

PRO-BLACK PROSODY

A THESIS IN  
Creative Writing and Media Arts

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by  
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### ABSTRACT

This thesis speaks to the triumphs and tragedies of the Black experience. It attempts to look at Blackness through the lens of my combined experiences as a spoken word artist, a student in the University of Missouri-Kansas City's creative writing program, my tenure as the Poet Laureate of the 18<sup>th</sup> & Vine Jazz District, and the work I've done as a public poet. It is a compendium of poems ranging from traditional forms such as the sonnet, the sestina, and the rondeau to performative poems; from ekphrastic poems to poems that were commissioned for various occasions.

Many of the poems explore the dangers of merely existing as a Black man in America. The speakers in these poems are grappling with the realities of internal and external violence. The self-inflicted violence that is the result of social conditioning and the external violence inflicted by a systemically racist society. In other instances, the poems in this thesis are

jazz poems, which is to say, poems that have been informed by jazz in both the subject matter and in rhythm.

Over the years I have become a huge advocate of the utility of poetry in public spaces. How poems can be included in public art or how they can be the perfect mechanism for capturing and distilling the emotion of a public event. I am fortunate enough to have been asked to write poems for numerous events and special occasions so many of those poems have been included as well. Poetry offered for public consumption, or poetry that is performative, often differs from academic poetry in that it is – almost by necessity – more accessible. However, that doesn't necessarily mean it has less aesthetic or intellectual value. I would humbly argue that it is just more aware of – and concerned about – its audience. Gifted lyricist, Black Thought, from the hip hop band, The Roots, offered the following line that perfectly sums up my ongoing efforts as a poet, “I holla at the scholarly but street cats will follow me.” I can't put it any simpler than that.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Pro-Black Prosody,” presented by Glenn A. North Jr., candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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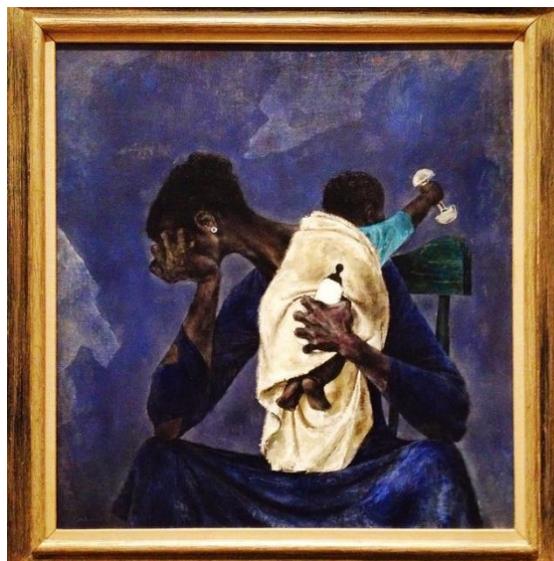
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## INTRODUCTION

Years ago, I noticed a trend in contemporary poetry. It seems as if most collections were focused on a particular project or that there was some thematic thread that tied a collection of poetry together. Many of those collections have resonated with me including *M·A·C·N·O·L·I·A* by A. Van Jordan, which sheds an historical light on the overlooked story of MacNolia Cox who in 1936 became the first African American to reach the final round of the national spelling bee competition; *The Big Smoke* by Adrian Matejka which is a poetic biography of the legendary and inimitably controversial Jack Johnson, the first African American heavyweight world champion; and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* by Harryette Mullen, which is a book-length abecedarian collection of poems inspired by the dictionary that explores the textual complexities, nuances, and even inherent biases in the English language. With that in mind, I became concerned when many of the poems I was writing for this thesis seemed to be disparate and unconnected. When I expressed this concern to UMKC Creative Writing poetry professor, Michelle Bouisseau, she offered the following advice, “Don’t try to come up with a theme for your thesis, just keep writing and the theme will emerge.” So that’s exactly what I did.

As I began compiling my work for this collection, I realized the initial theme that surfaced was the Black experience – more specifically, the triumphs and tragedies of the Black male experience in America. The collection opens with a poem called “Lynch Family Blues” which is an ekphrastic poem inspired by the Joseph Hirsch painting, *Lynch Family*. The painting (shown below) depicts a Black woman, who is obviously distraught. In her arms is infant who is raising his rattle in what could be interpreted as an act of defiance.



It is through the title of the painting, *Lynch Family*, that we can conclude what happened to the father who is conspicuously missing from the frame. My first draft of the poem was an attempt at a ballad which told the story of a man going to a juke joint one evening to have a few drinks. He encounters

a group of white men on the way home who eventually lynch him. However, it was long, meandering, and it spent too much time telling rather than showing. Then one day, after numerous unsuccessful revisions, I found myself contemplating the deep blue background of the painting. It occurred to me that rather than a ballad, this poem wanted to be a blues poem. When I employed the blues idiom, it was if the poem just spilled onto the page. In the process of crafting that poem I discovered the power of collaboration with artists of other disciplines (in this instance a painter) and how their influence could take my poetry in unexpected directions. It also deepened my understanding of how form can be an incredible tool for helping meandering poems discover what they were meant to be.

Another element that seemed to tie the poems in this collection together, which has been my desire to capture the music of language. I believe on some level, all poems attempt to do that, but I have endeavored to do so with a high level of intentionality. I am student of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. I believe, like two of the iconic leaders of both schools - Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka - that the blues and jazz provide the aesthetic foundation for nearly every genre of Black art including poetry. My tenure as Poet-in-Residence of the American Jazz Museum provided me the opportunity to perform poetry with several blues and jazz artists and those collaborations have had a profound impact on my work. To put it in a word *prosody*, which the *Oxford American Dictionary*

defines as the patterns of rhythm and sound used in poetry, became, and continues to be, a primary focus of my work. It has been said that poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music. At the risk of stating the obvious, one of the most effective ways to include rhythm or music in a poem is the use of rhyme. Many contemporary poets eschew rhyme in their work because, as many would argue, most of the rhymes in the English language have already been discovered, or that the language of rhyming poetry seems forced and unnatural. Therefore, a use of rhyme will sound stilted or it will fail to deliver anything fresh or new. However, in many of the poems in this collection such as *The Prodigal Poem* and *Revival*, rhyme becomes a necessary element for both the lyricism and momentum that contributes to the efficacy of each poem.

