

CORE

poems

DENISE MILLER



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CORE

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Floors and Fittings

This is the house built on flat of scrap white
pine and sycamore— family, floored with chisel,

chainsaw, hammer. They faced the flat of walls,
lime plastered and plugged of breath by sand

and water too wet to bet the mortgage on. This
is the house built on sweat of potsherd women

whole as wood thinnings, and yet they rolled
the bones of great, grand and mother, fashioned

tongues as door with chisel, chainsaw, hammer—they
bet the rent on love-lack, and lack of love is what their

whetstone bent into its fittings, then strawed to broom
they jumped from heart to floor. This is the house built

with muddied-good intentions dried to vow stopped breath
and yet, and yet, they bet with chisel, chainsaw, hammer.

So send a postcard just to the west of I do and yes
and there will be the house built
with chisel, chainsaw, and hammer.

Communion

Saturday morning sun streaks
through stained glass, slanting

gold across red carpet, as if God
gathered up his glory and threw

it clean through the milky way to
split this steel gray morning. We

have already been to the furnace.
Stirred coals until they coughed

like a young boys lungs after a puff
on his first cigarette while we waited

for the church's coffee colored walls
to warm. Although it's nothing new to

us, this once monthly ritual of pouring
grape juice into glasses, placing glasses

into round, silver trays; I round the corner
of the pew and pause, preparing to meet

God. At the altar, we place silver trays
piled with small glass cups cupping the

blood of Christ. Sit them on the wooden altar.
Then whisk starched white sheets across

so quickly, that the flap of fabric
catches air and for a moment, flies.

Miracle

For a moment, I am flight.
She is right. My slip of stream
gleams gold instead of smoke.

And she is also right to sight me
in the shined sweep of sunlight, instead
of in the scratch and spill of ink.

They are choking her with Sunday
stories— they are splintering me
into thorn and nail and rails of wood.

When she rounds this corner I could turn
her wine back to water, undo the fiction
that makes her totter. Instead, I breathe
in her belief and exhale fabric into wings.

Story Tell Me

:her

that cellophaned tenets turn to heartwood. Story, sell me that this body
is a trunk, sunk deep into its own soil. Convince
my fingerprinted memory that when roots coil skin
that it isn't the paradoxed end of living. Only
the lip of hope that births bleak into a beginning rinsed
of snake and apple and eve-figged sin.

:god

Story, tell her that love is a mouth, bell shaped and coward-quiet
grioting god into truth—loose as lightning
flying into sunlight. Story, whisper wildly
that tonight love is a verse that eviscerates silence—
a fairytale where the beanstalk is really a tree that rises
in its rooting—right now in her back yard-deep and bark-skin winding.
Story, spell her a tale of tears turned to taproot grown from unbinding—
salted seeds split from the tip of her tongue, growing defiant.

Clean

I live in my mother's back yard. In a house
as yellow as summer lemons and just as sour

beyond the pith inside. Two sons and three
daughters have fallen from between my legs

like water. I am quick as the click of high heels
on nighttime pavement and have mimicked my

mother's week-long work in white women's kitchens.
But, I have refused the rough knees knocked out

on the rub of linoleum and wood by bending low
when they came in to see me shine their floors.

I never got down on my knees for white folks
or God either.

Birth

She says I fell from between her legs like water,
but I know I was no river. I wasn't rushing in to life
because I've never rushed into anything.

I know instead, that I trickled creek water slow,
threading length of birth canal to daylight. Feet
first probably, to measure the give and take of ground.

And all the while I wound, I was testing her pace since all her
life she sounded all grace and click and tick-tock movement
while I sounded shuffle and seep and drip-drop stream.

Afterbirth

:mother

I saw her as sheath of bat
wing. At 3 or 5 of 4 or maybe 2
she was transparent and still, until
the singing sling of Orion's belt blew
her away from this, our second skin.

I could see her lift at the corner of my
eye and knew she wanted to bring
me in. Wanted to fold me in
the flap of her hurt-shaped hollow, so

:daughter

I bent my boneless sorrow into bow
string, forged my steel-tipped ache
into the break where arrow meets sin.
I wanted to shape my heart-skin
to be the quiver she bears me in.

