



**PLANETARY  
BODIES**

NAIMA Yael TOKUNOW

**BLACK WARRIOR REVIEW**  
CHAPBOOK SERIES 45.2



## GENESIS

I are all teeth all shinywhite all bloodgummed and swollen // I are  
not braced not creamy with fur

Remember how daddy said *birfd*ay // The careful lush of that word  
and then his lips would pull back

Look: is your mouth born // your mouth wet birth or sulphur egg  
filled to nest // is your palate the only meat in there

Eat at your black eat fingernails // eat the way daddy used to say *birf*  
with pulpy spit and all that porcelain

His mouth was wide and had all the language // I were born from  
that mouth and unborn // I were wombed there

*Birf* was promise and planet // remember how daddy made his  
mouth parch how he took back that wet word

I are dry I are thick in saliva // So desert so wilds in dryness // I are  
not given the word // I are not delivered

## AHISTORY

We have been refused a comfortable belonging.  
I begin with a digital leather valise  
of documents—birth, death, marriage,  
draft cards, phone book permanence.  
An address on a street that sits beside  
a freeway, now. All the loosened hard evidence.

We have names too good for a census. RELATION  
TO HEAD saddens at “Servant,” and then there’s the  
grease screen magic of a 1900’s ‘negro’ become a 1910’s  
‘mulatto.’ Not one has a name spelled right  
across the years. Black :: title as \_\_\_\_\_ :: title;  
an “X” to make your sign for the government.

Rapides, Denton, somewhere down the line  
a county birth, but first: I find the address where  
my great-great-grandmother died and stare  
at the blank slate of balding grass, a toilet  
sitting in a gathering of chairs, and ten dead trees  
nagging the surrounding lush of leaves—

the barren thrush of land with no house  
where there was a house, or maybe they got  
the address wrong; the pale clapboard  
across the street isn’t unfriendly. I have  
a disdain for white record-keeping,  
the slant of script learned in a classroom

to mark 'no' in the ATTENDED SCHOOL column. The pain of loss is an antecedent to this particular grave digging—nothing grows up from whey-faced registers but a foot on the butt of a shovel. Even with all of the lines drawn from mother to mother to mother, the tree

has beetles in the bark. Black :: moon as Black :: belonging, a sickle under the eye and if you're lucky, a waxing one. The country, an outstanding testament to weaponizing our labor and its records, the promised absence of familial tokens. The only thing I know of my great-great: profession: DOMESTIC.

It's not sweet to recognize that her hands scrubbed shit from someone else's drawers, and know only that. What a keen way to ensure that the work she sold is the same work her mother, unnamed, was sold for. What a weary form. This something, the years stacked up against

memory, an inheritance like the waterless moon: cold, far, holy. Black :: drought as Black :: remembered. *I love you, I love you*, I say to all my kin in particular.

Even just in suspicion, a dry glimmer of some giant love. A kindred not of here, unrecalled: a family of ghosts and all of them longing.

## NEW ORLEANS AUGUST 1949

The stucco walls were white, but she didn't  
lean against them, just stood tall and in pants, a woman  
erected in a wool skirt, beaming faintly.

It is important to know that her broad shoulders  
are thin here, that she has made herself slender and quiet,  
a sonic whisper of a woman, so as not to carve  
the world open with her size.

She stares at her baby, fat, dimpled, the corner of  
his mouth rich in spittle. Sitting on a hobby horse  
in the front yard, he boasts a fine-looking moon face,

two horrible teeth dropping shadows on his tongue,  
purple like the rest of him. You remember she was  
large, almost two stories taller than everyone, and in  
photographs like this, her skin shone milky, constellated  
beauty marks standing up against her neckline.

She must have changed his dirty  
nappies a thousand times, but here her palms  
were turned up, as if to say *I was not borne of this*.

If you were in outer-space, you could see this scene—  
the woman, her boy; the horse and its matted yarn;  
the modest house on Genois St. where everyone was born.

The baby grows fatter sitting there, and she  
taller, more like a statue than anything live, all stone-  
faced and perfect lipped. His shoe was cast in bronze,  
an effigy of his miniature ends.

As a mother she wasn't sentimental, but this, she thought,  
was fitting. The shoe  
is not the story.

