

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

2019

FLEX

Julian Randall

University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Randall, Julian, "FLEX" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1679.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1679>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

FLEX

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

JULIAN RANDALL

May 2019

Copyright Julian Randall 2019
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

Within this project I have compiled a book length collection of poems entitled “FLEX” which explore questions of violence, inheritance and pastoral poetics. Taking place across the landscapes of Mississippi, The Dominican Republic, and contemporary Black masculinity FLEX serves to ask questions of what violences contributed to the speaker’s birth and what possibilities exist on the other side of such historical pain.

“If you suffer in the grave, you can kill from it” – Ai

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The King is Dead, Long Live the King	1
Moon Cricket	2
Mississippi Genesis	4
LAMENTATION (Black Jesus Remix)	5
Codeswitch Decomposing into Lil Wayne Lyric	6
San Zenon Repents	7
I Am Only An Ocean Because I Resemble A Vast Regret	8
Abuela Dice Que Spilled Salt Goes Over the Shoulder	9
The Zero Country	10
The Zero Country	11
Poem in Which the Metaphor is Probably Too Obvious	12
IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS	14
The Book of Yeezus	16
DOWN	17
Internal Memoranda	18
The Cane Field Testifies Regarding the Assassination of the Mirabal Sisters	19
The Zero Country	20
Arroz Poetica	21
LAMENTATION	23
The Book of Yeezus	24
RUMORS OF WAR	25
Emile's Lament	26
Another Chapter	27
The Book of Yeezus	28
First February of the Life I Lost	29
Variation on a Theme of Athazagoraphobia	30
Ode To My Abuelo's Lungs or Every Country Sits Atop a Lake of Tar	31
The Zero Country	32
The Zero Country	34
Son of a Bad	35
FLEX	42
Notes	45
VITA	48

The King is Dead, Long Live the King

Heaven is the certainty that you will be avenged
I know I know the kingdom is not fair
but it's what I have a montage of red and a mitosis
of knuckles I'm not sure how you could expect me
to love anything Ain't no question
sadness is regal like that
golden and replaceable once I wanted
a lineage of identical men once a mouth soft and hot
as the quickest way that gold can hurt you You see
a pattern yet? I practice the want of nothing and fail
I've been shown how ugly I can be
when I am invisible
I don't believe in yesterdays
The throat of loneliness? Straddled with my knife
I press my hands to my face and the lament is a valley
the light sags through What do you do when you have
lost Everything? Rewrite the history of Everything
I don't like my smile because someone told me I didn't like it
Now I am gorgeous in all the languages I mothered
Flex the antonym of Missing I avenge myself
Stretch my hands I orphan my grief for the living and it is beauty
ain't no question I monarch
the lonely I my own everything now I miss my love and
it is an American grief I strike the smell from nostalgia
cut my memory to spite my country What is the odor of nothing
but my dominion in want of excess I grin and pillars of bone flower
into sawed off crowns say I flex the light and the light flexes
heat shimmer unfurling like a bicep my lust a mirage
where the body is merely a congealing of the river I can feel it
slowly drifting away from me The world I knew is gone
and getting more gone and my anthem populating my nose
with an abundance of salt I slip the shroud over the life I named
and forget I belonged to someone once My sovereign's face is a riot
of diamonds whining *This will be a beautiful death* and I am
gorgeous and desperate to never have to miss anyone again
I rock the jeweled shroud become the bride of my own sad light

Moon Cricket

I have been living despite myself
my territory hemmed by mud and threat
of mud If there is a land without its own
subliminal violences this night offers no
defense of what has died in it Some things
are only nourished in a stutter of kudzu
and the inconsistencies of silver the moon
shucks off Casual machines honey the dark
with the monotony of their health while
one theory of soil chokes out another See
no land without violence I've been staving off
the obvious It is dark and so am I
Earlier heat makes me lush with failed stars
I tell the homies *Living in Mississippi is like living
on the moon* and I mean every day brings
several weathers and I am never dressed
for any of them Kudzu in the right light
is like a gold front on a disintegrating tooth
Since I got here I have not written any throat
that was not straddled by something uninvited
The ground is brimming with sirens and children
of sirens I have been living in an idea of dark
come from another man's mind watching
the rain loose inconvenient silk imagining
what lives in the soil the asphalt choked out
If the clouds are the capital city of a country
of perfect memory then I am afraid

No ocean formed against me will abandon me
Lately the stars are dim so I count the niggas
I wish would try me I have walked into the dark
seeking a saddle and emerged with merely hands
I rock a trampled violet play moonlight in reverse
blued with desire I antithesis a lineage I do not leave
because how will I get home I have been here before
Flesh tenored with desperation escape like night
demands recursion Opaque as land before a man bridled
the light I am lonely in the season that widows everything
I have been waiting to tender the moon face an ancestral purple
I have been mothering a rage when I forget how to say escape
My favorite songs in any year all translate to *Run* or *Mine*
I am at my most named in the dark sing into a parallel quiet
name the song for the tether it casts pleading silver
towards a geography of light we barely name
I reach my hand out to a space of no stars
Where the clouds have torn like cotton I forget
How much I love a song which muscles the silence
How much I would give for a grammar of no slaves
O historical dead I am come from your unlanguageed apocalypse
like an ugly and deserved weather Watch me
eclipse their dark with my own Watch me citizen
the absence of your names

Mississippi Genesis

No.

