

THE FOREST BURNS BRIGHT

by

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the forest burns bright

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part one

understory

invocation

this time it'll be different

this time the sun will shine on my skin and i won't shy away

the moon will greet me at the witching hour as i lay my rose quartz on the windowsill

i will soak water in moonlight then drink it to taste the cosmos

the sage will burn in every corner of every room in my house

this time the poems will not fall out of my mouth like broken sticks in a summer storm

this time the wind will not blow away my house

it will carry me through the sky like dandelion seeds

snow in the middle of spring

i will write away the pain and turn it into closure

i will bless the paper with tears from the goddess

this time god will not be God because not even i can capitalize an ethereal presence

this time i will think of my grandfather

i will think of the pine trees of Appalachia

i will think of the cabin he was born in

the sounds of the old country as birds fly through the valleys

i will think of my mother and my father

my sister

our trauma

i will think of the times spent yelling and screaming

and the times spent thinking of escape plans

but i will also think of the beach

how we forgot about those things when my mother remembered her childhood spent

in the sands of emerald isle

this time it will be different

this time i won't forget who i am

i promise

creation

sometimes earth feels like an alien planet

the sounds are too loud

angry men yelling, screaming for assimilation

the smells are pungent

vomit smells all too much like fear

the people are unkind

they punch and kick as if the ground beneath them was made for someone else

sometimes earth reminds me too much of

the past and how the ground shook

reminds me of the dirt moving

vibrating like speakers blasting in a house party

i long for a quiet earth

where the birds sing to make music

where people talk not just to make noise

sometimes i think about god and creation and wonder why

so many people think they are something more

than that which destroys, the people with torches that ignite the forest fire

sometimes earth feels like it is reinventing itself

sometimes the trees speak in new languages i've yet to understand

the rivers run in new directions that send me across borders

the earth can be unkind but that is nothing new

i've learned to let the wind do the hard work

let it push me in the direction it wants

tell the anxiety to stop meddling with the journey unknown

allow my leaves to fall where they do

my seeds will blossom

and everything will feel like home once again

for channing smith

baby boy

we've let you down again

baby boy

you were sixteen temporarily yet now for infinity

too many kids like you will never light your own stars on fire

baby boy

my heart has crumpled itself into a ball for you

i've let queer youth after queer youth bury themselves

in my poems let

teenager's names die in my throat let

myself get lost in their stories that were never finished

baby boy

i-

i do not blame you for extinguishing your own fire

i do not blame you for letting the forest go dark

i do not blame you for cutting down the trees and selling the land

you and i both know what its like to have your coming out story told

before we finished the last chapter of the book

in which we tell it ourselves

i've stared down the barrel of the same gun

put my finger on the same trigger

baby boy

i hope you are at peace now

i wish you could see how much the brightest parts of your life

were going to shine had you stayed

i do not blame you

i do not blame you.

pathways

today is like any other day

wake up in isolation despite living with my parents

sigh at the sun for remembering to rise

brush the yearnings for endless slumber out of my hair

swish the mouth wash in my mouth to drown out the bitter taste of hunger

wear the brightest clothes to cover up the darkness around me

drive to class and think about crashing at least once

put on a smiling face for the professors who do not know my pain

make a mental note to buy the textbooks i cannot afford

i don't know when my world became overcast

sometimes i think i walk this path on purpose

there are days which feel like years and days that feel like minutes

some days i am a blooming cherry tree and others i am a scorched elm

some days i choose to live in the darkness because the light burns my skin

i think i choose paths that lead into heaven and hell because inconsistency is normal

i am used to fighting change even if it means salvation

sometimes i brush my hair because i want to

and i drive to school because i'm excited to see friends

there are nights that i cannot fall asleep

because the next day feels like winning the lottery

sometimes

i wear the brightest clothes to remind myself that i can be the light in the dark

and that faking it until i make it is one of the greatest acts of civil disobedience

the songbird's hymn

mother i cannot lie to you anymore

this song i sing

the words i breathe

my bones cannot support this weight

mother

if i told you that my sky was grey

if i told you that my sun was black

would you paint this world you gave me

a new color?

mother my skin feels like a cage

some days my bones break at the touch

mother can you hear me?

