his steps.
our sense of kin I sense

when I wake. note what
we inherit. what I want—

ya mama poem

ya mama so tame, she a white lady.
thinking and talking like that—smacks
a black square in the face—signals double-

crossing. ya mama so beat, she talks
in her sleep—reaps without tears or tearing.
material costs more than blood.

ya mama so dull, (she keeps a bible in her
purse) telling you the worst in your mind
a knife or thirst for deflection. a catechism

you master.

ya mama so wack, she snaps. if you act up
or get down, she tells you even the whites
of their eyes might watch for you to slip—use

anything as excuse to load clip into brow

and history. ya mama so neat, she won't wipe
after police (drain the blood and shit
from your body) nor for the coroner performing

the autopsy. turvy, ya mama so mental,
she knows when and what will happen to you
and your friends at any given moment

given by those yet to woo with bullet
in brain. ya mama so old, she lame. think
twice about masking—coding, un-masking,

anything in this world—that costs her.

II.

Who, he? I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humors from him.

—*The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, Act III, Scene IV,
Lines 29-30

for the friend of the white man who told me to go collect my welfare check

If she does not take the job, she starves, goes on welfare, or is easily defeated
by a world that prefers broken black spirits anyway.

—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

bitch, I ain't broke—one of many replies
filling my mind since our sidewalk encounter

in the French Quarter. *I'm going to write
a poem about this!* my penultimate statement

before breaking down in the Police Station
lobby on Royal Street. *good*, the cop said,

who might have believed.

*you would forward fall into a fistful
of furies*, a voice warned three weeks

prior in a dream—woke me.
fitful, the man who calls to task blinding

color and his own, a clash of neurochemical
reactions between brain and lips. *nothing*.

you—at first, your friend—I figured needs
an education, perhaps: “the state

or condition of doing or being well,”
the definition of welfare you both need,

but now, you and I know he needs more
than that—not the distinctly 20th century

definitions of “welfare,”
coined in 1904, 1918, and 1941.

it's 2018. *listen*. because you and I can see
his confused threat, I will do more

than survive, or sweat a creature
of his size. surely, as Maya said,

I'll rise—but not so

well, as I am fitful

petty.
warning.

next time, when you two talk of the check
I have yet to receive as a welfare queen,

listen to these: if I were to take this job—
the subjunctive mood you need

to own the history you don't own
up to—I could take this position.

I could, but when this friend of yours
tells me to go collect my welfare check,

I get almost everything I need, though
nothing sustaining, statistically

speaking—but enough
for me, in your language, *a Valkyrie*.

his countenance, like richest alchemy

she knew that river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye
which must know by now that she knew.

—from “Sweat,” by Zora Neale Hurston

open like the eye
of the man you kill.

carve and curve the body
as one would a piece

of wallpaper. these distorted
dimensions mind

you to a minimum. from crown
to toe. you’ve been told,

once you cheat, sleep
with one eye open. Death,

or the one you crave
to scratch, backs the flesh

into submission
with a thumb nail.

like the eye of the man
you kill. open. you might steal.

reacquaint this Self
with metallurgy. the need

to melt Ancients down.

an impulse: a keyhole.
a will, like puddles, drowns

the eye into widened
puzzles—as if one were

two. when you kill, steel
yourself over. like the eye

of the man, the third you’ll need
to bury his body—the off

chance of reaping this eye
or another's. to bide

time, abide the appointments
with the doctor, with the

lawyer, with your construct
who claims you're awfully

tied to the dimensions
of this world and its pages.

merely servants, they—

not to fear. *open wide.*
a shutter clicks—shudders

lick one corner of the room
black—if you lie, as you do,

then what offends changes
to virtue⁺ and to worthiness.