LAMENTATION (Black Jesus Remix)

"I cannot die, because this is my universe" - Lil Uzi Vert

Slur my passing with the gold punctuating my chest
A remix of my death snakes my white tee I wear
Messiah like a wine stain Fingers splayed as if begging
A piano to grant an eighth of its name Religion is an
Economy of what can be touched and when Give
Me three days I return in November Rocking
A tundra The wind making love to the space between
Me and my clothes Homies mourn me by pouring
Chains of bubbles into a glass What a world I left
What a heaven I turned my face from Not the pastoral
Of it The summer is lush with a green fit to drown in
I mean a republic of hands Everywhere I turn maroon
Tapestries of Do-rags The space of the neck is ripe
With flags A scalp is a nation and vice versa Resurrection
Is just a fancy word for how much I must have missed you
Men kneel in the heat at my coming we strip and they kiss
Away my most fragile weather Imagine a tender worth being
Holy for Maybe it's sad to be asked always the parameters
Of my tenderness Maybe it's the sadness after which
All gold is named I am pressing my mouth to what I cannot save
My bare toes in the dirt I decided it is a tragedy to be stainless
In such a place I have been to heaven and still have nowhere to stay

Codeswitch Decomposing into Lil Wayne Lyric

After Danez Smith

Lord Please Forgive Me for My Brash Delivery

A face is for other people's benefit, a brochure gospel
undone by a mouth. I am the most marketable sin since 2004.
A smile that yields only bones, a mouth slick with restraint.
I am a good filament, a bright obedient electric. I speak,
and sometimes am found.

Lord Please Forgive Me for My Brash

body and especially my mouth, for-
give me my scholarships, for-
give me my name brand ambition, for-
give me my tattered skin on my G-Unit sneakers
how easy I drenched all the photographs

Lord Please Forgive Me

my jagged epiphanies
my tarnished
jaw gleaming w/excess & all
my un-flayed dark

Lord Please

y'all knew I was a storm when you Found me
once a white boy asked me for a Skin-Colored Marker
I say Whose skin? and stare until he buss out cryin'
Imma flood waiting to happen been like this since '99

Lord

You know

I'mma make it rain

I'm da hurricane son

San Zenon Repents

The Hurricane of San Zenon struck Santo Domingo, on September 3rd 1930. Three weeks prior, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo was sworn in as president and cemented his 30-year dictatorship in the aftermath of San Zenon leveling most of the capital and killing 6000 Dominicans.

Did you think a saint can't weep?
me and all my burly weather
yo creo que tu no entiendes
what exactly yo soy
I saw him
el diablo jefe

Hands spotted white
bleach splayed across water
clouds before a storm
pues tu crees en Dios
how else my name then?

What is a saint to do
but gather what he can
in his lipless mouth?
howl prayers against what stands
in his path?
he came
lo siento para eso

Te amo te amo te amo
love is the velocity at which I ruin
Saints are made in the leaving
I never wanted you dead

just elsewhere

I Am Only An Ocean Because I Resemble A Vast Regret

I mean to say I look like no one and this
is considered my best feature
once a man took my Abuelo's island
and that is how my mother was born
once my grandmother met my grandfather
because they both fled to the same place
More than once a wound was inflicted
and a hand begged the wound to sing
and the wound wept out its one crimson eye
until there was enough history to make me
I mean to say without trauma I would not exist
If there is no invasion I might just be lonely

Abuela Dice Que Spilled Salt Goes Over the Shoulder

Por que no tenemos una país anymore
cuando we lived in Santo Domingo
we watched Trujillo spill 100 daughters
onto the street y lo sigue de este
recuerdas the memory of a city
turns you to salt esta de Dios
this would have been your fatherland
before men who were fathers
took it apart con sus manos sucios
por supuesto nos decidio
we had to wash ourselves of home
in order to survive we flew
so that su madre might be untouched
sacrificio para sacrificio
sangre por sangre
what else could we have done but taken
the house spilling into bricks in front of us
and sprinkle it into the ocean?
el oceano no hay azucar
salt is always hungry
salt is what made the men forget
their country had a name
that was not the name of a man
who gave every mirror his name
mijo la sal esta pequena pero
the ocean will never hold your face
so kindly y este is how men grow vain
and forget to wash the blood
from their hands before they hug their daughters

The Zero Country

I shut off the Men
section of my Tinder months ago
and I do not know if this is allegiance
or self-preservation. Hummingbirds—
starved to true thirst, become a series of barren flutes.
Bullets starved of their purposes rust in the cradle
After decades of inventing new circumstances for mercy
the hands that I invite will end me.
A man nurses another man's need
then kills him. This happens everywhere and everyday—
I am alone here this is the lonely that kills me slowest.
I don't know if I love living as much as I have a loyalty
to what survival drew me here in the first place.
I love men I know everything of callouses and thus am skeptical
of mercy I'm alive despite indebted to a strain of probability.
Generations of mothers not strangling their children
to hide them from the world they were already inheriting.
Magnolias, sluggish eruptions, my best dress
outside my window coming away in pieces.
I swore to my mother I would not die here—
but this happens everywhere and everyday.
My feverish dance swells under the rose
and azure of pulse. There is nowhere to do this
consistently, lust here is like lust anywhere else;
a season of bruised light one thirst wrestling down another.

The Zero Country

A mutual captivity is still a citizenship,
maybe the only kind. a scalpel pressed—
to the anatomy of staying. Summer
the weather its own arrogant membrane I live
in the byproduct of unforgiveable heat.
I contemplate purchasing more books
in the town where my family was enslaved
it is too hot for all this. Subversion makes a petty weapon.
This is perhaps all I have come to prove.
I keep telling this story even when I do not want to.
Miles ago my great grandfather tricked white people
into thinking he was white for a living, this was his trade.
The present is not so different a kind of gravity,
In pursuit of the fugitive, I have become him.