have the songs you sing silenced me?

god writes a new story for me every day and yet

i find myself drafting more and more tragedies

mother i miss the way the sun felt on my skin

i want this pain to find its way back to hell

i do not tell you these things because your sun

was black not too long ago

i do not want to drain the color from your own salvation

mother what color are my cheeks?

has the rosy color faded into sadness

the same way my sisters once were?

i forgot how to sing my song so long ago

the music notes sound more and more like a funeral

mother i've lost my way

mother help me find my way back to myself again

childhood

i remember the double wide trailer in the field
formosa trees blooming while they were still alive
summer days in middle school spent with the boy next door
the boy who i secretly loved before i knew what it meant to love
another boy like me i remember
tears running down my face because i didn't know what or who i was
i remember watching my father and sister's relationship
wither away like blackened rose petals
her running out of the house screaming
the social worker
i remember coming into full bloom
bursting at the seams i remember
memories i'm unsure of
the first time i wanted to die or
the first time i wanted to live again
i remember the first time that boy and i touched i remember
bursting at the seams i remember
finding uncharted territory within myself
the way his skin felt against mine but still not knowing him at all
the feeling of regret tasting like four too many meals that day
i remember my sister going away
then coming back like nothing ever happened
like the arguments and the crying and being sent away for far too long i remember
the barbies and the gi joes and the times when dirty looks never
made the food curdle in my stomach i remember the beauty of blossoming innocence
like the way gladiolas come alive in the spring
remember things i used to forget

a baptism

i remember it like it was yesterday

september 21st, 2011

my best kept secret becomes my worst nightmare

i am forced to be authentic before i am ready

people i once called friends stared at me like a foreigner

my wings are broken by slurs uttered in the 8th grade hallway

the boy i had a crush on has his head down at lunch

i was so alone that religion felt like betrayal

false gods false narratives

they whisper in the hallway about feelings i never had

for boys i never liked

masculinity shattered in a broken mirror

i am reduced to a slur

the guidance counselor never calls the cops

tells me to find god

i never tell her the divine beings i worship would not wish

this hell on earth upon any of their children

people threaten to jump me and i never flinch at their touch

got used to the name calling by practicing in the mirror

the guidance counselor asked how i knew if i never had sex

i swallow my confession before it crawls through my teeth

my english teacher shows me a new language

she writes stanzas on my palms and my fingers itch for paper

i write me a new genesis but leviiticus rips the pages to pieces

depression grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks my head back

spits black ink in my mouth

i regurgitate a poem and hope it splatters pretty on the page

i confess sins to the paper and hope it brings me salvation

every poem i write another sacrament

a baptism that will never cleanse me

on Gay Twitter™ (an ode to fats and femmes)

a cis-white, toned, 5'11 twitter gay posts a picture of himself in a jockstrap and a crop top
it gets thousands of likes by the Masc™ congregation
they stand from their seats at the pews of the Hot White Gay Church™
praise the Hot White Gay™ for being so brave
for stepping into the mold of conventional attractiveness even though it rejects him
the Hot White Gay™ decrees the post to be a pinnacle of body positivity
the congregation bursts into applause
the rafters of the cathedral rattle and shake and bend
and i pray that they break
i check the Hot White Gay™'s following list
i am not surprised to see that he only follows men who look like him
i am not surprised to see that this Messiah of Gay Twitter™ is yet another false prophet
proclaiming to be body positive when he is actually body fraudulent
the Messiah of Gay Twitter™ tries to ascend to Gay Heaven™
but cries out in pain when his wings break
he falls to the ground and reveals his true self
he retweets a picture of another Twitter Gay™ who looks just like him and says,
“that’s my type” sweating emoji winking emoji water droplets emoji
i wait for his downfall the same way all the fats and femmes do
i post my selfies and get three likes because i have a double chin and fat rolls
i call out fatphobia, misogyny and racism that the other Messiahs of Gay Twitter™ spew
their parishioners call me a heretic
try to burn me at the stake
tie me to a chair and throw me into the river Jordan just to see if i’ll drown
they forget that fat floats
they forget that you can’t burn something that is already made of fire
they forget that my feminine energy can shatter every window

