

# Blue Hallelujahs

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

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## What I Know About Blues

I know butterflies can taste  
with their feet.  
Blackberry vinegar or apple water  
can break a fever.

I know the sharp length  
of my mother's tongue  
*use every part of the fruit  
and stem she'd say, don't leave  
anything behind.*

I know the skin of mackerel  
is softer than an eyelid.  
I know salt—the way it sifts  
through tips, piling  
on a wife's lap like gold.

Can you hear how I hold  
a breath inside—  
use my body to say  
*I can be your Clementine  
I can be your sweet baby.*

Yes,  
I know how to name things.  
I've been called little lady,  
*pickaninny*, gel, mamacita, the black one,  
the big one, the dark one, woman—  
each name makes a map of me.

I Feel This Knowing Rising

## Pulling Threads

My mother's mother is a doll  
not yet painted, too light to be brown  
too dark to be white,  
a beige-red heft not in the rainbow.  
*You need to stick that girl  
in the fire*, people would say.  
All the townies wondered why  
she married Grandpa Willie, that slick  
umbered pearl who pulled bushels  
of oysters from the sea.

Did he court her, twirl her fine  
brown strands in hand,  
bring jars of bloodroot for porches  
tin basins of crab and coconuts  
soap carvings of mallards and snails,  
or did they crawl into faraway sounds  
as he laid her down and baked  
her skin in the sun?

Yesterday I found a photograph  
in the upstairs dresser:  
her white whalebone corset  
pink gloves that lace at the elbow  
his pomade hair slicked to the right  
the juke-joint slide  
gold-plated incantations of *baby baby*  
and the bark of bodies bursting like plums.

It takes time now to see past their layers—  
his Saturday nets, a quarter full  
her rosary of apple seeds

their hands do that slow shaky thing  
but I can almost see veins  
like water weeds climbing up the throat,  
trying to find the heat  
and stirring, the body remembers.

# The Shop Washington Built

Wild Willie Washington  
    branded his two-toned laugh  
on corn and rye  
    from warm copper pots.

He owned *The Shop* with three daughters,  
    a crowded hall of bootleg  
crab and boiled turtle eggs.  
    Some say honeycomb cells

from bees who spoke Greek.  
    At sundown he'd wipe the bar,  
hands flaps of hard ringed skin  
    and told small tales of lurid affairs

with Lena Horne and Ms. Ross.  
    Lessons on the proper way  
to eat mushrooms, wear dragon  
    hide as a belt, or spell out

the word Mississippi *m-i-*  
    *crooked letter-crooked letter-*  
Or his art of playing pool,  
    *the sound of ball to cue*

*should be a low clicking*  
    small round wings, cascading  
magpies light as walnut shells.  
    When you played

he crunched on boisterous  
    chips, tapped his black booted  
feet to a tune and stared you  
    down until you flinched.

During the summers you hear  
    his laughter ringing between  
broken beams and marsh reeds  
    the size of two tall ships.

## Bop: Big Sister Dreams

I'm a hardwearing Dixie peach in a one-room shop full of hops looking for great migrations. There's a turning in my belly, when pings of the till rings only twice daily—Bud, cola, or wooden spoons. A dollar bill stretches wide while hunger grows another layer of skin.

*We all wander and juggle in the lights  
until every floor is soaked through*

The paper plant in North Santee is callin, the assembly line takes root, a blind room pan-fried like many others. I've always wanted to be mistress of Fate or Mount Olympus, a deity dressed in Woolworth's best chiffon or smooth pink lace. To have my own till where Dap Daddies and big-bellied men can swig and swing like Jesus lives here.

*We all wander and juggle in the lights  
until every floor is soaked through*

When they unfold my limbs and cut me open— a cow-heavy old woman in a gliding chair, they'll find an open mouth, manmade twine, and a small whiskey cask turned down— where I keep topaz peaches and a restless pulse banked low like a secret.

*We all wander and juggle in the lights  
until every floor is soaked through*

## Inside the Rolling Walls: A Fairytale

On a good day *The Shop* sold bootleg  
gin, fresh pulled frog legs, and used fedoras.  
When the middle daughter tended the bar,  
hands cut the best meat for po' boys.

Her gin sweeter than candy yams,  
she could cut a rug with every papa  
and uncle in the place. Her only want—  
glitter from up north

bright lights of tall buildings  
to cast a shadow her sisters could see.  
But one day she met a boy  
who made her liver quiver. He was tall

like her daddy—had a left side  
swagger full of nectarines and apple  
vinegar. His runner legs and Paul Chambers  
bass promised slick cocoa butter;

their fingers white from the steam of it.  
At night they kissed 'til lips bruised and  
made their own grease. All was alive  
in hands and caked feet. Light culled

in her belly. Something banked inside—  
an incense of follicles to flesh. The news  
slipped over his head like water. Her hip-  
grinding pelvis became one swollen bowl.

The boy turned man—placed his horn  
in a cage, a shimmer he tries to sever.  
Rented a house by the river, a home  
to blossom inside. The girl—now a wife

mother irons clothes for him and coins;  
her fingers red from the steam of it.  
Days are long in the truck bed, his back  
a two-ton blade of gin made for lifting.

Their house turned into an island of *jesus*  
*marysavesouls* where she all wanted was maiden  
blood and name. To shake loose the afterbirth,  
scorched black beans, stones of the words

*in-sickness-in-health*. Now when he lurches  
into her covered in some other woman's  
tropic perfume, it's bare legs against hands  
full of gravel. Vows break like husks.

## Ethel September

Your rocking chair sways by itself now,  
a phantom southern belle of floral cotton

the snapping of peas nipping at tips. In your  
youth, twirling in taffeta and silk, a pastel fan,

a curve of lip, you're a debutante. Feet bare  
of cloth, you run through fields, ants on ankles—

belly moving to the sound of bullfrogs. Holding  
your hand and a strand of poppies, your brother

leads you to a tree where peaches fly. And there  
you sit, stuffing pits of cherries into the side

of your cheeks and nose. Have you seen Mr. Nat?  
They placed him in a wicker chair, brown toes

cocked up towards the Carolinas. The cancer flies  
gathered in his pockets, death followed and settled.

Is he there yet? Now you are on the porch. That house  
of white shutters and long-necked bottles of coke.

My father lies on your lap, head lolled to crickets, and  
you begin to sing, "*mah honey, mah honey, mah honey.*"

## The Sun Don't Know

the way lies can curl—  
    a comma  
    in your pocket  
but it don't change  
    the skin you're in

at the brink of crossing  
make sure your slip  
    isn't showing  
somebody's mama is watching

don't be afraid to drink  
whiskey or sweet tea  
    dark enough  
    to embalm a man

legs stretching over mine—  
    *hello honey dipper*

sometimes pain is—  
sand dollar smooth  
a flooded mouth  
    devoured rinds  
        brown rivers  
    beneath cotton

listen to what is gone  
    our bones  
    numbered  
    cattle culled

grandmother says *they fear*  
    *our womb* the reckoning  
    hive of dark  
berries and stems

true things blaze red  
like an unwallied  
    storm  
    in your head