Poem in Which the Metaphor is Probably Too Obvious

A Black church is burned in Mississippi
and spray painted *Vote Trump*

It's a pretty obvious metaphor from here
Brimstone Armageddon

Bullets their copper beaks
tender with heat smoke flies to migrate

what I know of inheritance:
the town is named Greenville

I know this because the news says
what I know at the molecular

My great grandfather was "from"
Greenville

In the way rubble is "from"
a building

Still too obvious? Ok that's fair
let's try again

My great grandfather was pale
as a surrender

The presumption of the body
is a shoddy prayer to hide in

The town found out and calmly told him
he had 24 hours

or they would tar and feather him death is implied in absolute qualities of tar

smoke flies to migrate I always say
Smoke when I mean *Family*

I live 131 miles from Greenville
a choice that put ash in my mother

an epidemic of red caps dripped out

the mouth of a swelling kind of country
a neglected cavity humming

a blues that sounds like a child spoken
for the last time

and surely the metaphor is exhausting
itself in your mouth

surely you are waiting for some inevitable use
of *Holy* or *Sacred* or *Wrong* or *America*

So I will settle for *Expected*
and say I am surprised

it took the fire (which touched my Great Grandfather's foot
in a way that can only make us cousins) so long

to say
Welcome home

IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

I won't be the first to admit it
But I could be more discriminating
With mercy the sea a fever
Of emerald I stand and ask the wave
What I would any other emperor
How palindromic the kingdom
I never thought to name the cloud
Outside the tradition of storms
Piecemeal I am building a boat
Out of what parts of me want
To endure beyond the changing hue
Of elegy I must be some kind of boy
To meet the verdant apocalypse
So unadorned Everything about me a loud
Fuck it I'mma go out in ball shorts
I have been searching for the exit
To shame maybe but also simply my wrists
Since I learned to talk I have always sworn
There's a seam to everything even loneliness
Even in Eden green translated to abandoned
How palindromic the kingdom of an eye
Vision always drowns the seen so why seek
Reflection before anything else The new world
Stays feelin itself At the end of everything
Who will manage my fade My hands will only
Ever meet each other again I lied earlier
I haven't *always* wanted anything and yet

Here I am at the death of *always* and somehow
Its birth how palindromic the kingdom
Of always I am searching for the old world
In which I was miserable but I knew its name
Absolution is in my hands by virtue of succession
The lethargic green moan surrounds this self too
Each crest's feeble music *beyond beyond beyond*
But I'm acting painfully human again an elegy
For what does not elegize an elegy for what struck first
Where are her bones now
Waves brief petals like the muscle tissue of a forest
I am mocked by another man's Eden so long as I allow it
The green surges in and if she is gone how long before
She is merely a word that I loved From where I stand there is a seam
To everything but want This is my new always: searching
For how to forgive being the last of anything

The Book of Yeezus

An arrow does its own form of singing I like to believe
this means nothing is ever too far
from the bird that it was I tender the dark
with a hum we cannot die in a legion
of spells for the Black boys who learned
to make the light sorry All I have ever wanted
is to be the wound you neon
all I have ever wanted is to die beautiful
in hands I could mistake for yours
All seasons are becoming the season
of my isolation the green sputters long
into December so I think we are all less invested
in loyalty these days O you gilded Amistad
the mouth I'd forgive without question froths
with an armada of golden hulled ships Excess
I too pretty the interruption when I cannot bear
the elegy any longer I don't know how not to love
what would kill me without noticing I can be
ferocious with my ugly I can be the knife chanting
silver through the abrasion I wish I could write
of you as something that would break if I held it
living for too long O grief-cousin phantom-chain
wind-throne blade-choir What is death to the children
of the forgotten One day too my mother will die
and my loneliness will be a hyperbole of ravens
all of which will sing like fugitives *Glory Glory*
how much I'll miss her While yours anthem in the wrong
direction I will probably still love you then *Glory Glory*
how easy I march in defense of another man who wants me dead

DOWN

“If we die in each other’s arms still get laid in that afterlife”- Kanye West

I too wish to be a prostrate floral interruptive
My mother is every bit as merciless as my father The genesis
Of my softness a book salted to pulp by casual influences
My mother told me to never cry I obeyed Told me to be safe
I have never forgiven the digression my desire presents Boys taste like
Death Maybe Popeyes if we feel fancy I want to make a joke that’s a false
Flag for the question What happens when someone wants you to live
So badly that it’s killing you I was right the first time Boys taste like death
And the eyes oblige entry too easily to be something you can keep He looks
Beautiful as something I could trust to finish the job once I am wounded
I want to be pulled apart as if my ass is a book waterlogged Genesis dead seam
Empty and full bodied as surrender They kill people for wanting And I want
To live longer than my mother more than I want to die as myself O invisible
Wound barely shrouded wood gravity is pulling me towards a synonym
For casket Mine eyes have seen the glory of whose apology will kiss me
I’m gone Eager bouquet sprawled on blue like stars you pierce my eye and drown

Internal Memoranda
May. 1961
Central Intelligence Agency
From: [REDACTED]
To: [REDACTED]

Mission report confirms [REDACTED] justice [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Trujillo [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] betrayal [REDACTED] wounded [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] fleeing up the highway [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] We are not godly enough men [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] he did not make it much further [REDACTED] blood-
drunk son of a [REDACTED] screaming [REDACTED] in nobody's [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] language. [REDACTED] Imbert shot him in the chin. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Sic Semper Tyrannis. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] savor this night, [REDACTED]
the silvered holes in [REDACTED] Chevy Bel Air mocked the stars, [REDACTED] we can meet for
beers after 6 [REDACTED]

The Cane Field Testifies Regarding the Assassination of the Mirabal Sisters

Pues es posible que I have learned to fear la lluvia
All of my saddest stories have the same beginning
Entiendes? One thing falls into another I am fallen

Into all the time Men enter me like rain
Swing the moon in their hands until I'm mud
I suck their boots beg them tranquilase tranquilase

It was an accident mostly to have lived this long
I regret the entry but what choice did I have
Men shove their weapons inside me and only I

Ever think to call them bastard All I have ever
Said has been blamed on the wind como una
Mariposa I am beautiful because I am surrounded

Guapisima I am cherished most by the blade
Yo soy la prima de la tormenta What rages
against me used to keep me alive entiendes?