## SAD & FREE

The root of the pain isn't the just in records, isn't the alignment of the planets in 1590. The moon swelled and my old, old baby got snatched by a hand like the tide: white fingered and then gone, folded in on itself, the self a blue-black cream.

The 14th century baptism books splinter me open, gorgeous calligraphy on vellum, curlicues like the hair on my nape. I can imagine the way these Scottish babies were dressed in god, all Agneses after their mother. All Abrahams and moon-white and braying. I do not know if their fattened fingers grasped at the priest's robe or their mother's hair, but there is a record of their blessing. A saint carried their names forward, a soft and deep gash across the tongue of the earth.

The nation, not new or newly emptied. Not quieter without its people, not softer in the middle, the gold of their bodies not gone from their beds. The records allege to familiarize me with these saved children, their parents, their great-great-great grandchildren; to make family of them, a white fingered surf. But these children are not mine, just the deed-holders to mine. Blessed a day or two after birth, brought up in a home built against the water. A home of stone. The floors matted with knotted rugs, and then sails, and then the floors became oceans, a blue-black cream and those oceans split to a new world, not new to the bones shown to empty it, but still and the ship became a shackle,

and the saved children became fathers of millions, not their own or their own and gave their names to their babies o

r the babies of their own lik

e a brand like the cattle and their black cream eyes and  
whose eyes now or can't you tell and the ship turns to ha

rbor and the ship empties its trash in the sea and the  
babies are still saved and still sweet and sweet flesh and they don't let  
us remember our god

s or our blessings our dances and the way we save our children fro

m the devils and who are the devils now or  
can't you tell

## WELL-SPOKEN

I learn tongue // I make felt in that mouth // Whose language // is  
in my gums // writing // out these words // It is common to have  
been stripped // of language // Watch // ether turn // my tongue  
moon // blue // But language ain't // just in the mouth // but air  
intake // in the breadth of lung // I learn speak // Pronounce well  
// but always short // of breath // like the words get hold // of too  
much space // in my throat // Look at the pressure in my // face //  
The cramp of speech // that isn't my own // I learn talk // I learned  
talking // Words too thin to break // my bones // too alien to reach  
// that groundwater // and still // I choke in // the atmosphere //  
of language // my own fat // world // between my teeth

## ANCESTRY.COM DOESN'T KNOW MY PEOPLE

Measure out your three bodies / Measure out your sixteen  
The charcoal of your feet / The red hot meat of your tongue  
Measure out parts of your body / you've made and undone

There are not enough numbers / for follicles or indicated freckles  
and these are the parts / that you've had for the longest  
or the shortest amount of time / Hair plucked or cut and let in again  
Pigmented markers of the way / you let your body burn

The red mole on your breast / is one two three maybe ten  
The red mole that might not be cancer / is fat and raised and demands  
more counting / Measure out twelve just in case

It is important to have an inventory / You will be someone's ancestor  
They will want to place your list / against their own see how many counts  
their new shiny bodies differ from yours / You must remember how many  
bodies you lived in how many / fingers and toes you've know  
as your own gifts / as your own colored threads

## THE PLANETARY BODIES

Open and out I are having a moon // for a meal // This is not ce-  
lestial this is feast // a mouth full of oil // Can you imagine // not  
rock // not even satellite // just fattened galaxy // gums that I are  
tonguing // clean

I are incredible fever // of hunger // Moon being not enough //  
Moon // says *I is black // as I want to be // Sits in its own says // I is*  
*// white in one million indents // of pock // I are lying in my lunch //*  
The moon did not // speak // even as I ate it // alive

The moon is done // and produced // So many photographs in par-  
tial shadow // *Here is the something // the scientists // say // held in*  
*all that void // all that flat // black // I are still faint // with hunger*  
*// my body wanting // more than rock // can fill*

What color are I // when crested // when gibbous // full of visible  
surface // Can you imagine // needing the sun to be seen // I are  
// what I eat // I am become // outside of this earth // I are visible  
// invisible // as I open // close open // my mouth // I are ample  
in this

## TEMPLE OF CONSTELLATION

A slick of wall sitting in no air and no atmosphere—  
 this is a god-maze without a bottom, lacking proper signage.  
 A trillion dead suns attempt to signal the final message  
 of it all: *we are dead as you see us, but look how gold we burn,*  
 which feels like a black proverb, if I ever knew one.