I should also mention that the search for musicality and the enjoyment of using rhyme in my work often leads to discovery. I remember working on the *Prodigal Poem* which was based on a negative experience I had facilitating a poetry workshop at a detention center. The young men in that facility (the majority of which were Black) were not interested in writing poems. Then I began to realize that many of those young men felt that society wasn't interested in them. Through the process of using rhyme, I witnessed the poem as it became an extended metaphor for the individuals I was writing about. It wasn't my original intent to write a poem that stretched

the metaphor throughout the length of the poem, but rhyme led me down that path.

“Revival” was a poem I wrote to celebrate Kansas City’s rich jazz heritage. The use of rhyme in this instance gave the poem a sonic quality that reflected the music I was writing about. The poem concludes with a stanza that is rich in staccato and provides a crescendo that could only have been achieved through the use of rhyme. When I shared it with saxophonist, Bobby Watson, he was adamant about including on the recording project, *Check Cashing Day*, because he said the poem had a music all its own.

Another thread that weaves the poems in this collection together is the idea of performance and poetry that is produced for public consumption. Having organized two successful poetry readings, Verbal Attack (1997 - 2000) and Jazz Poetry Jams (2002-2013); having served as the Poet-in-Residence of the American Jazz Museum; and in my current roles as the inaugural 18<sup>th</sup> & Vine Historic Jazz District Poet Laureate and the Artistic Director of the Louder Than A Bomb Youth Poetry Festival, I see the incredible impact performance poetry - or Spoken Word - can have on the community. As mentioned in the abstract, I have had the good fortune to become what some would call a public poet. In these multiple roles I have discovered as poet Thomas Lux points out in the book *Blueprints: Bringing Poetry to Communities*, in reference to community based poetry organizations, “...making an organization that brings poetry to a community

is in its values and satisfactions not so different from making a poem. Each is a space a stranger is invited to enter, shaped for that stranger's pleasure and enlargement. Each makes of that stranger a fellow traveler and brings him or her into community. Each requires a powerful force of imagination applied not to individual needs and desires but to collective ones." Many of the poems found in this collection are undergirded by that belief.

As it turns out, Michelle Boisseau was right. I kept writing and the themes emerged. Each poem in this collection explores the idea of what it means to be a Black man in a systemically racist society, how poetry celebrates the music in language, and how that music can be used to uplift communities. It is at the intersection of all these ideas that Pro-Black Prosody was born.

## Works Cited

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## **Black and Blue**

## **The Lynch Family Blues**

After *Lynch Family* by Joseph Hirsch, 1946

Went out swingin last night, Baby,  
Hope you didn't wait up for me.  
Said I was swingin all night, Baby  
Did you stay up late for me?  
I wasn't swingin in no joint, Darlin  
I was out on the limb of a tree.

Now I'm walkin on air, Baby,  
Feels almost like I'm free.  
My feet steady kickin the wind  
Yeah, I'm close to bein free.  
For the first time in my life, Baby  
White folks is lookin up to me.

Hear me, son, your daddy loves you  
Keep hangin on to hope.  
You the man of the house now  
Gotta help ya mama cope.  
Daddy won't be home no more  
Cause I reached the end of my rope.

**How to Mourn a Brown Boy**  
*(after Mother and Child by Ada Koch)*  
*for KC Mothers in Charge*

Prepare while he is still alive.  
Know that from the moment  
your belly swelled with him  
he was in the crosshairs.  
Tell the boy to pull up his pants  
to walk with purpose, pursue greatness  
but know that it won't protect him.  
After expending your maternal energy  
realize there is a competing trilogy  
of blood, bone, and bullet.  
If it has been 48 hours  
since your last phone conversation  
strengthen your index finger  
for numerous redials.  
Know his haunts as well as  
his homies and his honeys  
so they can be properly interrogated.  
Have a statement prepared  
for the reporters who pretend  
to care, practice the 1000-yard stare  
so you can look into the camera  
and plead with the perpetrator  
to turn himself in. Cry out  
for the folks in the neighborhood  
who saw something to come forward.  
Don't expect them to.  
Save one tenth of all your earnings  
to cover the reward money.  
Stock up on candles and flowers  
and teddy bears to adorn the shrine  
where you will find the body  
outlined in chalk. Discover the thin line  
between funeral and circus.  
Every member of the family or community  
need not offer a eulogy.  
Have an array of photos prepared  
for the Rest-in-Peace T-shirts  
that will need to be printed.  
Clear out cabinet space  
for all the napkins, paper plates

and plastic cups that will be left over after  
the crowd in your home disappears.  
Learn to live with the silence.  
Realize that in the darkest hour  
a mother's arms have the ability  
to embrace ghosts.  
Steel your heart against that moment  
each morning you awake  
to the returning grief.  
Arrive at the conclusion  
that there is no substance  
on earth that can fill the hole  
but God can comfort the space around it.  
Become initiated into the sorority  
no woman wants to belong to.  
Know that tomorrow  
it will be another mother's son  
inking the headlines.  
Go to her. She will need you.

**Yard Work**  
*for Malik*

I attempt to gather yellow, orange  
and red, as if colors could be contained.  
No matter how many neat piles I form  
a countless number of stray leaves remain.  
Safe in my backyard on the edge of town  
where lawns are trimmed and everybody speaks  
and the phrase, "It can't happen here" resounds -  
my peace is shattered by thoughts of Malik.  
How he bolts and blazes down brutal blocks  
while young assassins steady seek him out.  
Their guns are fully loaded, aimed, and cocked  
though they don't recall what the fight's about.  
And the leaves that are falling from the trees  
pile up like brown bodies on city streets.

**Visiting an Old Friend**  
*for KB*

I arrive at the spot where they found you  
dead, sprawled on the floor, head  
in a pool of blood, a lit joint just beyond your reach.

I pluck the bullet from your brain  
use my own bone and skin  
to seal the hole where it entered.