Es posible que every storm begets women
I am only what memories were buried in me
So I can't say what's buried elsewhere

Una pais is only as good as the saddest acres
Of its deception Nobody can tell you this
Better than la tierra itself That night it rained

They dragged them off the road El poder de
La tormenta es en el oscuro y los manos
I howled for a country I'm mostly made of ghost

Stories and rumors The men entered me
What choice did I have but to suck their boots
For this crime they have only ever called me citizen

I tremble when the rain comes De verdad
When the soldiers came back I mistook the headlights
Of the truck for lightning The thunder for acres of batons

The Zero Country

The wind melodies hard through the cotton

All I need to know the dead crave
gerunds with a desperation traditionally

reserved for rain it occurs to me
too often that in another world I count
among those historical dead Some
imagination prayed me another life
beyond what made me their ancestor
One age stretching past kingdom
crown of silence I have been mourned
now live again elsewhere and this is what

I have done with it I spit on statues
in front of men who own multiple knives
Men dressed like trees their children
dream of deer and what it means to own

I purse my lips try to become dead
in this world too every step I take here
is a sad defiance of the escape given

I ride past rows of cotton the sun transfigures
them into gills of the bleakest fish O meadow
of child's fists O violence that grows into
a more efficient violence I'm some other town's
ghost story Their knives moan my name
the whetstone after all the bride of history

All their love is cleaving in any other language
I walk beneath trees become the moon's sharp whistle
Violence is not my only name still all the men

I find in foliage look at me and whisper *Come true*
Come true Miles of mud beneath the cotton spread
like the scab of a flame I scrub clay from beneath
my fingernails wax a rust moon in the sink I remember
fire only has a few alternatives

Arroz Poetica

After Aracelis Girmay

It is your name that I am calling when I want
to massage the machetes into rain. You who

I am signaling back from grief. The country you
don't know is perfect. Even with our enemies,

who multiply like rice, in the space between
your hands, which were papered so close

to the veins that I have reduced you to a map
because I only ever had time for the one language;

and the water. In that space between the enemies
spin shrapnel cavalier as stars. I am watching

the water boil I am watching our enemies scream
into nourishment while the fires below make the air

scowl through them. O Abuelo, you who are gone,
it is you who I am calling from a field as seasonably dark

as your name. What brings a daughter to call her father
after rice? Moro, breath the sad daughter

of various consequences of fire I am saying your name
to tender the moon which according to your daughters

is merely a callous on your palm. All the luminous holes
your sky a field and a field and a field and a city of rice.

It is me citizen of an echo of an unknowing who
beats somewhere because of what you refused to die of.

What if the blade is inextricable from gratitude? The country
I don't know is perfect, because I have not laid eyes on the escape,

and because the bullets have no eyes only my mother's mouth,
which is these days plagued by a language in which every sentence

can't begin with *I miss*. It is your name I am calling to knead her
with my hands. My mother, daughter of the escape, glad citizen

of the war you escaped to from the war you were a young man in
once. It is your name I am calling because mine is not enough,

because there was once a place where you heard your favorite song
and once a place where you could not return, and they are the same

place. Because there was once a man whose hands dripped bleach
and insisted *seafoam*, because he ran the country into his name.

His name which I cast out to strangers when I mean to say *All that I am
stems back to what you were not taught. I am the son of the flight,*

*the propeller an insistence of blades, which churn the air like my mother
who does not know you but likely misses you still, stranger. O, tonight*

the dark is thickening around the barrel of the moon I utter you
my first idea of South and past my window my street seethes

thick with the fugitives of rain and past them a field I could have lived
my entire death in and past that another another another

until the rain carries me over cane fields I imagine you loved once
and doors where you once held a cigarette and pulled the fire down

to its rind. If the moon can't be an eye or the barrel of a language's
remorseless light let everywhere be your hands at least tonight.

O it is your name I am calling as if the rain will not always fall
like machetes. Abuelo there was rain in the world before you died,

I'm sure of it. But now you are the prince of all that falls so hard
I think it must mean to kill the field Prince of the rice that clatters

down into its tenderness Insisting itself south past what was once
named by the enemy All your dominion laughs *I live I live again.*

LAMENTATION

I want a church of this a triptych of tainted hands
I've never lived in a country where I could trust
The light to thread itself through the right flaw
I've been enumerating the gaps the sun flails through
Soon I will speak of winter and the gravity will be negligible
O how we have wounded the ocean with our fleeing
I have grown sick as the gut of a wave with the light that means Dead
Give me the window of the Jordan Clad Saint I'll make my stand
Photons here fall an apocalyptic Black we worship a fragile god
And that is how we know we can trust him I don't trust any gospel
That thinks the world will end outside of a boy's palm
I want a church of this and only this *The world ain't gotta end all at once*
And it won't and it won't and it won't and it won't and
Here it is now that I have found the impossible valley of a boy laid across
The palms of another the arc of his hips bronzed at the setting of the world
I am a window I weep copper crowns across the carpet at the stars
Searing a bright I must mistake for flowers I keep my grief pristine
And in a series of identical boxes categorized by color
Offspring of a stray history Let me be the stain The aggression
Of the sun blooms through *Glory* Gild my steps with the implication of lilies

The Book of Yeezus

Hunger always been my most loyal religion, now I am the last god of my youth. A boy tenders the window to fragments, hums *this will be a beautiful death*; calls all that touches him on the way down *Sky*.