Running my tongue along the walls, remember that I are obsessed  
 with mouths and slip its pink back against my palate. This place is not  
 for spit-wet idolatry. It is worship in a maze in space, which may sound  
 like a joke, but isn't. Here, all of the noise I know, knows me back.  
 The intimacy of my ears as a prayer, the familiar blip of my voice in  
 my eardrums:

oh                      oh                      oh                      oh

my common noises are calculated. The dead suns shout back in  
 blankness—I are greedy to want their sounds too, dead as they are.  
 I wonder how someone built this temple with their hands, wonder  
 how I know it—my body without weight, can't remember  
 routes, off ramps. My mouth burns for a place to put itself.

*Knock, knock*, the dead suns say. You are a black body becoming a satellite.  
*Who's there?* they yawn. *Knock*—I think of the devotional for becoming  
 a star. I are the temple now. I are hungry for more than a vacuum,  
 even as the vacuum holds me as my ancestors did. I, a draw of water,  
 them, a clay cup. What blessing to know a womb twice. What incredible salvage.

## WHITE HOLES AS THE INVERSE

My grandmother wasn't light enough or inconspicuous. Tall, big boned. Tawny, but wide-nosed, napped. My first memory of her was when I was sent away to stay a her house for a week. I was a bad baby, made some trouble. She held my hand with her long ecru fingers—they had beauty marks on them, her whole body was marked like that—and I thought about how she had beautiful hands and that she was very old to be beautiful. She came from a whole beautiful family, all old and dying. At Thanksgivings we would sit at a table with her cousins. Blondish, blue eyed, pale. Thin and quiet, their perfect dentures sitting unnaturally against their gums. Louisiana Creoles who sometimes got to sit wherever they liked on a trolley car. Parts of my family bred themselves out of darkness. To marry up. This wasn't about money. High color, that kind of up.

Grandmother married an air force man. All cheekbones and spread lips. He died when I was five, but there's a picture of him holding me as a newborn, his hair gray and coifed. The photograph is black and white and so you just see us in grayscale contrast. He was very handsome. A man whose skin promised that my father would be dark, dark, dark. I imagine her parents' sucked teeth, talked amongst themselves. *What a waste of color.* Maybe that's unfair, maybe that speaks to my inclination as a child to feel that everyone, somehow, would like to trend whiter. This want was understandable, even. The way things are in color. And so, and yet, my father became.

He was born and then grew and the whole time he was so beautiful. I grew up looking at his baby pictures with him, albums full of yellowed cardboard pages that my grandmother carefully arranged and labeled. He was well-liked and loved and sharp. I can hear other mother's coming up to my grandmother to say, *what a beautiful boy.* When he was old enough he played the game of coloring up—loved

a light girl with wavy hair from when he was old enough to know to when he left the country. Ran from war. Went to one of those far-aways and became a Panther. Learned to love his blackness, even if it didn't extend past his own raised fist. In telling his story, I hear its familiarity, its whole usual clip. Perhaps because we are not unfamiliar with the image. It's not new, never new, the concentric circles of passing. These stories nest inside each other and inside of the children of that race away from or towards blackness.

My father never loved a black women after that first. He named her my godmother, but I only met her once, prepubescent and eager. She looked like a version of my grandmother, but with short, thick hair and a small body. Beautiful. There is a preoccupation with looks in this story. There's a preoccupation with wanting. The capacity of loving and its confines and how, in this story, there is a certain lack. My father chose to love white women. And then. My mother. Who is not white, but may be confused as. Even with her middle eastern accent and olive skin. What whiteness tried to claim as its own through his eyes—*close enough*, I imagine him saying. I became the product. *What a beautiful.*

There is a portrait taken right after I was born. My mother holds me and my father holds her and everyone is in white and we are tilting our heads up towards the sun with our eyes closed. I am pink with a shock of black hair. I do not look like myself, for maybe the only time in my life. I look white. My mother looks perhaps-white, but too olive. My father blacker-seeming against the white of his skull cap and the blue of sky. I am pink. I have seen hundreds of pictures of myself as an infant, but this one is the most jarring—I've seem to have manifested the good color that had been wanted for my father. I soon darkened, like so many babies do, once they know the sun. I stayed. Darker. My parent's didn't stay together, which is neither cliché nor shocking. He loved a white woman after, and another. Which is neither cliché nor shocking.