I wanted her to meet me again—wanted
her to greet me as bat wing or know
me as the singing sling of Orion's belt.

Supper

Light streaks across black sky tonight like colored
ribbons blown straight by wind. The air's so
still, seems earth forgot to breathe, again.

I set down the bowl of snap beans I am splitting
for tomorrow's supper on the wooden porch slats
and watch the night shape your saunter to the bottom step.

You are straight and healing as milkweed.

Come to New York with me, you say. I hear a black
man can dig out more of a life in those wide streets
than he can in these dark Ohio valley coal mines.

Your words mount the steps my father built as you wear
a grin so contagious that it curves from the corners of your
cheeks like creek water. You promise—

We could leave tomorrow.

I am sitting stiff backed on a rough-hewn
rocker. My baby's cries slip through the screen
door and blow the wind right out of me. I watch

moon light fall to earth like ashes from the roof
of a burning house. I am black. A woman. Aged
twenty-five. Mother of three. Widowed.

The night air still holds stiff as silence.

The fingers of my right hand stroke the slip of bean still folded
in its palm. I snap one stringed edge, the other, then my thumb
and forefinger split the bean swiftly in two. I have always loved

the beans that grow out back beyond the buckeye trees.
Just now I know, you will pack one small bag tonight,
full of blue trousers and white shirts.

Tomorrow, I will bake ham for me to eat with these green beans for supper.

Leave

We could leave tomorrow. Could slip
off alley dust like the slate blue work shirt
I skin off mid-threshold every night.

Baby, if you are a sassafras tree in flower—
I am dandelion all gone to seed. Here,
all the life gets blown out of me.

Which Stars? a braided aubade

:she

Since the rising points of stars sit sure, there's no need
to right ourselves on morning. This slightly southern
moon albumins the tips of grass, egg white— when I
was young, I used to pinch the belly of a firefly, lay its
light on my marriage finger then let it trail my linger
into midnight. Now, the only breath that feeds me
is stirred to wind by the shelled song of cicadas.

:he

Baby, each day our risings and settings could be
due east or south of this nowhere. Honey, instead
of being pulled by tide, we could make our own light—
could site ourselves in the spark of train to track. You
got to know; I can't go back to young. Cause then all I
wanted was to run straight through night to morning.

Shutter

When my granddaughters strain to snap
my picture, I turn my head away so
suddenly that the slap of it shapes
their smiles into small, black o's.

There was a time, that hours saw me
stop in mirrors to see my reflection,
that mornings saw me slice a perfect
charcoal c under each eye, then slowly
trace my smile red. There was a time
when my legs were thick with possibility,
that I would stop along roadsides to pick
cattails and search for my silhouette in sunlight.

This is not the first time I have refused
to see myself. There was a time before
marriage to a man whose fingers held the neck
of a whiskey bottle with more gentleness than when
they gripped my own throat, a time before six boys
were born out of me, only to be made in their father's
image, a time before cushions cradled the familiar
curve of bodies, my husband's at the center of our bed
and mine on the couch that I mark as the first time,
when I, mirror less, veiled my face in white lace, then
closed the door to my father's house and opened
it to my husband's without looking.

semantics

it wasn't a whisky bottle's neck i nuzzled.
it was the stiff slick of a peony. just add this
to the things she got bottle-necked between
what I shoulda been and could never be. She

was word-raised while i grazed on auto grease
and miner's dust. she bent abc's into some kinda
damn verse— so yeah, i buried xyz's in her throat.
see, i was mechanic and she was engine—all piston

and ring. and when i oiled her—
bone and breath,
boy could she sing.

Origin Story: a braided triolet

:she

It was always the whiskey bottle's neck.
The fact that father's fingers figure eighted mother's
adam's apple, pushed "i do" from these lips liquid as breath.
It was always the whiskey bottle's neck.
I know you also got birthed from death.
I know your daddy grabbed the throat of your mother.
It was always the whiskey bottle's neck—
the fact that daddy's fingers figure-eighted mother's.