I love most what enables me to be reckless with survival. His mask flush with white diamonds; I watch him do his work and admire how a man can flower like a magnolia. I am miles from the man and still wish to kiss the hale from his face; I am in the practice of searching for the mercy in everything. I have lost the ability to cry for decades now. If tears really are our ultimate metric of sadness, then I am as ok as I have claimed. I am saying *lost* when I mean *My body made a decision without me*.

Responsibility, as I have learned it, is to die in defense of what is indifferent to you. I am the son of an apology that never arrived. Left to my own devices, I will always find my way back to the word *fugitive*. I am sick of the quiet that allegiance has brought me. There are too many summers for this not to be the end of something. I make a terrible bride in this weather; swelter and my bondage to the idea of men now the blush of a river violence has trickled into. There is blood on the leaves of my present and now the forest is always setting.

I am trying to let go, I am trying to unspool the notion of throne but— of course, the problem is regardless the monarch, your father still dies.

I have been kissing a locked door and on the other side, what? I imagine a mouth whining the dead to rhythm, the end of elegy as I know it. Maybe a field tilled patiently by storms; I make awful weather and yet— my reluctant pastoral; I promise, I would die here if only I knew how. I could love this; this lushness, everything here is a Black reserved for certain species of jazz.

RUMORS OF WAR

And maybe I don't know anything about desire
Outside of wanting to straddle a beast that wants
All of the same things I would expect of the short lived
The boy on the horse mirrors me only because our eyes meet
While he is charging into the seam of the world as if he is
Declaring a war on intricacy maybe it is the softness in us
That most urgently needs to be mown down in a field
By an avalanche of muscle Always the white steed flexin'
Like the sheathing of a day Where I have always lived
Treason is a matter of degrees and I am complicit for lacking
Urgency in my escape Any children I have will be born into war
I want few things more than I want stability in what I lament
I see the boy turn his face from the pastoral of gold and am the horse
Am a desire pimped A new whip inaugurated with the spoils of staying
It is a year where what moves gleams backward bejeweled and chuckling
Like a fistful of scalpels I'm the year that is every year
Where the white tees are abundant dependent on the quality of surrender
We are pollen or an armada where the wind points I will hang

Emile's Lament

"They could forgive me for killing a man but not for loving one"- Emile Griffith

When I beat him every lens swelled shut
I got fight stories to tell that shame hunger
for the percussion involved in return
Imagine what a child imagines the answer
to everything is in a man's mouth just because
It's where the music begins I didn't mean
anything similar to lust when we started
he called me a faggot and the uvula is
analogous to a speedbag you know the duality
of my percussion I like to dance in the swelter
of need regardless the body I like to make the skin
quiver on what might come back
I understand the sad calculus of vanity
beauty springs from the unforgiven
I can't say his death was anything like anything
I have ever wanted on purpose
Rather consider the slaughter I would have to make
to shame even an American eye for decades
I did not do anything that a kiss couldn't
I unbloomed an iris shucked the teeth from his mouth
then resumed being beautiful loving what I was famous
for ending the privilege of champions is what you kill
only visits in dreams what do I know at this point
of the melody of begging but the way swell restrains an M
Maricon maricon maricon mari mari Mary mercy mercy the knuckle
a seed in the soil of the eye the gusts of blood sewing the canvas
a proliferation of roses This my most public sin that I did not watch
him die but I was told and was unsurprised I skim the petals
of scar tissue from my hands until my knuckles are riddled with tender
lenses I sleep next to my man I sleep with one wound open

Another Chapter

*“Twice upon a time there was a boy who died.
And lived happily ever after. But that’s another chapter”- Andre 3000*

Tender is the barrel of the man serving himself
with a violence he will never use. I too take heat
with unbecoming delicacy. Wing of lightning
I play Teflon to the giggle of light. I doubt
there’s anything I want more
than to find myself beholden only to the weight
I choose. Why else the chains than to make a country that lies
in the soft of the beholder? Hear me.
I am bright and riddled with survival. Hear me.
I held the gun and fed it petty stars. Hear me.
It was 2004. I was twelve and what did I know of dying but desire?
Hear me. The gun wasn’t real.
Hear me. Still
the silvered fact of the barrel, dull in the light.
It was 2002. Hear me. The barrel was a train.
The train was a dull lightning. The train was an entire year.
Some years answer, and some are merely a violence we will never use. What then
to do with all this survival?
I am staring down the barrel of my own living.
Hear me, I am closest to tender when a fist stutters me with lilacs.
All the niggas I love kiss each other by shadowboxing,
all my niggas trust the malleability of violence
as if it raised us, because it did.
What do we know of soft but to restrain
the arm as if leashed by a tide?
Violence then, not antithetical to softness but
a question of the velocity of what we can barely say.
O, pistol pirouetting the leash of the finger;
O, my niggas loyal as a bruise; my forgiving gravity
I have been yearning to tell you, truly,
of what I would inflict in your name.
I am an empire of aching barrels,

I am a violence I may never use.