I hurry to close the door  
warn you that the addict who just called  
claiming he has your money is setting you up.

The January moon has the audacity to shine  
as I wipe your blood off the floor.  
I apologize for not staying in touch over

the expanse of cities and seasons  
which is why twenty-three years after the fact  
I find myself in a fold in time, in a fatal room

on an East St. Louis night.  
I tell you the son you always wanted  
was born eight months, two weeks

and three days after your death.  
I don't mention the fact that the assailant  
was not apprehended, that the police

will never conduct an investigation. Black  
lives don't matter and the Black lives  
of alleged drug dealers matter less.

With the sound of footsteps in the distance  
I rush to have all the conversations we missed  
over the divide of decades.

I tell you I'm still writing, that Big Lou  
is doing a 25-year bid in Leavenworth,  
that Troy is still getting on everyone's nerves.

Our surreal laughter is as wide  
as the winter night. I revel in the light of  
your eyes. Then comes the inevitable knock.

When you rise, I hug you  
with the strength of ten men  
and beg you not to answer the door.

## The Prodigal Poem

This poem is unwanted.  
This poem is illegitimate.  
This poem was an accident.  
I didn't mean to write it.  
Yes, I let my pen touch the pad  
but I was just scribbling,  
just doodling,  
just playing around with it  
like so many other poets before me.  
See, I thought the paper  
was on the pill  
so I didn't use any protection,  
no correction tape,  
no white out,  
no eraser.

I wanted to have it aborted  
but by the time  
I had saved up enough loot  
it had already reached its 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza.  
The paper won't consent  
to an ink test  
so I'm not claiming it.  
However, I see it hanging out  
in the hood sometimes.

This poem lets its words sag  
so you can see its behind.  
This poem wasn't raised right  
it can barely even rhyme.  
This poem hangs out with weed papers  
and it drinks too much wine.  
This poem will be dead  
before it reaches its 21<sup>st</sup> line -  
crumpled up in some waste basket  
next to a suicide letter  
or tragically executed by  
a heartless paper shredder.

At the very least  
it will end up locked behind the bars  
of some legal pad,  
it will be too late then  
to blame it on Dad  
whoever he may be.

No, this poem won't end happily.  
It has already lost touch with reality.  
Heavily influenced by BET  
it's caught up in some warped hip hop fantasy  
it denies the genre in which it belongs  
this poem thinks that it's a rap song:

*P to the izz O*  
*E to the izz M*  
*that's the anthem*  
*get all your hands up!*

This poem will never be published,  
revised, or anthologized.  
This poem will never reside  
on a library shelf  
because this poem is illiterate  
it can't even read itself.

This poem could never be a love poem.  
It's too busy trying to be a  
mack daddy poem  
but countless careless encounters  
have made it a  
that's-just-my-baby's-daddy poem  
and it has left fatherless verses  
in journals and notebooks all over town.  
With each passing line  
it sinks further down.

Job, Psalms, Proverbs  
and not just these  
but Ecclesiastes  
and Song of Solomon  
yearned for this poem  
to follow them.

These prophetic poems  
that foretold of the coming Messiah  
and the glory of the New Jerusalem  
reached out to this poem  
prayed for this poem  
loved this poem.

But some poems  
don't want to be saved  
they just crash and burn  
at the bottom of the page.

**Boys with Guns**

*after Baa Baa Black Sheep*

*Hey Little Black Boy*

*Do you have a gun?*

Yes, sir! Yes, sir!

Keeps my haters on the run.

*How about bullets?*

Oh, I got plenty to spare.

*Who are they meant for?*

I really don't care.

*Hey Little Black Boy*

*that's no way to play.*

Of course it is, Sir

it's the American way.

## **I Don't Usually Write Nature Poems**

because patches of blossoming  
tulips, orchids, and daffodils  
tend to remind me of cotton fields.  
My ancestors laboring under  
an unforgiving sun, fingers dripping  
blood that moistened the hard soil  
that would eventually swallow  
their broken bodies.

I don't usually write nature poems  
because when *a hundred starlings lift  
and bank together before they wheel  
and drop* against the glimmer of a setting sun  
gloriously signifying freedom, I am reminded  
of millions of my brothers in a prison  
industrial complex that reduces them to caged birds.

I don't usually write nature poems  
because when I behold the wonder  
of a midnight sky, a black blanket of clouds  
punctured by innumerable stars, my heart weeps  
for countless black men laid to rest  
by those who swore an oath to serve and protect.

I don't usually write nature poems  
because while I often marvel  
at raging rivers and clear blue lakes  
they tend to make me contemplate  
African shores, the gold rich land,  
the continent where time began  
and my heart is filled with immeasurable pain  
imagining the glory of those ancestral plains  
before the slave ships came.

**Self Portrait as Michael Brown Jr.  
Murdered at 18**

1.

I left a prayer on Sound Cloud  
to make sure God heard me.

2.

Don't let them get away with this.

3.

Blood is a master storyteller.

4.

Life really does go by[e] very quickly.

5.

Post-race America my ass.

6.

Bullets do break big brown boys.

7.

Some try to hide like the struggle  
won't find them.

8.

Let my death be the thing  
that serves to remind them.

9.

Ckuf the police.

10.

Honesty is the [dead] policy.

11.

So what if I smoked weed.

12.

Yes, this is a better place  
I just came here way too soon.

13.

The world will remember my name.

14.

This is too a high a price to pay for fame.

15.

A meaningful death beats a meaningless life.

16.

Wish I could have kissed my mother one last time.

17.

“God gave me a sign now it’s time  
to feed all my people.”

18.

Look, Ferguson! My soul ascending  
just above the smoke.

**this ain't nuthin new**  
*a twitter poem*

distorted history  
cant conceal  
the 400yr old bloodspill  
they kill  
our children  
tell us b patient  
as they plot new ways  
2 get away  
w/ murder

#ferguson

## **Her Dark Lament**

*after Camptown Ladies by Kara Walker*

Kara Walker knows / that at some point / we've all ridden  
a Black woman's back / made her / our beast of burden /  
left her alone / to raise our children / we have exalted /  
a blond-blue construct of beauty / & made little Black girls  
feel like monsters / but that was then / many will argue /  
while a 400-year-old shadow / darkens the new millennium /  
how long will we offer her carrot-stick promises / that come  
back to bite her in the ass?