:he

how you know my nicotine and lovers
ain't fruit from the family tree i watched my daddy plant?
how you know i don't wanna be more than the fists of my father
how you know my nicotine and my lovers
ain't the whiskey-wet haint that hovers
in my sons whose madness cuffs their kid's hands?
how you know my nicotine and lovers
ain't the fruit from the family trees I watched my daddy's plant?

:together

how you know?
We can't.

Hiring

They lined us up daily. 10 or more men
outside the supervisor's office window.

Some of us, standing straight as whitewashed
fence posts, others as solid as the dark space

between rungs. All of us stiffing our spines
with the hope we'd be hired, while we were

measured day after day by a yard stick that
didn't exist. A line of 10 men whose legs turned

into question marks were pulled to paychecks
or pushed further to poverty by the point

of the supervisor's finger. He could tinker
with our futures in an Ohio Valley where it

was either steel or coal that put food on tables.
We couldn't name the criteria, so he kept

white men and their children seeing sunlight
while the few black men who made the cut, bent

themselves in half below ground. Once we got
in, we were in it. 300 feet deep at least and up

to our shins in water and rock dust with just enough
to depend on us above ground to keep us down under.

Closing

For years, the rumors didn't scare me. I knew there was still 50 or 60 years of raw material to haul out that could fuel me from age 21 to pension. Besides, we had struck before and survived. Once, we miners fed our families 109 days on fish and deer.

But this was different. It was devastating. I had worked coal seams so steady that they stretched back to our father's and their father's before them. Most of us went underground so young that it felt like we had exchanged graduation caps for hard hats

to work a job that was supposed to be as stable as the bolts we used to steady the tons-heavy coal ceilings with. See, I had spent twenty years in shafts as short as my ten year old daughter where I learned to go in safe. Coveralls, steel-reinforced boots, hard hat, light. Stayed alert while my body measured time in the constant

chew, haul, bolt, scoop, chew, haul, bolt, scoop of the system. Had lunched and hunched in a place where everyday it was completely life or death. So it was impossible to believe that I would ever need to reinvent myself. Hard to conceive that coming out could be what killed me. I was a coal miner. Could see in light as thin as a pencil line but now,

with Y&O's doors closing, I couldn't see my future. But I searched anyway. Found an opening 50 miles from home and applied. Felt a high school education wouldn't make me one of the 87 hired for a factory job. With 10,000 applicants whose resumes were weighty while mine was light as coal dust, I knew I would have to trust God. So,

five months and no call found me steadying myself on scripture. Mining bible page by page like I was mining pillar to post, prayer picking up pieces of my spirit like loose coal. But God's promise pushed me six months from last unemployment check to plenty.

Something

There is nothing here. Honest. Your Ohio Valley
is silent and choking; coal dust caked on a nineteen
year-old miner's lungs. It buries people.

Turns spirit to cinder and some of 'em don't
see it. Buries me too, but all I can do is
breathe it in, between I married you and again.

The first time, I was twenty-something.
A divorced mother. You were twenty-
something, Widowed. Needing

a mother for your daughters. We both
were there. Twisting our twenties
like turnpikes into adulthood.

We were not good, together.
Conversations that should have been
easy, caught in the clink of glass on glass

until we found ourselves whiskey-wrought
and fighting. I lulled myself with cigarettes.
That slow burn was something I could count on.

And you? You found your forgetting flecked in
the fins of fish. Hooked them mid-swim in a boat
big enough for one bucket and one body, only.

And me? I still keep a little money stashed
so that wherever and whenever I reach,
I have just enough to get away.

Together

Some days I am a boat, big enough
for one bucket and one body only.
My skin, the thin that sails through silted
memories that bank at my soul's edge.

Those days, I paddle to the strip
mine's center—drop anchor. Breathe.
Then feel the catch and slide of insides
settling as I thread bait through crook

of hook. I drop line. Look life into
the hole that swallows. Some nights
we face each other—faces fringed
with the flesh of fist-heavy

fathers and the skin of mothers
stiff as the slick of punching bags.
Our eyes and mouths—the picture
perfect film of water.