break every chain

they forget that the fats and the femmes run this shit

that without us their revolution would carry no real weight

rolls

maybe you didn't hear me the first time
but i've been a whole lotta boy since i was eight
i've been larger than life longer than you've been relevant
but not longer than you've been dumb
my body is not an invitation to criticism
you cannot read my stretch marks like the guides to them fad diets
you've been interpreting like a pastor with scripture in church
my body is not just a temple
it is a holy fucking city
my body has men praying at my feet and begging for salvation
my body is the old testament, the new testament, the library of Alexandria
men have spent years trying to read me but don't have the Rosetta stone
my body has wiped out civilizations of men like Pompeii
my body's territory is more sought after than El Dorado but this skin ain't fiction
my body got hills higher than the Himalayas
and people have died trying to climb them so
don't get lost trying to take in all this man
don't try to tell me to lose weight when your judgement is heavier than my happiness
don't tell me how unhealthy i am when your vehement disgust
is more toxic than my body fat
don't try to tell me how nobody will date me when i got all your friends in my DMs
i crush men beneath my feet like grapes and drink their blood like wine
i turn men into appetizers because they're not worth the full course meal
i will stop indulging in sweets and grease and men
when you stop trying to swallow me whole with your dirty looks
when you finally realize that i'm not gonna change my body so you feel comfortable
if all you can do is stare when you look at me

that means you have already been spell bound

i bathe my body in water soaked in moonlight

i sage my skin just to keep your negativity from harming it

i pray and pray during the witching hour to kill people that touch me without their consent

i light candles and dance around fires to ensure that men that try to feast on this body

get cotton mouthed and asphyxiate on my skin

be careful, because...

i am not bite size.

try not to choke when you put my name in your mouth.

ignition

and this is how it all starts

the anger lights the fire that turns Eden into Hades

the smoke burns my eyes and sears my throat closed

i thrash and thrash and hope i hit everyone in my path

maybe this fire is what i've always meant to be

anger incarnate to turn the world black

they said the fire next time

the ultimate punishment

but perhaps this fire will smoke out the evil

the flames spread into the treetops

the birds fly away leaving trails of smoke behind them

like brimstone launched from catapults from the depths of hell

i am my own sacrifice

my own wicker man

my own monarch with his head in the guillotine waiting for the bitter end

i feel the roots churning and writhing in the ground

the trunks of the trees groaning

i know it hurts

change isn't favorable if the gods never asked for it

but this is my own doing

i lit this fire

i prayed and prayed under the full moon and the sun said burn

the sun said wrath

the sun said light the forest like the library of Alexandria

we burn the remnants of the past to create a new future

and maybe

this future will be brightest one yet

part two

fire

the second coming

god writes a poem about me but leaves out the middle
fails to mention the second
or third
or fourth existential crisis
doesn't tell me that my mother will learn to hate my father
doesn't tell me that i will learn to hate most people
doesn't tell me that my sister will almost die
god writes a poem about me and leaves out the anger
forgets the part about my trauma being invalidated by others
god leaves out the anger but writes too much about sadness
god writes me into therapy but never closure
god thinks he kills me off in the end but forgets the story of jesus
forgets that he comes back just to make a point
god forgets that i can come back so i make him remember his mistakes
i drink the moonlight and drown the cities in magic
i laugh in the face of salvation and turn priests into heretics
god doesn't realize that i am writing in permanent marker
doesn't know that you cannot kill what you never took part in creating
god has a funny way of claiming things he doesn't own
he has a way of laying waste to civilizations that don't scream his name loud enough
drowns the earth in a flood because the people aren't civilized enough
god kills people for the sake of making a point but never resurrects their families hope
god creates generational poverty but is praised for the stimulus check
i write a poem about god but make sure to leave in all the dirt
i write a poem about god and turn gold into food because
there is no glory in a city of riches when the people you make are starving