**Kifamilia (or Fear of a Black Planet)**  
*after Stoop Love by Glyneshia Johnson*

*There is a system that does not want to see Black males and Black females together. They understand if our relationships are together, they will lose, but if our relationships are torn up, then we can forever be treated in certain ways by the oppressor.*

- Dr. Julia Hare

The revolution starts here.  
A brown and trembling hand  
hovering above a caramel knee,  
the seedling promise  
of a blossoming Black family.  
What is more powerful  
than Black love?  
It's not the thug, the drug addict,  
the gang banger  
the system fears.  
No, it's the Black family  
that produces an educated black man  
or a powerful Black woman.  
Yes, they murder Trayvon Martin  
and Michael Brown and Tamir Rice  
but Black love  
is what they truly want to kill.  
It's how they've always planned it,  
fear of a Black planet.  
But on stoops all over America  
front porch steps throughout  
this stolen land, young sepia couples  
coo, caress, and copulate  
press into each other and procreate  
no noose, knife, or bullet  
can annihilate  
the resilience of Black love.

## **Celebration**

*for Carter G. Woodson*

Black folks know how to struggle  
like trapped birds  
who have filled their cages with song  
like muscles that have been  
torn and stretched  
before becoming strong  
like lumps of coal that emerge as diamonds  
after being burned and pressured too long.

We struggle in style.  
We suffer and smile.  
We grieve and we grin.  
We don't break cause we bend.  
We never give in.

Because we know God will never  
give us more than we can handle  
which gets us through in the clutch  
we just sometimes wish  
He wouldn't trust us so much.

Yes, we play the hand  
that was dealt us with ease-  
who else could turn chitlins into delicacies?

Who else could take the N-word  
as much as we hated to hear it  
and turn it into a term of endearment?

Who else could turn slave songs  
into coded incantations  
that led to freedom  
from master's plantation?

Who else could take the pain  
that accompanies truth  
give it a soundtrack  
and call it the blues?

Who else could be broke  
and still dress sporty  
make a smooth entrance  
even when arriving tardy  
and turn an eviction notice  
into a rent party?

Who else, in the midst of tragedy  
and emotional confusion,  
could turn the sadness of a funeral  
into a family reunion?  
Now, the Apostle Paul told the church in Rome  
what my grandmother taught me  
as a child at home:

"For I reckon that the sufferings  
of this present time are not worthy  
to be compared with the glory  
which shall be revealed in us..."

Now I speak with all the courage  
that has been instilled in us  
with the strength of the sweat and the blood  
that has been spilled for us  
may each season of celebration rebuild in us  
what our oppressors have tried to kill in us.

Because who else  
but a great and mighty nation  
could take the incessant injustice  
that we have endured  
and turn it into a celebration?

## **All That Jazz**

## Revival

There is a place where parched lips  
kiss warped reeds and cramped fingers  
stroke strings and keys  
filling the air with melodies.  
And resurrected rhapsodies  
capture the cadence of ancient chants  
where shackles are removed  
and our ancestors dance  
in anticipation of liberty  
and every note that's played  
is dedicated to their memory.

There is a place where each heartache  
and every sharp pain  
can be smoothed and soothed  
by a medicinal refrain  
the story of King David makes it plain:

*And it came to pass,  
when the evil spirit from God  
was upon Saul that David took a harp,  
and played with his hand:  
so Saul was refreshed, and was well,  
and the evil spirit departed from him.*

You see this divinely inspired requiem  
came forth from a glorious past  
and though it defies description  
we choose to call it *Jazz*  
and ever since this music  
emerged from space and time  
it has found a permanent residence  
on 9 + 9 and Vine.  
Someday soon you'll travel there  
to escape from emails,  
cell phones and faxes,  
from being overworked and underpaid  
and paying too many taxes.

This is the place where even Struggle  
kicks off his shoes and relaxes  
and the only war that will ever take place  
is the battle of the saxes.

This is the place where jazz  
is served up as a sensual delight  
and it smells like grandmother's chitlins  
cause she always cooks em just right  
and it tastes like the peach cobbler  
she bakes that gets better with every bite  
and it feels like love's very first kiss  
shared in the soft moonlight  
and it looks like Susanna Jones  
when she wears that red dress  
Lord, what a beautiful sight  
and it sounds like the Jazz Disciples  
smooth on a blue Monday night  
or like Gabriel's trump at the Rapture  
just before we take flight.

So these ministers of music  
are awaiting your arrival  
wanting to provide you  
with orchestral comfort  
as you witness the Revival  
because jazz, like matter,  
can't be destroyed  
it only changes forms  
and the historic intersection  
of 18th and Vine  
is where jazz will be reborn.

Then we will cherish  
this noble noise  
and glow in the cool of its heat  
as the caramel coated cacophony  
provides a sonically hypnotic beat  
that can only ever be heard  
through the tapping soles of the feet  
and as willing slaves to the rhythm  
our freedom will be complete.

## Praise Song for Julia Lee

“She was a big fat black colored girl who was just great,  
and could play any request you wanted to hear.”

- John Tumina, Promoter and Booking Agent

We see you, Julia, go on  
wit yo fat Black ass.  
You are a sticky wet  
street song. You are  
the sweet ooze from  
the sweet spot that starts  
the party. You are  
the Kansas City Kitty.  
You pitted your big,  
fat, Black, colored sexy  
against the blonde blue.  
We see you, Julia,  
straddling Milton's  
stage, commanding the  
*King Size Papas to  
Snatch It and Grab It.*  
And how they came.  
How they came so  
willingly to see the  
epitome of a crazy little  
Kansas City woman.  
The song you sang made  
men obey. It made  
Harry Truman bring you  
to Washington. Your fat  
Black colored voice filling  
White House halls -- What  
a lovely scene. You're still  
teaching us how to swing.  
You are our sexy. You are  
our sultry. You are our big  
fat Black, colored song.