Those nights, air ceases to exist.
Those nights I dream of breathing.
Those nights my ears become
the gulping gills of fish.

re/casting: a ghazal

:he

The smallmouth spirals its scales toward sun; my hook exposed.
Tail breaks silence's surface. I tug, life's fight exposed.

There are rocks I want to hook from strip mine's bed. Polish
pieces into flecked stars; set them in your ears, exposed.

But polish-cloth is fingers flexed to unclog float-coal.
And this dust, raked from rock stops our blast. These years, exposed.

Water, penny-colored replicates this memory:
Your ring-box mouth you closed, reappears. All hurt exposed.

You say my back's a boatbed you can't curve your spine to.
My back's planking's plumbed to your vertebral fears, exposed.

I am a boat, bow-bent with burdens newly exposed.

:she

Nights, I don't face you; turn body to dream unexposed.
I hold breath to halt love's surfacing. Keep hope unexposed

There is rock I want to split from strip mine's bed. Fracture
"now" from "maybe"; hide in cupboard corners, unexposed.

This drill bit is teeth that crack from tongue's private puncture.
This hope is water slowed by oiled thickeners unexposed.

Nights, I gill water's oxygen to blood
Scale lips to fit your lungs. Leave loving years unexposed.

Days, I surface sore from shape-shifting feet into fins
Slip thin boned scales from eyelids that keep fears unexposed

My cheek first breaks water, wields your silver hook—exposed.

:testimony

*the found poems in this section are adapted from two of the 300 pages of oral histories of Latino/as and African Americans in Saginaw, Michigan collected and compiled by Dr. Michelle S. Johnson in a project called Community Spaces of the Industrious.

and I was the middle—Found Poem #1 A.R.9-9-99

<i>full name and</i>	<i>date of birth</i>	<i>for the record.</i>
Abdul	Raheem 12-17-25.	Rashada.
<i>born?</i>	Starkville, Mississippi.	
<i>Starkville,</i>	<i>Mississippi?</i>	
Yes.		
<i>Mother? Father?</i>	Yes. father	farmer. just for himself. enough to support his family of nine children.
<i>eight brothers and sisters?</i>		
Yes.		
<i>Where did you fall?</i>	<i>Oldest,</i> <i>youngest,</i> <i>middle?</i> Exactly.	
<i>Middle.</i>		It was, it was nine of us and I was the middle child. It was two boys older than me, two boys younger than me, two girls older than me and two girls younger than me.
<i>So when you said exactly . . .</i>	Yes.	

farming? what kind of

small scale just to support his family
yes.
cotton, corn hay . . . we raised
peanuts,
sweet potatoes Sugar cane molasses hogs and my mother
raised a lot of chickens and let's see. milk cows sell the milk.
that's how
he would come by a little money And then the
15th and 1st
they would pay him for the milk
twice a month.

100 acres & no mule—Found Poem #3 A.R.9-9-99

Did he own *his*
land?
How much land *was he*
working?
100 acres
land. And some of it was
pasture
and some of it was
hay
and some he farmed
and some was
wood or timber, where the trees grow .
once in awhile
buy the trees cut them down.

Do you remember

his name?

My
grandfather?

fathers'

Um hum.

Jerry

Tait.

Jerry

Tait.

a little boy, he was

small

when

the

slaves

was

freed

or whatever. But anyway

he

received

100 acres

he inherit

this

land you

see.

And

was

divided between the children.

Between the nine?

Between

the nine

I've Never Been—Found Poem # 6 A.R.9-9-99

So how old were you when you left Mississippi?

23 years old .I'm thinking.

So what was it like in Starkville when you left?

when you left? Stark ville?

Segregated bad, real bad. And I was . . .

I had to leave

because white people crazy
when

you were man enough to
say

no to them no to them no
to them no to them

you know. And so I've never been one
to buckle to nobody, I've never been

I've never
been.