⁺ “O, he sits high in all the people's hearts;/ And that which would appear offence in us,/ His countenance, like richest alchymy,/ Will change to virtue and to worthiness.”—*The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene III, Lines 157-160

maleficium

psychic missive to “Chevalier” Barthélemy Louis de Macarty (abt. 1751-1825), the owner of my 7th great-grandmother, Jeanneton (abt. 1723-1800), after the 1834 disappearance of his daughter, the infamous Marie Delphine MaCarty Lalaurie

draw blood. I’ve been waiting
for this game to begin. counting

each card, you play them.
to learn about survival

and my sex, prick—skin
the hand that feeds before you

lose even your name, Chevalier—
MaCarty, go ahead, I’ll say. call a spade

a spade. with the slash of a nib,
one could bury or raise me

from obscurity
of paper, but we’re beyond that

tapered pool of ink—your legacy.
on ghost tours in the French Quarter,

they’ll call Delphine mad—mean
like the dog you’d beat and name

slave after slave after. she’d chew
a man’s ear off, a woman’s. *the bitch.*

reduced to slave stories—The Gris-Gris⁺
Case—and supernatural

culprits, you ask for these—for one
like me—on this, your death bed.

as for me, think of the fifty year old
griffe your widow sold

freedom to in 1773. go on,

⁺ Le Breton, the victim of a voodoo curse allegedly performed by his vengeful slaves in this infamous case from 1773, was also a familial relation of MaCarty family.

think. after all, it was written

on her bill of sale: “just causes
motivate.” yes, they do. for the record,

MaCarty, age has done something
to you. here, a kind of curse. a lack

of circulation, doctors might say.
well, they’d be mistaken. call it *me*.

corrosion of mind causes
you to think you’re alive.

you never could tell
imagination from the real. reeling,

you still trust this
feeling—always trusted

calling to be heard. oh, believe me. I
hear you.

alas! that was long ago. a game.
who other than you or I, after all,

could teach Madame Lalaurie to play
about injury in this way, and wound?

now, so confused, I see you’re
stuck, plying each syllable

to the drought of your knowing—
not knowing which a symptom.

a stroke of luck? funny—try
to sound me out. *draw*

blood. snake through the curl
of each letter, each paper,

as daughters, mothers, sisters—

summon names like Jeanneton.

she—her sisters—weren't like this

negresse—the black you conjured
to feed the protruding belly

of your toddling, this expanding territory.
a deranged daughter. *your legacy.*

sure, in your mind, I take Delphine's
infant head in my hands, and thrust

her crown unto spells. and yes,
some not free might suffer. for a moment,

you think this might stop me. *bet.*
outside of time, I've tasted—

taste every word—it's worth
the dying curse. a debt.

every spirit, even the woman
she chains to the stove, embraces

these conditions—finally, like fire.
look. I would tell her (like you)

to trust me. *light it.* from now
on, I'll feed you

this threat. suspended
by the neck, they tell me.

otitis media

poet, remember when
walking in Madrid, *the act*.

of being you know, but not
how you tend to undo this,

language, and your mind's
frayed wires. you're sick,

so afraid. your ears pop
from last week's ascent—

the disproportionate
distribution of the fluid

inner. *the fluid enter*. you,
in your third eye, hear this.

don't turn around. here—
a crowded hoping—a Sahara

dusted in the light of its own
making. on the train

from Algeciras, you stink
of blood. Iberian ancestors,

or multiphasic cultures,
identified creole Children

who would be Men. who would take
blood and give it in what then

was known as a territory
of your nearest people?

Louisiana after colonization.
the act. you don't know—re-

member yet—all the names.
poet, do as I say. don't turn

around. they won't
own you.

In Hamburg with *The Negro Avenged*

like a tantalizing will-o'-the-wisp, maddening and misleading the headless host...