**Borrowed Brilliance**  
*for Charlie Parker*

I was once ruled  
by my appetites too, man.  
Got so high one night  
I cried because I didn't think  
anyone deserved to feel  
that good. I know the constant  
need for stimulation,  
to have your body ache  
for destruction.  
But I caught a break  
found a way to kill the craving,  
to crucify the flesh,  
discovered a peace  
you will never know.  
As I listen to *KoKo*,  
I hear you race through chords  
like a schizophrenic running  
when no one is chasing him.  
I want to meet you  
somewhere in the music  
to borrow some of your brilliance  
for these poems I long to write -  
me spilling ink onto empty pages  
and you filling the air  
with brilliant notes  
on a never-ending night.

## Beholding Big Joe Turner

“Rock ‘n’ roll would have never happened without him.”  
- Doc Pomus, songwriter

You turn from the bar to see Big Joe Turner head  
for the microphone like a mountain sliding  
behind a tree. You came to hear some gut bucket

but when the first note rises thru the air, a new sound  
pierces your ear. The Sunset Club is one body of arms, legs,  
hips, and heads, undulating in 4/4 time. Big Joe barely moves

but with a voice wider than the night he commands you  
to *shake, rattle & roll*. You and your dance partner  
add sweat to the list. You don’t know each other

but your secret parts do as you dance beyond crescendo.  
Years later, you will be resent your son for loving Elvis.  
When your daughter buys the new Beach Boys album

with her allowance you will hide your disappointment.  
You will feel despair as your coddled children don’t seem  
to care that you were there the night rock ‘n’ roll was born.

**For John Coltrane**  
Contrapuntal #1

With furious locomotion

Trane traverses (sound) tracks  
headed for a freedom few will ever know  
a sonic ascent beyond dissonance  
he cascades a hundred notes per minute  
wielding his ax with the skill of a killer  
through the thick anti-Black forest

## **Monk**

The loni used escape times morize fully  
dischordinary measures onatectonic shifts  
globalancertain spirationallurespected  
adoredeemedicinalmelodiesteemancipate  
harmonyxstrokestrikeystraightnochaser.

## A Verse for Ella

*And to know that you love me for my singing is too much  
for me. Forgive me if I don't have all the words. Maybe  
I can sing it and you'll understand.*

- Ella Fitzgerald

Ella's eloquence elevates elegance  
beyond explanation. Her lungs  
emit ecstatic elastic  
embellishments of sonic elements  
making all else irrelevant.  
She invested sweat  
equity into every execution  
of melodic elocution elongated  
by esoteric eclectic frenetic  
scategorically electric chants  
no chance to elude the Sonic  
Sorceress or of escaping the  
*ellamorphosis* we have all been  
transformed and transmogrified  
to a state that can only be described  
as elevated elation. Her illustrious  
incantations impart acoustic  
liberation that resonates resoundingly -  
Ella sets us free.

**Check Cashing Day**  
*for Bobby Watson*

Two score and ten years ago  
Martin shared a dream  
for justice to roll down  
like a mighty stream.

A dream deeply rooted in reality  
and the solemn prospect  
that he had come to the nation's capital  
to cash a 100-year old check  
like so many folks in the hood  
with bills stacked high enough  
for a bungee-cord jump  
anxiously looking forward  
to the first of the month  
with 300,000 black voices  
demanding their pay August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963  
was Check Cashing Day!

And while America had currency  
in her bloated account  
and Black folks were only requesting  
a fair amount  
like frogs playing basketball on a rubber court  
the check still bounced.

The first of the month has passed  
600 times  
since Martin uttered those  
exalted lines: "I HAVE A DREAM!"

We hold that phrase  
in such high esteem  
but there was another Martin  
who also dreamed.  
His name was Trayvon  
and with a bag of Skittles  
and a bottle of tea  
his dreams were buried  
six feet deep.

Slavery never really ended  
it just changed forms  
from sharecropping to wage restrictions  
to welfare moms.  
As Martin declared in reference  
to so-called emancipation in 1863  
150 years later  
“The Negro is still not free!”

A brother finally made it  
to the White House  
but even a Black president  
cannot correct  
the problem of over 1 million Black men  
in the prison industrial complex.

Yes, the new Jim Crow  
has enormous wings  
and he loves to fly off  
with colored dreams.

But back in ‘63  
Martin also penned these lines:  
“Justice too long delayed  
is justice denied.”

And don’t label me  
an angry Black man  
because believe you me  
I understand  
when we follow the vision  
of Dr. King  
white folks are full partners  
in the dream.  
But in our nation’s attempt  
to fix the problem of race –  
you ain’t never gone fix  
what you can’t face.

So, listen up, Uncle Sam  
here we stand  
with this 150-year-old check  
in our tired Black hands  
there's nothing left to talk about  
nothing left to say  
but "Cough it up, America,  
it's Check Cashing Day!"

## Why Black Folks Like to Dance

“For the art – the blues, the spirituals, the jazz,  
the dance – was what we had in place of freedom.”  
– Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

You study the darkness  
of my body desiring  
to know the curve  
and the line, whips scarred  
my back but never broke  
my spine, you implement  
strategies designed  
to steal what’s inherently mine.  
You want to move like me  
to groove like me  
to boogaloo like me  
but your body can’t  
move like mine  
cause it never needed to.  
I cakewalked out your slavery  
and you couldn’t lynch my blues  
you even try to dance  
like me but you stuck  
with two left shoes.  
My hips undulate and  
shake pinecones loose  
my frame contorts in ways  
that Sherlock could not deduce  
with every oppressor I face  
and throughout every abuse  
my movements possess  
a beauty only struggle  
could produce.  
I keep it movin with a quickness  
with a panther’s agility  
got a lindy hop too fast  
for the naked eye to see

I call my left leg Malcolm  
and Martin is my right  
I can march the streets  
of Birmingham at noontime  
and dance all Saturday night.  
Never understood  
how you could love my music,  
my walk, my talk, my style  
but hate me so intensely  
why am I so reviled?  
May not ever get the answers  
on this side of eternity  
but one thing is for certain  
I'ma keep on doin me  
I'ma dance like  
there's no tomorrow  
and sing at the top  
of my lungs  
ain't no sense in fightin  
when I've already won.