As a child, my father used to sit and take my Barbies and sit them beside me. Lecture me on how Barbie was not a real woman, was not the shape of a real woman, was *unrealistic*. He would only let me play with them if I was sure that I knew I was not meant to look like them, doll-pretty. I nodded vigorously. He kept telling me. I know as that child, I didn't quite believe him. Not that the doll wasn't actually beautiful or womanly or perfect, because I didn't find her looks particularly fine. I didn't believe him because he said that I should know my beauty but only loved women who were doll-pretty enough. Never loved a black woman in front of me.

I don't know my father anymore, but I wear his face five shades lighter. Passing is the act of being able to be read as belonging to whiteness without owning whiteness. Passing is also the action of bequeathing. *Where*, I want to ask him, *are all the black women that you love*. That he loves, that he is actively loving. I can see him at the medicine cabinet of his bathroom, looking towards the mirror with his mouth spreading, as if the whole world of blackness didn't exist outside of that reflection. I don't have any of his pictures but I still remember. *What a beautiful boy*.

## ALTERNATE ORBIT # 1

[Earth is out. Earth is a ball of ice screaming. Earth isn't spinning the same way no more. Gods didn't burn the whole dirt up, because they people did first. Little they, tiny hands, tiny millions. they has become past tense. Nobody present. We slipped ourselves out and here. Poor baby Earth, to have felt its own millions try and turned itself inside out. Earth isn't dead, but finally has its whole cold circle to itself.]

I are napping. A break from a break from a work that I give to my body. On the couch my weight is heavy, good full pounds. I don't get comfortable, just are. Timecard: make a book / or swim / or speak to a lover for an hour. This tenderness is work, my mouth carving and building the world around my bodies. I use myself how I like.

Two suns stick their tongues out. I laugh at the sky, purple and giggling. Sky's purple and I'm still black. What good, funny suns. What light purple. *Who needs grass when the ground is soft*, I say, and the ground nods and brings itself up to my face out the window. I eat a little sweet-ground, recognize the offering. I are *Thank you* with my mouth full. My eyes sweat the sky, and the atmosphere takes it's long lavender arms and wipes up after me. I lean back from the window and spreads my fingers wide.

[Turns out the white folk on Earth were the aliens, warring. Whipping they little faces at each other, close enough for sour breath. Turns out no one else in the whole universe kills for coin. They never knew the skin of the galaxy. Other elsewheres, people just are / or just aren't / or just stop being when they're done. We're lucky we found out. No one picked up the Earth radio waves. Not one broadcast. No one was listening.]

## RUMORS FROM THE APOCALYPSE

Building up a new sky from burn and bone and temple,  
we warn the birds not to run out the flagging skyline,  
the new tides making wings of us all.

We cut into the summits, digging out the pleasure.  
Our skin cakes—this parable of earth-making  
is not without sacrifice, our nails still showing signs

of vitamin-deficient childhoods—the soft cuticles,  
the rice paper tips dragging from nail bed. Hand rich,  
the earth unpacks and we find new minerals.

There are no more kings, no more gold to pan for.  
We whisper old songs, songs that clear up a history,  
undead entire generations; the birds croon of us now.

At the center, a fire burns without pyres, no iron  
or nickel. We lead the children to bed, their feet buried  
in a silt bed. This fat star becomes.

We find our new earth's shade. It's skin is not a cream  
play act—slip tops slip, we dress it up.  
We fill the star with black—hands, arms. Deer & vellum

alike, our skin spent one million ways. We feel  
fuller than our bellies, some new perception of standing  
in a pack, that power and filigree.