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

the actor, when he sees Füssli's painting
in his mind for the second time, thinks—
yo body so black, ya mama can't see ya

face. the woman clutching this figure,
a semi-centered and blackened male,
first stands out for the actor

due to her yellow-brown skin.

the moment before (a preternatural
echo voicing the vibrato and distortion
of two nearing white men) jars him slightly

from the Avenged Negro. the Mulâtresse
in her white dress and her unfurled, black
hair long in the wind. *almost blacker*, the actor

notes, than the Negro's *blue-black* skin.
the disarmed torso of the Avenged
disappears into the whipping

storm, as her one reddish arm reaches
to slap a cackle of lightning. the left
corner paints the suggestion of a body

of water—just as the actor finally notices
the third figure, a darker brown onlooker.
hooded, she appears with red, vaginal lips—

to the right of their feet—relocating time
and the plateau, where these three figures
find themselves

thrust upon. Füssli's storm is a headache
in the actor's mind (a boulder rendering
this Black disappearing) nearly headless

and out of sight.

On Menzel's *Atelierwand*

this cast has dissembled before. the more
you study them, the more thoroughly each
remark bores through. *you fool!* your high concepts
of Art. you warn them. *speak like that again.*

you could as easily prefer these rooms
to the clamorous outside world. your plans
resolved bust, head, hands “from dust,” as it were,
“to dust.” this studio, each hook, and hand,

humble reminders of Death's last face.
the hound gave chase. the child—without a trace
of envy—you no longer are. they laugh
when you reach the studio wall—suggest,

though in gest, you fracture into tangibles,
and turn idea—that they might deftly touch.

In Madrid with Picasso's *Guernica*

sharp-tongued, afloat
in the doorway,

the tongue-less mass will
fringe and press closer.

we won't suspect,
never detect the electric,

bulbous candle of an eye—
nor the sect of bodies

to follow. the before
and after. the planes.

the cilia numbers.
a tally of dashes—a sty

for human, horse, or bull—
which breaks us?

abreast, we couldn't see
digits. atone none

in grey—black and white.
as line and form, we're prone

to think each slash and stroke
always over—neutral and not.

dislocated limbus, geo-
metric is war.

is smoke? is what a brok-
en neck or sword?

footfalls in frame. first,
the rush, vibratile

over wails, then nothing—
ignited like a candle

through the door.

Gaspard the nightwalker

ever-bright, like the flames of this
land, refuse to land.

like fire, these rocks glint a surprise
of ground-fog. you, too, see

the split—watching it burn. grey
parts for air. the whoosh of sky

and a moon, more than half-closed,
gloat much—too much for comfort

or curtain. so what if I would
rather watch the fit from here?

see flame as the house, with no
idea of ceil or sealing, but for what

one has taught and housed with it.
this, my argument, do understand.

some call me the nightwalker,
because I cannot be seen—am,

essentially, invisible. I can set fire
to bodies, then flirt a feather back

into tempered symmetry. darling,
when I dare you back, I feel nothing

for you. walk out onto the air.

III.

And this realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward: at my beginning was this woman whose face I had never seen, but at my end was nothing, no one between me and the black room of the world.

–Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother: A Novel*

Fractals

I think, like a leaf,
I know what trees do.

a house turns green
sometimes, or all grey

like a leaf—sometimes fall red,
then, I start to feel

deceived by grammar.
a pendulum,

quite happy once more,
intertwines. Self,

a figurine, aware of time
and color in the way of

stain glass, a tree, summer houses—
these—all remember

only in shades.
in and out of tune

as I am, Self—sometimes all red
depends on mood.

listen. the house's color
changes with sound.

like the old signs, anything I
utter can be secret, caught

in the hand like a fly, or a thread
in a crown of leaves.

oh things! I know what trees do.
like the dead, they undo

other things too—like telling
secrets. listen, I do,

blanketed in leaves. pulling—

through winter, some say,
trees keep telling things.
buried in their rings,
I know they do. trees tell
secrets—inside every
one. Self, a crystal, becoming.