## Poetry for The People

## Concerning the Emptiness of Earthen Vessels or Self Portrait as a Bowl

I was molded by ancient hands  
firmed by flames.

I offer libations  
to ancestors,  
rice to children.

I rest on tables waiting  
to welcome strangers.  
I adorn altars  
vibrating with the sound  
of sacred songs.

I am the clay canvas  
that gave birth to art.

Even when broken  
my shards have been used  
to scrape away  
decayed flesh.

Yes, I offer new life!

Come, gather round me  
take me in your cupped hands  
offer me to one another  
every kindred and tongue  
and people and nation

*For in a fallen world  
the greatest aim of man  
is reconciliation.*

And we are all clay  
shaped by unseen hands  
empty earthen vessels  
waiting to be filled.

## A Psalm for The Word Gatherers

*We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives. – Toni Morrison*

Will you come wonder with me, Beloved?  
Behold, the majesty of the universe,  
the ever revolving earth  
in the center of a perpetually moving solar system  
with a perpetually moving Milky Way  
that resides in an ever-expanding galaxy  
amidst a cluster of billions of other galaxies  
that are also in perpetual motion, which some say,  
eons ago, began with the utterance of a word.

Will you, Fellow Traveler, consider the time  
when stars spoke to us in the voices  
of Pleiades and Orion to guide our wandering ships  
to shore? The most courageous ones, we are told,  
sacrificially imploded, burned themselves out  
in the ancient millennia so that future generations  
could inherit their shimmering light.

All language should be an expression of love.

Pause to ponder with me, Fellow Inquisitor,  
the mysterious nature of language  
how it shapes thought, creates culture,  
clothes itself in flesh and governs civilizations –  
how the unwise use of it begets bigotry,  
cultivates calamity, lets loose the winds of war.

Our linguistic mission is clear:

When political power corrupts absolutely  
our collective voices must ring resolutely.  
When bullets break our children's bodies  
our calls to action must blare more loudly.  
When immigrant infants are snatched from their parent's arms  
our rally cry must sound the alarm.  
When the illusion of race threatens to divide  
our song must rise high as the listening skies.

Beyond the threshold of this athenaeum lies all the bounty  
we will ever need to forever secure the victory. HEAR ME every

*Word Warrior*  
*Rhyme Welder*  
*Cacophony Carpenter*  
*Omnipotent Orator*  
*Stanza Sorcerer*  
*Syllable Stylist*  
*Metaphor Mason*  
we have only this  
place in time  
but our words will  
resound verbally, eternally...

If language is the measure of our lives  
may we wield it only as it seasoned with empathy  
may we use it only in the pursuit of righteousness  
and may we learn to love as selflessly as the stars.

**HOWL: The Remix**  
*After Allen Ginsberg*

I saw the stupefied souls of my generation ravaged by  
the heinous heresy that a hyper-hedonistic  
self-seeking, I, me, my existence could bring  
them joy,  
souls clothed in insatiable flesh folding themselves  
into medicine cabinets scurrying into  
translucent, sepia-toned bottles seduced  
by pharmaceutical solutions to substantiate  
a pseudo reality, opioid oafs who somehow  
believed themselves to be better than the  
meth heads and crack whores tweaking on 39<sup>th</sup> & Main,  
souls so swathed in the sashes  
of self-absorption and neo-narcissism,  
the bullet-ridden, blood-splattered infant  
ghosts of Sandy Hook barely give them pause,  
souls in gentrified exposed-brick downtown lofts, Northeast  
roach infested tenements, over-priced Mid-town  
two-stories, angry Brookside cottages, Make America  
Great Again Lee's Summit ranch styles, all stuck  
on their stupid couches of obesity, stymied in a  
Netflix stupor, a bizarre, banal, binge-watching  
bonanza of buffoonery,  
souls no longer seeking truth and beauty in art or the muse  
in music, having turned their backs on jazz settle for  
canned, computerized, cacophonous, caricatures,  
lacking composition, monotonous autotuned  
sordid strip-club symphonies, twerk tracks  
transcribed for titillation,  
I have seen souls in need of screens - so many screens - to Facebook,  
Snapchat, Instagram, Tweet, looking  
for swipe-right love and likes from strangers, posting  
photos of their vacuously vain vacations and  
their mundane megalomaniacal meals  
while little girls in Flint, Michigan don't have  
clean drinking water,

souls of grown men obsessed with playing with balls,  
playing with their own balls, erotomaniacs  
purveying porn, pulverizing their penises,  
a potpourri of predatory predilections  
so perverse, so pervasive that the touch  
from a real woman leaves them impotent,  
souls of women diminished into dysmorphic delusions,  
lifting, nipping, tucking, cutting, injecting,  
dieting, dying, for a photo-shopped fantasy  
frame, a botoxed vision of beauty that can  
never be obtained.  
souls with holes that can't be filled bartering their  
bodies on Craig's List or Tinder but no tender-  
ness, no authentic intimacy, no caress, only  
the conjugal clanking of janky genitals  
joined in an unregenerate gyration of jaundice  
and jism,  
as I stood on the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> & Vine, a Charlie Parker  
tune howling from the Blue Room, I counted  
myself among those souls, dodging the image  
of myself reflected in the windows of cars  
passing by, not wanting to see the man I said  
I'd never be, the man I have become, another  
in the legion of souls who in the vanity of  
mortality cobbled together gods from dream-  
catchers and crystals, Swastikas and pistols,  
synthetic gods who would worship us and I watched  
Jesus wave goodbye from a Greyhound bus,  
Oh Lord! Who will we pray to now?

**The Seed of Starchild**  
*after Parliament-Funkadelic*

We are among you,  
the celestial seed  
of Starchild,  
heads held high  
fists raised  
standing  
not just knee deep  
we are total-ly deep  
in old-batch-  
of-collard-greens funk.  
Like Big Mama  
standing in the doorway  
with her switch,  
can't get around us  
can't get under us  
can't get over us  
you can't get away.