To speak in new tongues we make the old worlds  
lay their inch down. Trench out new water. Fill our mouths  
to the lip. Open our mouths and \_\_\_\_\_

## IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

I foraged for my family among millions of records. I looked for their faces, their homes, the jaundice edges of their babies. My brain is ebbing. Every synapse a blood-red witch, lobes signaling that I am without the necessary magic. I wonder if all of the salt I eat is pickling my brain, safe housing it from death. My body is still warm, heart pumping something awful in there, a mama to all of the lesser hearts—kidney, liver, lungs—all forcing blight out towards my fingernails. Once as a baby, I raised and shook my head—*I don't have a brain, I have a ponytail*, as if a prayer. To be without recollection. When I was born my parents didn't recognize that same evaporating brain. I never knew a brain could choke until I went to braid my own hair and found I'd lost the channels for self-adornment. Forgot the ways of my father's mother's mother. My cork of hair lay unembellished. Waking up slowly, on an easy morning, my brain can be fooled—you are singular, you are without the before of kinship, but not for long. Little raging sadnesses crawl up salt-lick tongue and into my sinuses. A brain is a soft bed to give a terror. A lost family is a soft terror put to bed. There is nothing forfeited in knowing that ancestry is not a gift. Here it is, angrily making my art. Here it is, the only thing making and receding. There is nothing lost.

## THE AWFUL REMEDY

I are a medicine // Teeth ground // a fine powder // It is easy to // recover  
like this // gums soft and bleeding // but not loose // A government // of  
soft-paste porcelain

Married // I are hungry for a feast // of healing // Love helps and eating //  
helps // prescribes me to myself // Self-medication // a kindling violence //  
a comfort

There is an absence // of sex // which explains // this famine of desire // I  
are finding // in my crotch // The medicine // I are becoming // quick // and  
acidic // in my own // hand

Some // times // I are making fantasies // the husband // I are become //  
the tincture of bridegroom // A soft mouth // and a wide // bed // for curing

The truancy // of a woman // in my bed is not // the missing dose // I are  
used to knowing // a holiday of breasts // against breast

To become a medicine // I am stopped // taking that other pill // that kept me  
dry // Now I are // a bath of sog // happy to be // exhausted by myself

I are feeling // too much // as if my belly // has a bottom // fermented //  
bubbling up // I are a medicine // a hot husband // a leak of // some awful //  
remedy // that works

The trick // of dosage // is to close eyes // I are sure // is to put self inside  
// mouth // is to have a cold drink // of water // I are swallowing // I are  
almost done

## ALTERNATE ORBIT #2

I make a grandmother of the moon— the moon sticks out her hands as a gesture of good faith, a generative prayer. The moon is a live star.

I make a grandmother of the moon. Her blind eyes now milky from purpose, the whites of her eyes and the whites of her eyes all glowing.

This is a love poem (but that is too forward for the moon). My grandmother is not a glutton for fawning, however earnest. My moon winks in disdain

or approval. She shakes her head and the whole world goes dark. Your grandmother also has this head. The whole of old women. Her blinks bring out

telescopes, rockets, all fire and filth. She is a clergy, grey face paled not in death, but in divinity. I are learning her favorite hymns by heart.

The moon is a church . I make the moon a grandmother. She winks at the repetition of title. I are silly to think she knows not who she is.

I are converted, looking at her face in my own. Looking at her skin against the scar of stars, there is an arm of reaching, all towards one another.

They say the moon is cold, but my grandmother is full of heat light. I make the moon a mother. The world blinks, prays. Just like she taught us.

## IF NOT FATHERS, THEN

I make candied cuts // in aloe flesh // shallow to clear // My blood stays  
// to itself // a sundial // in straight line

Leave a father // where he moles // I are singing // some daybright //  
lullaby // A calming ricochet // A less quiet // alley paves my throat

I are making // recovery // sounds // circles with thick dark // fingers  
ready // to loose the noise // A ripping flag // My once-pickled voice //  
opens

Reverse culprit // I are not // making brine bath // I are finally grown  
// heavy in uvula // skin healing // under milk sap

If I are // not hungry // in cutting // not // hungry in fathers // watch  
me // surgery feast // fat leaf // juice of it // rolling defiant

If not // the fathers to cut // no inside flesh // returned out // only  
healing // plants // then I are // become an angel // Free // from long-  
ing

High tone in the throat // I are only weaning // my skin back // in health  
// No father found here // I are voice // hundreds of voice // all mine

## A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

There was a woman and is a woman body. The wild planet dissolved her insides, the softness that she sometimes offered to the world. It was a kindness, the planet thought, to let her live. Now, she makes herself celestial, tastes her new glass, the sheared grease of its fruit.