The Book of Yeezus

I too am afraid
that without my sadness I will disperse
There are fewer synonyms for god
than are convenient

The shattered only lusts
for company What is torn has only ever
dreamed a golden grammar

for what it can't
recall I don't remember a time before
intrusion Maybe I was everything Maybe I was
sorry Once I tore my body for the sake of
loving it I am citizenized by each ache I learned
presence from the most American of fugitives

The Fugitive's Gospel reads as follows:

*a wound is a tenderness you nurse for decades
If you dress a fracture in gold it is barely a wound at all*

My head ringed by acres of a scarlet October I believe
there's a wound above me I'm just the wound of everything else

First February of the Life I Lost

O Little February I have been waiting
to forget my new image of betrayal this boy
somewhere in your mouth though I have never
asked for details for I knew I could not bear it

It is hot under all this remembering
Regardless the season it is my least favorite weather
I confess I took pride
in my ability to absorb this hurt
in exchange for knowing you I architect of this sad geography
I loved you but loved your potential even more
You loved me I'm sure of it but you loved being better than me
even more O my love you touched me in that first February
Kissed me and it was the end of weather O leash I made of you
I built the house so wrong content to know there was a house

I loved you more than you loved me
and I accepted that too readily offered forgiveness too early
O little tether years now since your name
became the unsayable thing

My house is infested with the *was* of love
My back an arrogant crop of knots It is September I am weary
with the *is* of living

Variation on a Theme of Athazagoraphobia

After SZA

“Why am I so easy to forget like that?” - SZA

I'll know we're done when my wounds forget me
Let me tell you a secret
I was betrayed and I spent the light
massaging the silence with a song
I'm sure there's a myth for what has never felt
pretty enough to speak mid-dissection
but I'm not interested because my mother taught me
never to cry over a woman and so I do not weep
because most floods begin as a rumor
I name the blade for the sound it makes
against my fingernails I'm in pursuit of a bloodless metaphor
for having been cheated on Proximity is a language
in which I am always dissolving Like anything
governed by physics there are limits to forgetting
I'm within the margin of error for most things
I forgave you because I believed if you left
I would never have the chance to forgive you
there is no crueler recursion
than loving what you cannot manage to pardon
At least theoretically what's done is done
I'm still eating the vegetables I ate for the sake
of staying alive for you I am
dragging your dark sugar over my pores
watching myself populate the drain

Ode To My Abuelo's Lungs or Every Country Sits Atop a Lake of Tar

Alabanza
that it will not be this cough
that claims him after these
90-something years
it is the South that will end
him and I say South
meaning that I come from
somewhere
where a nation is only a translation
for what had to be abandoned
in the jaw of a pistol
beneath my Abuelo's chest
shriveled patches of land
threaded with gunpowder

Abuelo argues to return to Santo Domingo
and we remind him that it was an argument
that brought us here in the first place
it was the journey to Washington Heights
that begged him to shred his lungs
and now the dust of his ingles
swirls a soft storm and he is old
too old for anything that does not promise
wings and a good burial
an airplane will kill him but so will the staying
he mumbles my name and home
in a language we inherited from a pistol
he uses our hands to deny the disease
and I know he has used my fingers to cradle
a cigarette and kiss it like an exile
he does not care if he dies
if he is home for the dying
speaks only What he would give to mount the sky
carrying only two little bags full of sulfur
if you could hear him cough you would
swear it sounds like somebody he loved
fumbling desperately for the exit

The Zero Country

Patriot but of what?

Actually I have my answer no need
to bother pretending anything innocent
has ever been memorialized I understand
my training is to try and slack the blade
with a question because it is easier
than the truth which is that the statue
says *They gave their lives for a just and holy
cause* And I know here I am
someone's nobility brushing grave dirt
off a name brand jacket And yet I am not
even as angry as I am baffled by what it seems
is meant to stand forever No not even that
It's the word *Gave* which is soft like the interior
of a fist as if there were a volunteering
I am afraid of what rhetoric I still let surprise me
Gave as if it were a public service to keep trying
to trade me like a good asset to the space
because it is the rule of law here where I am
a species of landscape A pastoral here where
your dead stand nearly as tall as the law
How long have I been asking this question
straight outta the grave of forgetting? Patriot
every time I engage in a staring contest with
this irisless debacle and spit on it as if I have
no memory that I have died for less a multitude
of times *They gave their lives for a just and holy
cause* There is nothing Blacker than uncertainty
There is a point where language chose to stop
remembering You know my many names
and no matter the letters pronounce each of them
Mercy Gave their lives in this county where I know
that once there was a fire and then it stopped
Within every stone a chisel can find a prodigious
killer I know from experience that there is a word
for *Take* in every language and in nearly every language
it is used too sparingly I exercise what I know
about stone Anthem *Mercy* I erode you slow
And now? All your children call me *Rain*

The Zero Country

“Let us live again, Sweet, come back & haunt these fields” – Aracelis Girmay

If nothing else, I kiss you in defiance
of what dogs drove us to this moment. We arrived
with me draped in orchids and you a vision
all my instincts name blood, but tenderness
tells me must be different. Maybe I’m wrong,
blood is always softer than what it survived,
and yet it survived. I am loving you here in the valley,
which is as far back as I can trace the beginning of everything,
which in this language seems the beginning of bondage. Once here
there was not a word for manacle, or whip, what violence there was;
mostly a question of necessity. I’m sure now,
that once this lushness had no grammar for hands, only the birds
whose throats scoured the morning raw antheming of territory
and the debt of the light. I know now, you were dressed
like a thickness of dawn, telling me all you knew of all of this
land’s wild imaginings. After everything, may there always be your hands.
May there be the inevitable miracle of beginnings
where I could only see miles of what happened.
I love that you love the trees into their names, here
where I lose the trail of my own. You sweet possibility,
hum a whole field, and I have no logic
with which to say whether this is in fact the right sound
for this plant this place where the light ends.
Still you say Sweetgrass and Azalea and Never
cotton. Say Magnolia and the air thick with brides.
I’m trying to say I am made of so many softnesses
and the survivals they left behind. I am kissing you
that we might haunt this language where the pistol
has been a kind of pollen. This is the first time
that I have ever been here and not said *Dead* or
Fugitive. Instead I remember that there must be a place
where the word ends. Let it be here, let it be here.