We are here,  
Packin shoot-em-  
for-they-run bop guns  
to dismiss  
the rhythm less  
*If you choose not to move  
you will be removed.*  
Gotta help the Interstellar  
get her groove back,  
as we promoticate  
a neo-funkdafied  
philosophy of  
Afrofuturism.  
This is a subatomic  
attempt to re-appropriate  
& transmogrify  
that which has been  
commodified.

We are One  
Nation Under a Groove  
with a mission designed  
to occupy minds  
& restrain  
the maggot brains  
of tea party drones  
cloned from the “junk  
DNA” of Sir Nose  
(Devoid of Funk).  
Hard to conceive  
but we believe  
even a Biff  
or a Becky  
can reach a state  
of Funkentelechy.  
We are not haters  
but originators  
whose only concern  
is to funk  
& be funk'd in return.

## **On the Profundity of Patterns**

To understand is to perceive patterns  
whispering the secrets of the universe  
disclosing the mystery of our identity  
in an infinite, repeating, cosmic language  
giving us the power and passion to create  
bearing witness to how we evolve.

In synch with the galaxies, we evolve  
in coherent complementing patterns.  
Theistic threads connect all creation  
revealing the unity of the universe  
signs and wonders that exhaust language -  
We are stardust feebly attempting to identify

ourselves, when our true identity  
lies beyond the limits of our evolution.  
Decay and regeneration is the language  
spoken by the perpetual patterns  
that govern and guide the universe  
giving evidence of The Creator.

“For the invisible things of him from the creation  
of the world are clearly seen...” Our identities  
are more than we are taught at universities  
as human vanity exceeds our state of evolution.  
We brilliantly repeat the wrong patterns  
clothing our mistakes in politically correct language.

Of what use is the technology of language  
If not to precipitate the creation  
of sentient social systems patterned  
after the omniscient, transcendent identity  
which beckons us to evolve  
in harmony with each other and the universe.

Oh, the wonder of the universe!  
Stars, spirals, and seashells speaking a language  
that revolves, involves, and evolves.  
Sequences, shapes, and cells creating  
the majesty of our collective identity  
if we choose to follow the correct patterns.

Though we did not create the observable universe  
we have the language, the pursuit of our higher identity  
and the perception of patterns to exquisitely evolve.

## **The Wars We Start**

*After Poppies by Ada Koch*

*If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders Fields*

-- from *In Flanders Fields* by John McCrae

The wars we start are seldom just  
killing those who don't look like us.  
No poppies bloom in desert sands  
where drones drop bombs from unseen hands  
countless bodies return to dust.

Our dollars say *In God We Trust*.  
Our actions say for oil we lust.  
Will justice find those who command  
The wars we start?

Poppies adorned in blood and rust  
a recompense for souls at dusk  
can't dry the mother's eyes that scan  
her fallen son's now lifeless hands.  
When will we view with true disgust  
The wars we start?

## **Sacrificial Giving**

*after La Pietà by Ada Koch*

*When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar,  
he said 'It is finished': and he bowed his head,  
and gave up the ghost.*

- John 19:30

*I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby*

- Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, Mother of Emmet Till

Could Mary have understood at the time that her boy's blood would offer a propitiation for sin? Would that idea comfort her as she cradled his limp body, wounds still oozing? Could Mamie have fully appreciated the beauty of her baby's mutilated visage; foreseen the Civil Rights Movement birthed at his open casket funeral? How many mothers have had to lay their sons bodies on some arbitrary altar, watch them march off to war, bite a drive-by's stray bullet, quietly die in the back of a police van? Do they find peace, attain some element of joy knowing that the death of their offspring brought a sense of meaning to a seemingly meaningless world? Is there solace to be found, any consolation in sacrificing their sons as soldiers, dying in battles for victories they will never see?

## The House of Seven Hungers

Somewhere in this city there is a child who is hungry. There is no breakfast waiting for him when he finishes dressing for school. Although he knows better, he opens the refrigerator, staring into the familiar bright emptiness, an emptiness that resembles the emptiness in his stomach, an emptiness not unlike that found in the chests of politicians – gaping holes where their hearts should be politicians who gamble with our children’s lives like it’s a game, like their lives are disposable. Cutting food subsidy programs as casually as one would a deck of cards. Somewhere in this city, that hungry child sits -- silent as an empty plate – in the back of a classroom, not able to hear the teacher’s voice over the insistent growls in his belly. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are not edible and thus are not a priority. What the child has learned is that the body is a house of seven hungers...

1.  
The mind fixated on food has room for little else to ponder.
2.  
The eye searching for sustenance will continually wander.
3.  
The nose filled with flavorful aromas the tongue will never taste may foolishly cut itself off, just to spite its face.
4.  
The mouth constantly craving that which will never touch its lips will spew venomous words like bullets from a clip.
5.  
The cells starving for nutrients they never will absorb will resort to fast-food fixes they can more readily afford.
6.  
The heart hungry for love when no one hears its cry will feed itself the very thing that will cause its demise.

7.

The stomach ever empty will soon find recompense  
and in its maddened state will devour innocence.

Somewhere in this city, the child, now a young man,  
since dropping out school, has too much time  
on his hands. He attempts to find work  
but the pickens are slim, trying to  
divorce himself from hunger before the streets  
devour him. Meanwhile back in DC, the one percent  
complain, too much is not enough when  
selfish gain is the game. But who pays the price  
for their pursuit of dividends? In the house  
of seven hungers live the seven deadly sins.  
And somewhere in this city, the hungry child,  
now an *angry* young man, decides to move  
forward with his poorly thought out plan  
and though he has been there a thousand  
times before, he points a gun in the face  
of the cashier at the corner liquor store.  
Even in his fear, the cashier understands  
that hunger will bring the thief out of any man.  
And somewhere in this city another hungry  
child awakes to another empty refrigerator,  
another empty plate. The question is, what  
is it we will do while the child awaits?