summer

the sun peers out from behind a cumulus cloud
plays peek-a-boo with the grass until the grass deepens its
chlorophyll colored skin and smiles at the warmth
i am creating my own heat with another man
large, fertile
our skin feels like the leaves of a tree in a rainforest
smooth, oily
wet with perspiration
i call this man *baby* but don't mean it
the word falls off my tongue like a wounded soldier
he kisses my neck like he can take me home to meet his parents
i do not tell him that i am desperate for this
but also desperate for him to treat me like every other boy
i do not tell him that i'll probably block him afterwards
the heat suffocates the skin
the skin suffocates the mind
the mind suffocates me and suddenly i am back where i started
where i was before i called this man *baby*
before i made myself a liar again
the man leaves
the heat lingers like a soul tethered to its corpse
i wash my hands to feel less sinful
the heat lingers
it always does

protection

maybe God is the charred bark of a pine tree
crumbling between two fingers
staining the skin a dark charcoal
falling lifeless to the ground like a pig in the slaughter
but we know that black forests will become green once again
maybe this poem is a reason to continue fighting
knowing that the blackened trunks and seared ground
is the beginning of a revolution waiting to happen
maybe i am the forest
maybe my skin has been lit on fire by men with lighters for fingers
my roots have been burned but they remain steadfast
my existence challenged by lighting in the sky
parts of me may die but they will just feed
the parts of me that are still growing
what i lose in the battle will determine how much blooms in the war
maybe this anger
this scream that has been building up for 21 years
is the retribution waiting to happen
maybe i'll light myself on fire just to watch the branches burn
to cut off the dead parts of myself and begin anew
maybe that is what it takes to defend myself
from men with torches

anger

this is what you asked for

these veins turned flood plains will drown out the sorrow

with chants and screams and cries and hoarseness in the throat

this is a protest

confused kids wear their hearts on their sleeves

wear their blood on their shirts

wear disguises in classrooms

wear disguises at home

kids don't get to be kids anymore

we scream and scream and rattle our bones till the sun goes out

we march and canvas and rally

kids are blamed for problems they were not alive to see be created

we are drenched in sweat because of stress and global warming

our bodies ache and you ask for us to carry your baggage

our throats are dry and you ask us to sing you another song

we have nothing left to give and are expected to fund your charities

but now we have our fists to bang on the tables you never asked us to sit at

we have loudspeakers that blast the sounds of change

we have our bodies that refuse to do anything but hold space that we create for ourselves

this is a protest

our existence is a protest

we've lit the fires in our bellies and there's nothing to put them out

the smoke that comes out our mouths will suffocate the sorrow and the pain

the change you never saw coming will burn your utopias down

frustration

in Chechnya

queer men and women are being sacrificed
to a god that measures salvation in bloodshed
conservatives tell us to stop rubbing it in their faces
but hunt us down even when we are hiding

in Chechnya

a citizen can be suspected of homosexual activity
and is then abducted

queer men suspected of committing acts of sodomy
have glass bottles shoved inside of them
because the government thinks humiliation and rape
is the greatest form of punishment

in Chechnya

the spirit of queer folk has been dangling by a thread
for four years and it is still treated like a myth
queer folk go missing and their neighbors act like they never existed
pride flags in Russia are banned

and the public acts like they never saw color to begin with
queer people are being herded like cattle in Chechnya

and the only help they get are BuzzFeed articles
and think pieces on totalitarianism on Twitter

queer people are being sent to the slaughterhouse
and people are worried about Lady Gaga's album being leaked
in Chechnya

there are people who would be going to gay bars here
that are being sent to their graves instead
and all we worry about is our own survival

candles with canopies

when the forest burns bright
citizens of the planet suddenly care about the environment
they come armed with sympathy and glasses of water
they think their 8 ounces of salvation is enough
to satiate a blaze fueled by anger and revenge
they care not for the men that have been cutting down
the forest for years and years
the destruction that takes the longest to complete
the forest burns bright and the people will call themselves the heroes
they will make the firefighters the time magazine person of the year
while the animals without homes starve in their back yards
and they get hit by semi-trucks crossing their highways trying to escape the burning
when i was raped
my forest burned brighter than it ever did before
people that never paid me any mind tried to become my messiah
they tried to put out the fires so they could proclaim themselves heroes
my forest burned bright
and people only cared about how the smoke made their clothes smell
my forest burned bright
and the people watched like it was the fourth of July
they watched while my trees blackened and the leaves turned to ash
when i was raped
my trauma became an inferno that people could only watch
they drank their water and waited for god to extinguish me
the rains did not come for over a year
the people let me smolder for what felt like a thousand years
yet i burned and burned until there was nothing else to engulf