Malleable yes.
nbat *was* *it* *like* *Malleable*
 1949?

What kind of work were you doing?

Real bad, hook out man
 real bad
 they call it the hot line a big conveyor belt
 brought iron out of the foundry, had a long line heavy containers
 they loaded iron in the foundry.

Yes
hot
iron pulled iron set iron shook a
shake out iron
loaded
conveyor corner belt dump it on this line guys
that
would knock the ... off place behind you hook
off
with
these iron hooks, hook the iron off put it over behind
you supervisor constantly telling you, you
taking
off
an iron as you can take off now, you tell you
another job be coming in say well I'll put it over here
you're already getting as much as you can get but they could
come in and if you don't do it
they send you home.

When They Sent Me Home

Started as hook out man. Had to catch solar hot iron flares
mid-spin on conveyor belts; pile it accordin' to job.

It was hard. Hard. Hard. Me takin' off much iron as I
could. Heat makin' me want to take my own skin off.

But knowin' that South to North in '49 made my wallet
handkerchief thin, forced me to keep the foreman

behind me makin' sure my hookin' hand could catch each
job. Put it in its proper place so I wouldn't lose my place

when they sent me home. And they sent me home, plenty.
'Cause I couldn't see the justice in that job or any. White

men standin' like picket fence line with clipboards and ties
while black men stooped, shovlin' coal dust or soot-brushed

and burnin.' 15 years of workin' that kind of shift had me ready
for shiftin' to somethin.' While 10 more saw me grind, mill and

press; I was all the while stretchin' spirit from cinder so that after
a fair day's work, people would know I wasn't no workin' boy.

I worked the big wigs like I worked the line. Fixed what needed
fixin'— took off only what was mine and felt the bill-fold in my

pocket, 'cause it was the rock iron that steadied me.

Let me ask one more question,

mostly black folks

Yes,

It was

mostly blacks

know.

Just mostly blacks you see

on this hot line was it

and Latinos

yes,

and Mexicans

you

you

see.

And I Came Out—Found Poem # 9 A.R 9-9-99

when you on the line and the line break down or something
they always had some little dirty

job that they wanted you to do
always.

And do some little dirty detail whenever they
would
come get me for the detail, some little nasty

detail, then I would ask them how you choose me

how you come by
me.

Oh because I'm black.
no, no no.

 You getting
 me? No, no, no, I

say you getting me because I'm the youngest
man?

So he couldn't give me no justification for
getting me so I
tell him get another man see
 because I'm not
 the youngest man, I know I'm not
 the
youngest
man, I'm older than the white boy over there,
I'm older than these boys over here,
 I'm older than these over here,
now how you choose me see.

that's
the
way
I
would fight them . So I would
fight.
I
did
until I came out for 25 years.

And I came out in 1975.

Foreman's Visit

It's not the last time he'll pocket his hand to pat my
shine. He strokes my skin, eager like he's makin'
sho I'm still there in the same secret way his Saturday
woman's fingers feel for the familiar rough of linen
folded line-fine as chisel edge in my money pocket.

I have been rocked by his up and down of hip since
he started standin' the line and know that when he
holds my sweat stained skin, he is really holdin'
his anger. See, I know I am the armor
that keeps him from takin' off his own skin.

Where I would like to start. Do you remember *your full*
name, your date
born?

Johnny Fifer that's
F-i-f-e-r.

born?

Mississippi. Canton.

born? 3-27-41.

Do you remember *it*
well?

Yeah, I remember. It was rough; we sharecroppers lived—
passed.

Just the way it was back then. Raised
corn, cotton, beans, sweet potatoes, the whoschlak.

You name it, we raised it—raised
a complete crop.

Who owned

the land?

John Witt—he had
land
as far as the eye
could see.

That your family

worked?

No— we shared so much. Each family had
so much
on this plantation. I would say he had

at least 10, 15 families.

Really?

Yeah.

All black?

Mm

hm.

Mr. John know,
well he knew what was going on.
a n d I
didn't want to leave
I
had been with him all my life and t h a t ' s
the only one
I did know.
I was going to Saginaw, my mother was over
[t]here.