Son of a Bad

"I must become / I must become a menace to my enemies"- June Jordan

History only becomes more unmanageable the longer that it goes on

This is America

and that is precisely the problem

I'm singing from the intersection of the relevant centuries

I am doing something mean to what they have made Consider

I am the last of the polite requests

I am the last of the unsick Earth

I am the last of the ones who were stolen

or who stole themselves

Because this is America I know where to look when I say scorch

I know what was escaped I know I cannot give you back your violence

only the promise of kudzu O shelter that starves I say

WANT

Softly but trust I mean to kill the entire field



I am sung from the faultline in a national morality I would tell you
the story straight but I have been too generous with my blood
Suffice to say I am the son of a plural I legion My name is a consequence
because we are many Archival erosion I arrived bedecked and nasty
I arrived 808 hullsongs with no lyrics I want you to hear me I am lush
with fugitives From a series of dirty Black eternitys From a series of merciless
summers I ride I ride I ride I write to unblood the soil I bang a song
Unabashed in the silence between what ought to be and what happened



Taste what is sharp when you need most badly to remember me
I am telling you as directly as gravity allows there are miles
of threat and I am one of them because when you hold the knife
observe it with your eyes that tenderness you must have plucked
from somewhere from someone the blade beholds me in a way
that briefly makes us cousins Circumstance whets me across years
and oceans I gleam I am a menace gownned by rumors I'm your
ghost story You know which one Flinch/Praise I am Bad on both sides
you pressed me against a headstone and I laughed a warpland laugh
as your house collapsed behind you



To unwish the tragedy is to unwish myself I have unwished myself for less
Despite my best efforts I am the son of this concept too Once there was
a train I rode it even though I meant for it to wear me The end

of history as I could change it Instead I live I draw each hotter breath
on this planet in this place which I imagine will be the last to know
when the war climaxes though to me this is the only place it could have begun
I mistake a magnolia petal for the wing my great grandfather could have been
How long until all my dead are the same beauty? At my worst I am begging
the flood My superheated ancestral I am trusting a strength I invented
in a language that has taken me everywhere but home I do not know what it is
to truly want to survive only what it is to want to outlive to want back
what is owed O majesty O knuckles knitting into the familiar The end

is whatever tenderness I might sow in the wake of my vengeance



From those acres of ungovernable grief the horns rose like gulls

Some notes tethered to the sky others to the heat

The enemy is urgent with guilt and in this history a boy

is blowing his notes on a cauterized landscape I can see why

everyone my father has ever loved once dressed like the moon

I'm the son of a bad man but the song cracks where I would have

had a father Fine I am fathered by the fire then regardless I am born



I am changing the You here I am pivoting towards what some I love
cannot follow I leave the smoldering gate of a house in my wake
If you can follow here where the unimaginable became the survived
I name you Bad the oceans will stop short of wherever we stand
Our name is the living and the dead for we are many and what we are is
A technology lost to the enemy O my tender legion for you I give
My name to what we once called history or war or country when it saved us
to feign worship of what was inflicted If I have any allegiance left I pledge it
to the fugitives and what was sung on the run to what I cannot call hope
Daughters-Sons-Children-Consequences-Survivals-Bullets That Missed-Bullets That Returned
Miles of Wings Name then ourselves If history is truly dead I am glad
To spend what lies beyond the dominion of time with you



FLEX

Hear me

Neglect turned everything to gold

Midas touch I turn the comfortable

To the dead an anti-elegy tho I'm

Learning not to mourn what I make

It's a complex this gravity I birth unknowing

Not my complex yours say it

I am owned by several things all of them

Inherited from a horizon claimed before

I was languaged Invoke the historical

Somethingsomethingsomething **Chains**

Somethingsomethingsomething **Unworthy**

I'm citizen of a clumsy imperative

Belonging is a concern of a self I deaded

Past participle implies the historical is a mob

Try again I mobbed my own lonely and was legion

Play some offense then Gold the impossible wound

Citizen of betrayal Citizen of the going going going–

Recursion this fugitive state as native to me as my father's

Eyes chestnut of a tree felled before we were languaged

See Inheritance is a hell of a drug We Black and highly valued

For our Flex I said what I said and became citizen

Of this petty excuse for forever Flex on em then

Invocation of the bicep I have and the bicep throttling me

I live here now Mississippi and everywhere is everywhere

That someone may have escaped from Fugitive

A sad motivation for river It's a strange thing

That belief you are beautiful be a subversion of the water
But here I am winter gasping at the conditions
Too weak to even strangle the grass to soil No instead
Trees feathered with their hollowed offspring
Here the wind don't howl just blooms a militia
Of castanets seven people were lynched here
I looked it up and nobody will tell me which tree
You are not as tired of the image as I am of uncertainty
Everyday the rain threatens Everyday my same imperious lonely
Hear me the sun ran like a punk the sun ran like it owed
Not even the gold is trustworthy why gold?
Because it was the color of my love and by extension
The life I buried here Gold the genesis of one lonely
My ancestors were traded mere miles from here Gold the genesis
Of another I know they are not the same in anything but geography
Still it is an act of Flex just to stand anywhere gravity being what it is
Attempt the volta towards impossible Midas the lonely into a radif
Dreams of living life like a gilded garrote

Flex

The crown of scar tissue still the crown

Flex

Go to therapy if you scared

Flex

Shuck the fear out of the opposition

Flex

Everyday gold for the sake of your attention

Flex

Your hereness a mountain plumed with trees

branches hemmed like unplayed notes
A history can be undone with less than an alphabet
Amend the scandal of the time that brought you here
Fled to Flex Ex. My family fled from Mississippi
My family flexed from Mississippi and you become
The muscle driving you forward See you were ugly
Once because you believed it Dire invocation
I am some kind of unkillable and don't know how to act
Everything I said I couldn't live without