The planet comes out and demands, *be oral, all open skin begging*. She, a not-glowing satellite, says, *get out of my house. Get out from under my roof*. Planet has already begun to harden its burning body against her. She opens the whole black atmosphere and calls upon dots of lamp-light that do not know her any better.

It is a shock to call *help* and have a trillion eyes stare blankly back. To know that all stars are planets in some other arrangement.

*exeunt all*

She became a rock in a blanket of strangers to get rid of her breast swollen with pummeling. The planet pummels the atmosphere in protest. A moon does not fit in a frame, has no bosom. The planet sings *center, center, center me*, that classic song of suns, while she orbits inside herself, barren.

The planet bawls, its pants fouled with desire. It demands that she body herself again. It pleads, makes dances of the air's flat color, sends light to every corner of her surface, looking. She is ungiving. She sits at her center and watches the planet cast shadows. As a woman, she never felt close to body. How close she feels now.

*exeunt all*

The planet rubs his hands palm-sticky. It is intelligent. Used to getting its way like this. *Please*. Or with screaming. *How do you turn back into something I can push myself into?* The moon woman doesn't answer. *I thought that I made you*, planet whimpers, *I thought that you were made for me*.

Becoming a moon is not a long-term solution, she is not safe as this glass-eyed, pocked, stone thing. [Planet tries to learn moon magic, learn astrology. It reads all of the literature]. She opens and opens and opens and opens and

stops. Outside of her rock, in the air above her, she sees her body, buzzing. [The planet doesn't see anything, its dick out again now]. She waxes. Asks the outside, *how does moon stop just hanging?* Planet licks its palms. *How does moon take wing?*

*exeunt all*

## CONJURE WOMAN

Do not make bones at me // I are soonly calcified // I are knowing  
of death and of burial // making your spells // into mush words

Remember how to incant this // I are not black in my father's image //  
even though // his makes my only blackness // I are filled with black //

with cartilage // skeleton loose dancing // skeleton heavy under all that  
tissue // pink and ribboned with fat // I are trending // towards something else //

some dust some bone disloyal // Try to witch a way back // not to him // his  
x-ray narratives // take witch mush and burn it charcoal // eat it in gallons // I  
are finding

the blackness // unjointed from his bones I are making this body // remember  
how // I are not filleting my father // not needing his ribs to read // my own

## ASSEMBLY OF THE MULTIVERSE

Memory is the quintet of my fingers, reaching into the warm pâté of the bodies. Who gets to make science of these bodies. As a new scientist, I haven't found ways to explain without comparison or metaphor—*this rip in the fabric of time and space is the size of a hard-boiled egg, or, the hole in the atmosphere has made our bloods an open sewer*. How do I remember a world that I hope exists.

I build out the memory of a solar system with foam and wooden dowels, painted with unfamiliar moons. To explain this other world I surger ours, graft soft dirt, which we have all touched in our hands, onto the skin of the other planet. I will not lose finesse in the not-memory.

For immediate release: everyone here is Black and everyone here has eaten the dirt because it is sweet and because curiosity has never been a killed cat. Saying, *whitefolk this is not your dreamscape*, without without wincing is a challenge. Memory is also a straw with a split—we suck with all of the might in our heads, but the water squeals and we only get a little.

To wipe my memory of white folks, I have imagined a concave history—slipping into a black hole, there is only this little planet with its big moon and its multiple suns, and everything that has happened on Earth, every past is unremembered. Every black brain cleansed of trouble.

Memory, that blind hand, is not the enemy. Selectiveness is helpful here. Remember, we have all been transported. This is not some almost-familiar Blackness, it's ours, we have our bodies still. Saved in space, we are living as we predicted. There is a certain amount of trust that pulling the future into the present requires. A dismembering of possible consequences; a confidence.

The last important bit: our dead kin join us. They were close anyway, their bodies made dwarf planet in some nearby skein of space. Hundreds of generations of Black life to live again and with each other. Upon arrival, someone's grandmama says, *Imagine that*, and we all nod, eyes trending to the horizon floating somewhere above us. We all imagine. We've remembered this forever.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the editors of the following publications where earlier versions of some of these poems originally appeared:

*DATABLEED*

*Bone Bouquet*

*Nat. Brut*

*Winter Tangerine*

*Phoebe*

*jubilat*

*Broad*