Got Hired, Got Here—Found Poem # 3: J.F. Interview 8-4-99

So how long had your mom been here

Saginaw?

My mother, I don't know exactly how long. Yes I do

Because [mother] she met him.and they
[husband]

hiring at the Malleable Iron so he came over got hired
the same day that's how she
ended

up over here.

So then you came to Saginaw?

1950 Yeah.

So what was that like?

come from living out on a farm

[to]

basketball?

I played

we played

summer league

Hoyt Park and I ice skated

I was going to play but had the job, I needed money,
my mother couldn't,

you know,

things that I wanted better clothes stuff like that so

I said well I was able

so when I got out of school I just went straight to the
cleaners and started working

there, then I worked till they closed until

Marcella got

pregnant,

after she got

pregnant with my daughter

then

I

had

to

drop out of school

the little job that I had it wasn't enough
to—

then I had the responsibility.

the plant.

Mr. Foley

I went to Mr. Foley and he hired me at the Malleable.

work was, oh God work was hard
at the Malleable.

What were you doing
out there?
Dubberman.

what's that?
That's the hardest, that's lifting molds,

I mean 60, 70

How long? *lift them up off the belt?*

How long?

Lift it from the mold machine to the belt.

About 8 hours. Or
9, 10. whatever they

working you do.

Was hot? *Wasn't*

it?

Hot, hot, hot, I mean red hot. That's why I say you had to have a
purpose or family

or something in order to stay. You had to know what work were or
something you

know. You couldn't just go in there and I got a job. You had to have
something

to think about that makes you do this for 8 or 9 or 10 hours. But

soon

as you got home, Hands swell,
take some Epsom Salt, Mama ... and

alcohol and rub them down.
How long? *So you would*
lift them

till I got ready to retire.

Purpose

You had to have something to think about made
you able to be duberman or shake out at the Malleable.
8, 9, 10 hours of crackin' cast from sand or pouring
3000 tons of melted metal a day while sweat swilled
slick into iron and flicked like fireworks on concrete.

There was no freedom in this. Black men goin' in, skin
all shades of Saginaw soil, then coming out darker than the coal
that heated the foundry. See, I had to find me a purpose. Somethin'
to keep me shiftin' mold to belt so that every second felt light
as liftin' bread to my daughter's mouth with my fingertips.

she had got in the shop there.

Now

what was she doing in

the plant?

I don't know. I never
did
go to an open house over there.

So you don't

know

what

kind of work she was doing?

No.

Yeah. No I never did. I just...I
wonder why. I never did.

But I know

they working
a lot of oily stuff.

A lot

?

Yeah cuz when she got home she
smelled like oil.

So She?—Found Poem # 7: J.F. Interview 8-4-99

So she was on the line?

Yeah.

Oil

There was no freedom in this. True, black men went in.
But black women shed dresses for denim—also, stood the line.
Some shook soot from strands of hair. I scraped oil from mine.
There are lines we've all walked. Some thin and straight as pencil
lines. Some dark and slued crude-thick. We walked both.

Graphite light in years—we laid the first scratch together. Backs
arched passion-straight on silver seats in the back of a '56
Pontiac Starchief. The second, we scrawled grief-bent. My belly
baby-full and yours binge-heavy on obligation. Then, we crossed them.

You, when you found your music mingled with the growl and hum
of motorcycle engines. And me—when my skin breathed blow-oil
sour in the space perfume should have been.

69 we would be stretched as far as the eye
could see so we
would cut off hit M-13 to
Saginaw. Big Buck and
them keep straight up go under
the underpass,
that's some beautiful noise, you hear
Harleys.

By the time we get home bugs on the windshield,
 eyeglasses it's 3:00 or 4:00 in morning
 and it's like music to your ears. I tell you

50, 75. 100 bikes coming down. I mean ya'll rolling. 95 miles an
 hour heading home

that was

a beautiful sound. And you tooling on.