an offering

another mass shooting claims the lives of high schoolers
this time on valentine's day
another group of kids taken by white supremacy and the president's hate
makes national news and the debate on guns starts again
a shooter turns a high school into a mass grave
and all we can think about is his mental health
not the president and the gun culture that created him
nearly 800,000 people attend the march in the nation's capital
and the only thing congress does for them is give them a pat on the back
i attend the march in Greenville on admitted students day
i make signs and walk through campus on the way to the courthouse
parents stare at me in disgust and harass me
my friend walks with me and we are worried for our safety
who knew that protesting the deaths of children at the hands of gun violence
would result in more violence against people that are freshly out of high school?
a mass shooting happens in Charlottesville at a church
people gathered there to get closer to god are called to heaven without god's consent
a white man with guns opens fire on a group of angels
a white man with guns is escorted
alive
by policemen
a white man who killed nine black church goers
wears a bullet proof vest for his safety
on the way to his trial
a group of kids will never graduate from high school
a group of church goers will never go to the next homecoming
a generation of people will never not know what mass shootings are

perspire

i know

this body of mine is a river and you're trying to get upstream

my current is stronger than your desire

boy

i know what it means to thirst for something that drowns

i see it in your eyes

this hunger for flesh and bone and sweat

turns you into a brothers grimm wolf

with teeth gnashing and tongue lapping

i see the desire for heat within

the need for flesh against flesh has you foaming at the mouth

dying to get to the fountain of youth just to feel like yourself again

this body has the power of an army of spartans

it will crush you like grains and flowers in a mortar and pestle

you try to chase the current of the river

but don't know where it ends

my body is stronger than 10,000 men in Viking ships

i will drown you in this riptide and claim your body like treasure

submit to the current and you might survive

oxygen

i forgot how to breathe this time
i see my rapist on campus and my blood doesn't circulate to my brain
he approaches the event i'm tabling for
it's national coming out day
suddenly i wish i never came out
the oxygen leaves my body and i wish i was still suffocating in the closet
i wish that pride was never in my vocabulary
if being out and proud means sharing that feeling with my rapist
then i vow to never celebrate love ever again
i walk away from the table
i count my steps
i clench my fists
i want to run a hole through his chest
my heart feels like a hole in my chest
my skin feels foreign to me
i feel like its happening all over again
this is the first time i've seen him since it happened
my skin feels like its on fire
i'm back in the inferno
this time the inferno is rage
and not despair
i try not to ignite everything in my path
i imagine him being swallowed by lava
or a tornado made of lightning
he leaves and my skin is extinguished
i can breathe again
but pride doesn't feel like a celebration for nearly two years

the rain comes

southerners know what rain smells like
it smells like the air after a hurricane
like cool summer nights with the fog rolling in thick
i smell the air and begin to cry
my salvation takes form as clouds billow in the sky
the sun whispers goodbye to the treetops
tells the moon to keep the forest company while she's away
the first drop hits the dry ground of the scorched forest
steam rises from the blackened dirt
and the forest is dense with smoke
i remember what it feels like to be cool again
the rain pours and pours like waterfalls in the Appalachians
angels cry on the corpse of my body
the trees let out sighs of relief
water gets to their roots for the first time in years
in rains for three months and it drowns the fire's spectators from years ago
the forest begins to be resurrected
on the third year
it rises from the ashes
it emerges from the tomb created from trauma
the forest grows new trees from the carbon rich soil
flowers blossom from the graves of their ancestors
the forest is thicker than ever before
trees talk with the wind and learn new languages
the rain slows and comes to a halt
the animals come back home
my body rests for the first time in what feels like a lifetime