**400 Years: Still Here**  
*after Aracelis Girmay*

*And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance.*

- Genesis 15: 13-14

*Won't you come celebrate with me that everyday something has tried to kill me and has failed.*

- Lucille Clifton

Here is a 400-year-old poem  
an elegy of sorts because we sometimes use  
metrical compositions to make sense of death  
Here is 1619  
Here are 20 kidnapped Africans on a Dutch ship  
brought ashore to the British Colony Jamestown, Virginia  
Here is American history  
Here are 20 souls beginning a history - a horror story  
with no end in sight  
Here is how they stole the intangible  
Here is your stolen language  
Here is your stolen religion  
Here is your stolen body  
Here is your stolen mind  
Here is where your family should be  
Here is your wife  
Here is your wife raped  
Here is your wife raped while you  
stand aside and look  
How do you write a rape poem?  
Here is your back  
Here is your back bloody  
Here is your back bloody and torn  
to shreds - ribbons of skin dropping  
to the dust  
Here is your head  
your body buried up to the neck  
Here is your head atop of your buried body  
being used for target practice  
Here are five million stars  
over the Atlantic Ocean weeping

Here are five million Black bodies  
on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean  
Here is the baby you had in the belly of a slave ship  
Here is your baby tossed overboard  
because you'd rather see him in a grave  
than to let him be a slave  
Here is a rusted knife  
Here is a rusted knife on your genitals  
Welcome to your castration  
Here is where the pain begins  
Here is where it never ends  
Here is white Jesus  
Here is white Jesus telling a lie  
that all will be glorious in the sweet by and by  
that slavery  
is your destiny  
Here is so called Emancipation  
Here is Birth of A Nation  
Here is how you survive  
Here is June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1865  
Here is your 40 acres and mule  
No wait, my bad, there went  
your 40 acres and mule  
Here is your neck  
Here is a noose  
Here is a tree  
joined in a Satanic trilogy  
Here is your blood  
Here is your blood memory  
Here is your blood its memory  
contaminated on a cellular level  
Here is winter in America  
every government system whiter than snow  
Here is 5-0  
Here is the Po Po  
Here are the Black skin patrollers  
a modern iteration of the paddy rollers  
Here is slavery in a new context  
Here is the prison industrial complex  
Here is four centuries of dysfunction  
Here is how you function  
Here is how you manage  
Here is how you cope  
Here is how you turn trauma into jazz

Here is how you are built to last  
Here is how you ingest oppression  
Here is how you keep on progressin  
Here you are  
You are a miracle  
fulfillment of the dream of your ancestors  
and in spite of everything  
You. Are. Still. Here.

## What Were Their Names?

When pondering origins,  
I sometimes trouble  
the loose threads dangling  
from the base of my spine  
where God stitched me  
in my mother's womb

I am three years past fifty  
but the threads are as ancient  
as the Garden of Eden,  
coded with a language as archaic  
as that which was spoken  
in the Land of Shinar  
when there was only one tongue,  
only one enormous continent.

Who was there to witness  
the tectonic shifts?  
Who were those scattered tribes  
guided by ancient stars?  
I long to know their names.

Who were they?  
Erecting pyramids in Giza?  
Hanging gardens in Babylon?  
Worshipping at the Temple of Artemis?

Who were those  
noble brown monarchs  
building kingdoms  
on West African shores?  
There is this bubbling  
in my blood  
a rumbling in my bones  
that longs to connect  
with those who came before.

Who bathed in the golden sun  
before the slave ships came?  
Which rich Virginian bought them  
and made them take his name?

Who were those who escaped  
to freedom with their hearts set aflame?  
Who were the ones  
that helped them  
but chose to remain?  
it is the idea of ancestry  
that becomes a soft refrain  
the knowledge of my forefathers  
is a treasure I must gain  
someday I will find them  
and learn to sing their names.

## Notes

Most of the poems in the Poetry for The People section were commissioned.

*Concerning the Emptiness of Earthen Vessels* was commissioned by artist David Dahlquist as part of the City of Kansas City's One Percent for the Art public art program. It is permanently installed at the Kansas City Missouri Police Department East Patrol Campus. (2015)

*A Psalm for the Word Gatherers* was commissioned by the Johnson County Library and is permanently installed on a 5ft x 3ft steel plate at the Monticello Branch. (2019)

*Howl: The Remix* was commissioned by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in conjunction with the with the *Big Picture* exhibit that featured a photo of Alan Ginsberg. (2018)

*On the Profundity of Patterns* was commissioned by the Charlotte Street Foundation for the *Pattern Languages* exhibit in Rockhurst University's Greenlease Gallery. (2017)

*The Wars We Start* and *Sacrificial Giving* were commissioned by artist Ada Koch for inclusion in the *Love Loss and War* exhibit at Kansas City Artist's Coalition River Market Gallery. (2016)

*The House of Seven Hungers* was commissioned by KC Healthy Kids and the Health Forward Foundation for inclusion in a promotional video. (2020)

*400 Years: Still Here* was commissioned by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art for their 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Juneteenth celebration. (2019)

*What Were Their Names* was commissioned by KCPT for a local spot promoting the *Finding Your Roots* series hosted by Henry Louis Gates. (2014)

## VITA

Glenn Albert North Jr. was born on May 13, 1966, in Kansas City Missouri. He was educated in local public schools and graduated from Bishop Hogan High School in Kansas City, Missouri in 1984. Glenn attended Lincoln University in 1984 where he majored in English and later in life transferred to Rockhurst University where he earned a BLS in English. In 2009, while serving as the Education Manager and Poet-in-Residence at the American Jazz Museum, Glenn entered the MFA program for Creative Writing and Media Arts at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

He is a Cave Canem fellow and a Callaloo creative writing fellow. He is a recipient of the Charlotte Street Generative Performing Artist Award and the Crystal Field Poetry Award. His work has appeared in *Caper Literary Journal*, *Platte Valley Review*, *Kansas City Voices*, *KC Studio*, *Cave Canem Anthology XII*, *The African American Review*, *American Studies Journal* and the *Langston Hughes Review*. He also collaborated with legendary jazz musician, Bobby Watson on the critically acclaimed recording project *Check Cashing Day*.

He is currently the Executive Director of the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Center and is serving as the inaugural Poet Laureate of the Historic 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine Jazz District.