Turn that hog on let it rock, his lady, his
 wife. Sometimes I hate that I

sold my bike.

Did You Want?—Found Poem # 9: J.F. Interview 8-4-99

So did your wife *ever* *go* *?*
Oh no, no, no, no. She couldn't stand.
Those, those, those . . . in fact
 my wife never did
get on the motorcycle
 and she didn't
like that either. She said "no
 way
 in life
 I'm
 getting on that
two
 wheeler."

Now *did you want*
 her
 to at first?
yeah. By that time you know
we just
 . . . we wasn't . . . maybe when
we first
got together she probably would
have but by that time

Song of Songs

:John

I should have breathed you in. Should have flicked convention
from my mind, but the oil slicked pencil line image of you rockin'
sand from molds of iron thick as your thighs after your thighs
rocked me, melted all this man so deep into misery that these fingertips
forgot the trace of your breast as you breathed sleep deep after lovemaking.

Forgot you ever breathed “mmm, Johnny. My man” into this curve of neck.
Forgot you flicked eyes at me lust lidded and laced, lashes thick as fingertips.
Forgot that those yearning years sailed yawl-young in a line. Forgot those sweat
slick moments you were mine. Then, I melted into you, my thin-shouldered
Marcella. What I wanted was you, virgin thick Cella to always belly up behind,

trace your lace thin fingers along this broad, thick back. Girl, did you have to haul
and hoist like that? Did you have to? Did you forget I breathed next to you?
Marcella, you had to? You could’a rubbed fingers raw and melted our poverty
in the sterile smell of bleach and soapsuds, could’a been black and women and flicked
misery from our mouths while fitting white folks socks on twine twisted and hung into line.
But you flicked away my soul fist-handed instead of pulling me in with your fingertips.

:Marcella

John, you used to be Johnny. But my Johnny got lost between the thumb and fore
of fingertips pressed into filter thick lips then crushed into the rough of cement
as we blew, smoke curved into line. But, what’s real had slipped from my geography
long before ingot got breathed into steel. Long before this brow bled sweat-red
into bandanna and men flicked my femininity into flecks of ore. I melted—

melted dreams into 12 days on 12 days off— melted fingertips into molten metal.
The job flicked identity from fingerprints. Still, I was hope thick that we still breathed
the huh-huhhhhh breath of first kiss. I still sauntered the line between bills and everything
is possible. But responsibility’s wrinkle already etched a line between us. I mirrored your
manhood across cast iron molds, melted your memory of the first time we breathed together.
Melted the melody of your fingertips the first time you touched the thick between my thighs.
My soft and sway and switch flicked.

:they

John, while I struggled to dream without any pieces of good truth
to mix up hope with, you flicked the me still wanting to be your
song-drink, your long drink, your talking drum into the thick of failure.
Cella, we touched with bodies bruised by surviving instead
of tendering our sores with our fingertips.

What I Want You to See

Birds crash at the feeder, drop
beaked seeds like moments.
Every moment distils into this:

The gardener my son imagined he was. The cosmo
seed he planted but forgot to crack first. The seed

of the son I imagined buried in the clay-cracked
soil of my womb. The robin-egged blue of the room

that seeded my never imagining a son who would
never plant a garden and the garden that would never

be fed by the wet wheel of the mill in the step mother's
place that became the wipe of the drop on the back

of the hand of the grandfather who tendered the petal
soft skin of his wife like the gardener my never-son

imagined himself to be. Look.
This is what I want you to see:

The grandmother, never flower frail.
The grandfather, whiskey-wet handed.
The son, never planted.

The seed—
 broken but never blooming.

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Miller has been awarded a 2015 Hedgebrook Fellowship. *Core* is Miller's full length poetry collection. Other publications include poems in *Dunes Review*; *Michigan Writers Corner*; *Terror and Transformation Anthology*, *Wising Up Press*; *Just Like A Girl Anthology*, *GirlChild Press*; *African American Review*; *american ghost: poets on life after industry* from *Stockport Flats Press*; and *BLACKBERRY: a magazine*. For more information: www.makedo.weebly.com