part three

rebirth

catharsis

we all go through many deaths
but we bury versions of ourselves more than anyone else
we lay our traumas to rest and sometimes leave the graves unmarked
if my trauma were to be buried
i think i'd dig the grave on black mountain
i would bury my rape next to the cabin where my grandfather was born
i would allow for my ancestors to wrap me in blankets
to plant the seeds of grief into my skin
to let the seeds grow into trees and flowers
the grave would be surrounded by maple trees and lavender
i would say a prayer to athena and cover the grave in granite
there would be no funeral service
the grave would be unmarked
i'd leave it there and let the earth do the rest
earth would swallow my rape whole
it would let the roots of the forest eat through the flesh
the lavender would keep the anger from spreading
if i could bury my trauma i think this manuscript would be the eulogy
i think this manuscript would tell god exactly what i wanted
i think this manuscript would tell god and athena and the universe that i survived
if i could bury my trauma i'm not sure if i would ever visit the grave
i think the trees know exactly what to do
i think they can keep it safe

embers

little fits of anxiety find their way into my skin
my body is a vessel for panic
sometimes i worry about things that don't even exist
the remnants of years of trauma always have seats at the table
my body is laid out
cut into sections
the traumas decide amongst themselves what to eat first
my mental health thinks the legs are the best
since they were so strong from holding up my self-confidence for so long
the years of harassment in school wants the arms
because they know my arms carried a lifelong amount of anxiety and pain
the rape wants my tongue
it already knows how it tastes
it just wants seconds
academia wants my brain
even though it was burned out five times in the past two years
my body is ripe for the picking
my trauma rises from the grave just to get a taste
i try to exorcise it from the people i hold close
i throw holy water at them and wonder why they drown
i pull up a chair and sit at the table
i stare at my own body and my mouth begins to water
everything just looks so good
all the traumas disappear
maybe i've been consuming myself this whole time

self love

i get out of my big ass bed

put on my big ass clothes

brush my big ass hair on my big ass head

stare at myself in the mirror

and smile

i look at my tattoos

my beard

my body

my aura

i wonder why i could ever hate something so beautiful

there are days that i refuse to look at myself

i avoid my gaze in the mirror

i let society yell in my face and tell me i'm not worth it

i suck in my stomach and hope nobody notices

but not today

today i am large

today i am loud

today i will scream from the rooftops that i am fat and femme

today i will let the world know that it will not silence me

beauty standards will rot before i succumb to them

jesus will become a myth before i relearn to hate myself

my body is beautiful and no one can tell me different

today i got out of bed

i looked in the mirror

i smiled

i laughed

and i won

makeup brushes

the first time i put makeup on
i felt like i had been reborn
foundation covered my skin like a superhero costume
suddenly i realize why drag queens are warriors
i put eyeshadow on my lids and forget all my problems
the highlighter on my cheeks has me looking like the hope diamond
i grab my brushes from my Lancôme bag
the one my grandmother gave to me
i am reminded of all the little queer boys that don't have this privilege
i think about boys who wish their skin could glow
that their eyes could pop
that their contour could cut the bullies
so i put on some blush in their honor
i wear makeup like battle armor because some kids need to see it
some kids need to know that they will be fabulous when they are older
there are little queer boys that will glow so bright
their bullies become blind
there are some little queer boys who will never see the shine
i wear makeup because i want to
because society says no
because it makes me feel proud to be femme
somewhere
there is a 12-year-old boy sneaking into his mom's makeup bag
somewhere
there is a young boy learning how to sculpt his cheeks to the gods
today
i get to be their hero

garden of eden

i never got the chance to write my own origin story
never felt the pen on the page tingle with excitement
only felt the writing of wrongs into rights
the paper screaming as the ink burns eulogies into its skin
i never plucked the apple from my own tree
never fed myself my own joy or tasted the fruits of my labor
just spoke in tongues with snakes
who constrict the joy out of me
the people who think themselves gods
but are really sheep waiting for their shepherd
i do not write sins but the tragedies speak for themselves
the trees of this utopia are dripping with cyanide
cannot hide amongst the bushes should they burn holes into your skin
i wait for my god to show me the way
for the sea to part itself
for the dictators to let my people go
i wait for the plagues and the famines and the floods
i wait for my cities to be turned into pillars of salt
for my tower of babel to reach the heavens and burn it to the ground
before my people speak gibberish and claim to understand it
so let this be the genesis that doesn't end
with men thinking themselves kings and not servants
let the ashes i crawl out of be the bed of flowers i sleep on at night
lest us forget the revolution of children with lion hearts
and women with a symphony of voices
and queer folk with enough fire power to turn the capital buildings you hide in
into piles of rubble that could never be rebuilt