Delta

for my maternal grandmother, Alpha Mae Harness Stanford (1933-1993) and her daughters

the eye, ripe so like a sun-
beam, could swipe over a face
and split it open.

Alpha,

your granddaughter's daydreaming. this
time: the night the car crashed into another

story—much like the one when
your cousin thrashed out the back

of a pickup in Magnolia
some eighty odd years ago.

next: the endothelium's failing.

yes, the sun can strike harder
than a fist. remember this. each eye

grew (after necessary surgeries done)
cloudy, blue.

Alpha,

not young, nor very resilient,
resin coats us. our kin.

in the worst of weather,
leaves amber. seeds in wind.

often that summer we're buried
bitter with leaves.

Étude in Radial Colors

not sleeping under this window.
outside, the trees peek through lantern light
 and bamboo slats.

the blind's bunched strings illumine. sleeping troubles
me most, because I suspect

I have not met the right doctor. yet, the trouble
with thinking at night about the day I thought

I would never sleep again how it felt
how it feels (a still-life) like now.
 I am afraid and say so.

because I cannot remember every body and every
thing I have known, and done,
 nor what they have done to me

and mine, my mind is likely to twist one
thing into another, twine so— sound sews

in two syllables the way I've imagined a knot—
tonight,
 trouble sneaks in, asks me
 what if

Ben didn't hang himself
from a tree? the blind's bunched strings

illumine. because negation is a rope I can hang myself with,
I have trouble with my body. with nights. Self, inside this

refrain of proper nouns, I think as troubling as Ben
outside who's passed himself and passed Past—

the daughter

after police shot and killed Philando Castile on 7/7/16

it's okay, Mommy. I'm right here with you,
I say, but I'm not there anymore. I've grown
my fingernails long enough to scratch,

pick at every hair in my head. you say
he's dead. he died inside the car with you
and me—I didn't hear him moving around

the apartment last night—don't own a gun.
you say he was a good man. he wouldn't like
my pulling out my eyelash, eyebrow, arm hair

now. now, Mommy, it's okay. I know you
remember me with hair, braids with colored,
plastic balls settled at the top, nested in black—

waves of lotioned hair, then—my braid undone,
and the hair tie, loosed so, like everything else
that comes after this disease. they say

it is compulsive, signaling unease, but I
can't seem to get to its root. this habit to pull
past pain—to remove something from me.

it's okay, Mommy. I'm right here with you. they
tell me it is reversible—something that can be treated
like wood—which can keep a structure beautiful

for years. when building a thing to stand
for a while—the body of a man, for instance—
to stand without talking back, as some have

unfortunately—it is best to use pressure.
according to the pamphlet on my kitchen
counter, these walls are not crawling with insects.

it says our building is treated by people
I can't seem to name, but I know
I heard him, Mommy. I hear him. do you?

Caisson

if gravity pulls,
 dear one, then pull away
from the search

 for the sound board
you lost in this storm.
 how to explain

loss, feeling everything
 at once? seeking is
something else:

 a sound produced
outside the throat
 in a suit sleeked

with moonlight, rust
 and sand. in water
sound converts

 flooded music.
damaged vessels
 dimmed by gravity

revert to surface. pressured,
 the damp recesses
of the ship's mouth,

 you won't remember,
nor the contraction
 of your body. how it

pulls you to see,
 dear one. gravity has
pulled apart the sound

 board—has always
won. on your tongue, the question
 waters.

your body, your blood, this
 moment, you cannot
forget, but will to.

not long after, you
know fire and flood. to become
the vessel, need

and want. it was meant to be.
to wane. is the being
you are becoming to fade?

or foresee this?

bedtime stories

stage one:

the mothers talk sounds like disassembled
light. I hear words and letters
 between us our physical bodies

once acted as singular vessels time
keepers, like the one parsecs
away the nearest inhabited star system.