Gone

Lucky me to be born into a language of mistakes
I leave the violent on *Seen* and watch them wither
Turns out I was their gravity their forgetful sovereign
I Flex they flinch the sonics of the words cousins
By virtue of a pistol This is how I was taught to bridle
Sadness like an American Run with a band of kids
With silver caps so you know we bad waiting for the bone
Eviction Flex like value native to your mouth Tooth out
A tiny moon a second grin shimmering in your palm Flex
The loss the cost is secondary Hear me a life I had ended
While I was trying to pursue the life I wanted by pursuing
A loss cobwebbed as a bride All of this true the calcium winnowing
Under the gold I widowed my own comfort I am in danger
My squad an echo my squad a promise you get dead someday
If you touch me thus I'm untouched neglect killed the grass
The dead turn to gold before they resurrect I am framed
By a pastoral I might have escaped once O the history
O the lineage the renowned Flex of survivors I'm here

I'm back muscled like a creek or the whisper
That threads a storm miles later Maybe not Stick to the facts
I'm alive despite a growing and planetary grief I wear a chain
Somedays and a sweatshirt that translates to *I Am Coming*
Back For What Is Mine Gaudy surprise on the faces of children
Of owners They think I am impossible They think I am a ghost
I Medusa like my daddy taught me their eyes wilt and are
Ill-tended grapes consumed by the skull I'm metaphoring
I told you I don't know how to act but I know how to anthem
My lyric loose and I got time today I'm the type of bad
No synonym alive can hold

Notes

- The epigraphs of this collection in order come from Ruth Ellen Kocher's *One Girl Babylon*, Kanye West's *The College Dropout* and Ai's *Vice*
- "The King is Dead, Long Live the King" incorporates fragments of lyrics from the Kanye West song "Gorgeous" from his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*
- The term "Moon Cricket" is an antiquated racial slur for Black people believed to originate from enslaved Black people's practice of singing songs in the field at night
- "Mississippi Genesis" follows the "Genesis" form invented by Amanda Johnston. The form uses a five-column contrapuntal poem with a seventh poem sourced from the italicized text.
- "LAMENTATION (Black Jesus Remix)" is an ekphrastic of Kehinde Wiley's "Lamentation" series
- "Codeswitch Decomposing into Lil Wayne Lyric" is written after Danez Smith's "Untitled and Vanishing." The Lil Wayne lyric comes from the song "Pussy Monster"
- The epigraph of "DOWN" comes from the Kanye West song "Lost In The World" from his album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. "DOWN" takes its title from Kehinde Wiley's series of the same name.
- The dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo was assassinated in a shootout in his signature Chevy Bel Air in May of 1961. It has long been speculated that the guns used in the assassination were provided by the CIA
- The four Mirabal Sisters were the revolutionary leaders of The Movement of the Fourteenth of June were assassinated on Trujillo's orders on November 25th, 1960. Three of the sisters, Patria, Minerva and Antonia Maria, were beaten to death in a sugar cane field by soldiers while driving back from visiting their imprisoned husbands. In order to cover up the assassination, the soldiers loaded the sister's bodies back into the car and crashed it into the field to stage an accident.
- The epigraph of "Son of a Bad" comes from June Jordan's "I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies"
- "LAMENTATION" takes its title from Kehinde Wiley's stained-glass series of the same name
- "The Book of Yeezus [Hunger always been my most loyal religion]" references the Kanye West song "Power"
- "RUMORS OF WAR" is an ekphrastic of the Kehinde Wiley portrait series of the same name
- Emile Griffith was the Black bisexual welterweight champion boxer of the world. After being called a "maricon" by Cuban boxer Benny "The Kid" Paret, Griffith killed Paret in their 1962 title match. He was haunted by nightmares until the day he died.
- "Another Chapter" is an ekphrastic of a GIF in which rapper Andre 3000 spins a pistol on his finger in order to tip a tiny saucer of tea to his lips. The epigraph comes one of his verses on the Outkast song "Aquemini"
- "The Book of Yeezus [I too am afraid]" references Kanye's 2003 car crash and subsequent recovery in which he had gold teeth to cover up the damage done to his jaw after the nearly fatal accident. It also references Pusha T's verse on the Kanye West song

“New.God.Flow.1” where he raps “I believe there’s a god above me, I’m just the god of everything else”

- “IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS” is an ekphrastic poem that takes its title from the Kehinde Wiley maritime painting series of the same name
- “Variation on a Theme of Athazagoraphobia” is written after the SZA song “Supermodel”
- “The Zero Country [Patriot but of what]” references the inscription on the confederate monument in the town square of Oxford, Mississippi
- “Arroz Poetica” is written after Aracelis Girmay’s poem of the same name
- The epigraph of “The Zero Country [If nothing else, I kiss you in defiance]” comes from Aracelis Girmay’s “Teeth”

VITA

Julian Randall is a Living Queer Black poet from Chicago. He has received fellowships from Cave Canem, CantoMundo, Callaloo, BOAAT and the Watering Hole. Julian is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize. Julian is the winner of the 2019 Betty Berzon Emerging Writer Award from the Publishing Triangle. His poetry has been published in New York Times Magazine, Ploughshares, and POETRY and anthologized in *Bettering American Poetry*, *Nepantla* and *Furious Flower*. He has essays in LitHub and other venues. He holds an MFA in Poetry from Ole Miss. His first book of poetry, *Refuse* (Pitt, Fall 2018), is the winner of the 2017 Cave Canem Poetry Prize and a finalist for the 2019 NAACP Image Award in Poetry.