utopia

if queer people were to build their own city

i imagine there'd be coffee shops that serve iced coffee on every corner

drag shows would take the place of Sunday services

the shows would have more trans queens and drag kings

the mayor would be Janelle Monáe

if queer people were to build their own city

i think cisgender straight people shouldn't be allowed

you know how they like to make room for themselves

in spaces that didn't ask for them

scratch that

i think they should be allowed but only on Mondays

nobody likes Mondays

i think that Mayor Monáe should declare Fridays a city-wide holiday

and that happy hour should be free

if queer people were to build their own city

i think everyone would be driving Subaru's

or not driving at all

i think there would be green spaces within the city

so people can walk their dogs and hike

like some people apparently like to do

i think god wouldn't even be a woman

they'd be a nonbinary lesbian named Jay

who enjoys going to karaoke in Thursday nights for free Bloody Mary's

if queer people were to build their own city

rent would be free

because queers like socialism

and being alive

quarantine

the president and the government allot \$1200 for ten weeks of quarantine

not everyone gets that money

college students who are depressed and without jobs

don't get that money

their parents claimed them on their tax returns last year

obviously they should've prepared for the pandemic

\$1200 is two months rent for a single mother of three in the southside of Greenville

\$1200 is one hundredth of the cost of my sister's medical bills

\$1200 is a slap in the face to those experiencing poverty

a pandemic ravages the poor

the old

the medically compromised

and politicians look on and smile

godless people on capital hill take their money out of stocks and wait for the crash

people are without work while politicians are without worry

some people are starving while others are feasting

god shuts his doors because of all the shame

jesus takes back his miracles because we never deserved them

the united states government is a joke and the rest of the world is laughing

white people with cabin fever have armed protests and the police do nothing

a black man walks through his neighborhood and is arrested on sight

quarantine only applies to those without power

republicans want to sacrifice the old and the disabled to the capitalist gods

democrats shift the blame onto the president and not the system that created him

the rest of us look on and wait for the country to put out its fire

or for the fire to burn it all to the ground

tattoos

i miss the smell of green soap
the way the alcohol wipe feels on my skin before the needle digs a hole
i miss taking ownership of my body after stealing it back from my abuser
the way the needle hurts at first but feels like a massage after
i love the way my artist turns trauma into art
turns my angry skin into a soothing river
i tattoo my body because it makes me feel powerful
it makes me feel like i have control over a thing i'm not used to possessing
i love waking up and remembering my body is a canvas
i love looking in the mirror and remembering who inhabits my skin
i love looking in the mirror and remembering i inhabit my skin
the needle paints a picture that my cells learn to replicate
the needle sings a song that my skin just can't forget
i remember when i used to look at pictures of tattooed emo boys on Tumblr
and how i used to dream of looking like them one day
i remember how i used to wish i could do what i wanted to with my body
and how that was just a fairy tale
now i am ten tattoos deep and i want a thousand more
i hope the humming of the tattoo machine is the elevator music in heaven
i hope god has neck tattoos and Gabriel has flaming guitars on his back
i hope jesus is doing stick and poke tattoos out of his basement
i hope my grandma is getting a sleeve done by Jimi Hendrix as we speak
i hope the tattoos i have now will be on me in the after life
because if i can't own my body in heaven
maybe the devil will have a tattoo gun with my name on it in hell

peace

i'm imagining the mountains and the beach

i'm imagining the Chicago skyline and the streets of Philly

the way my spirit found a part of itself in each of these places

how poetry led me to the city and made me miss home too

i'm thinking about the future

about aging

about finding myself away from home

i'm imagining the forest while moving to the concrete jungle

i'm remembering the trauma but this time i don't catch fire

this time i remember the healing

the rain

the way my skin felt beneath cool water and the summer breeze

i remember the trauma but it doesn't taste sour

i remember the past

the way it made me feel like my skin was boiling

i focus on the present for once

i graduate

i move on

i keep those close closer and move farther from the people who watched me burn

this time i'm prophesizing the good instead of the bad

remember

i bathed in moonlight

i saged my skin

the poems flew from my mouth like birds during Beltane

in the beginning i thought of closure

and i think this is what it looks like