stage two:

for us children, they go telling easily
at first, knowingly returning
 as brown girls

 gnawed imaginations.
they—born in the age before our advancement
 neurosynaptic the order

 the day tell us symbiosis
with other creatures a potential
loss of will, status, harm. still can.

stage three:

how little one understands. we've not told them
 our phantom pains never. these story-
tellers say of the past what begins

the first act can ripple the rest, can slow
one's transmission which,
for a time, meant corporeal

like us. we want to thrive
in the uncertainty own framing, but
 feel merely a dilated pupil.

stage four:

a meager portion mind. we've parsed
the initial blueprints. note: the tongue a house,
a language the conical cornea.

these eyes, heavy, and again to see
what becomes a gathering words,
strange quite feel nounce.

stage ____:

 non-linear distortions
phantoms in visibility. we synthesize

sense

mothers

parallel, body
a presence

paradoxical
in the wake.

Aphorism

trauma *can't hear*
does not allow for play
 for picking
or taking up roles
 or arms

trauma *can't touch*
only allows
 certain players
certain prayers

trauma *can smell*
vows the allegiance
 of forgetting

this allowance does not
 get
in Wolof
 tongues
in Swahili
 in Fon
Adinkra *can't speak*

 the allowance of myth
storied & ancestral
 red clay mouths

stories of ancestors & Gods
 centers
 not one
 not West

trauma *can't breathe*
spectral & stars
 listen as covered
 mouths

trauma *can taste*

mouths

IV.

coda, n. *Music*.

A passage of more or less independent character introduced after the completion of the essential parts of a movement, so as to form a more definite and satisfactory conclusion. Also transf. and fig.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Hazards of Being, a Black Mage in the 23rd Century

I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt th'equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth...

—*The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V, Lines 41-44

Some might ask you to perform tricks. If you give them the slip,
they might call you tricky. A trick. Losing yourself in this tome,

you could conjure a memory of kindergarten and a boy's blue-
black lips, or something entirely different from what critics expect.

If you enchant the red dress robes from your mage college graduation
and the hood you ditched—which indicates your class and year—

minutes after the apprenticeship in dual-casting and double-consciousness—
both could float around without you—speak for you, if necessary.

Trust me. You can't miss an equivocation. Every one points to nothing.
You will eat, sleep, seethe—so that the clan in power can talk you

into their tedious organizations. As an infiltrator, your hands tend
to be tied—in the office—when another black wizard summons a familiar.

While raising the dead, an issue might speak as it eats at you—your family
growing—ask the cost of each spell cast through and against you

these last four hundred years. *Yes.* A line of blood, smeared on the floor, can
tether. As the mouth of a line of sorcerers, you divine red signs, read as runes.

Before the birth of your first child, they say:

STOP DO NOT ENTER ONE WAY DEAD END NO YIELD

which almost breaks—spilling the cask of the womb open—but fails to.

Your eye's mystified burn is a hazard too. The third in a backlash of hexes
you will one day need to explain the source of. Code words instituted before

your induction into these ordinary communities (once spelled out) might never escape you. Like being possessed. Poisons rendered in the flesh.

You may kill a child before—or after—you bear it. Test the magical properties of that child and its kin. *A danger.* Fulsome creatures, these.

Their habits, if turned into ingredients or objects, could find a fiend, imbued with gall, where the mana of a mortal's milk should be.

VITA

Winner of the 2018 Iowa Review Award in poetry and the 2017 Vassar Miller Poetry Award, Shaina Monet is a New Orleans native. She completed a BA in French and a BA in English at the University of New Orleans in 2013, and hopes to obtain her MFA from the University of New Orleans this December. Her love for *Star Trek* and playing D&D continues to inspire her writing almost as much as the work of her family and the artists and thinkers who keep her living, so she thanks again those who made and make these things and people possible. In the coming years, she plans to complete her first full-length poetry collection, learn several more languages, make progress on her historical fiction novel set in 18th and 19th century New Orleans, and pursue a PhD in language and literature.

