

*I LOVE YOU, TALLAHASSEE,*

“Tallahassee, be a mother to me—knife / the umbilical cord, send me north”

– Lauren Berry, *The Lifting Dress*

let me go. What is left  
to say about your summers  
that conjure blood red fungus  
between sidewalks at dawn  
only for the pleasure of searing

them to ash by noon.

Glittering armpit of the Florida panhandle,  
patron saint of perpetually-rebranding tiki bars  
where gin-and-tonic blurs of frantic desire ricochet  
through the damp night and minutes

hemorrhage from our bodies to rejoin the sand.

Tallahassee, you will always be the city that taught me how to bleed  
into my floorboards, sweat into the salt-fist of a hurricane, or wish I could  
become a metaphor like that. I will never love another place  
the way I loved this grid of spiderwebs: with that scuttling,  
cleaved kind of worship you only get

enough strength and stupidity to bear once.

The way you love anything when you arrive  
a girl flinging herself at the raw  
ripe husk of what only exists  
to be forgotten. I dreamed you a fever and I was desperate  
to swallow your swooning barbed lights, your asphalt-

splitting roots, fuck you, Tallahassee, I surrendered the last  
half of my twenties, one hundred thousand dollars federal debt, my faith  
in poetry; not the poem, the survival of the voice

in its obsolete mother tongue, the small true voice  
your boozy seraphim lobbied me to murder. Tallahassee,  
you are the last poem I’ll write

for another decade. Prove me wrong.

You are a sorceress who turns her citizens to tadpoles  
bejeweled in pollen, drugged green with lust, kicking  
lazy in your purgatorial soupweather.

And in the soupweather Kirby read *unhorsed by the moon*

and made Wikipedia dream of death  
And in the soupweather stray cats pillaged the art alley  
for half-gnawed angel wings  
And in the soupweather our hearts writhe like endless  
spouts of a garden hose  
And in the soupweather we watch the world end  
from sunblistered porches myrrhed in citronella  
And in the great roiling soup of the Gulf, oily ships  
keep precious their distance.

And what of the Chinese magnolias  
wedded to streamers of gray moss.

And what of the stupid enchantment of azaleas,  
popsicle-stained tongues of caladium, monstera, saw palm,  
the periwinkle weeds where my dog likes to pee.

I love your cemetery, Tallahassee, where phantoms of unhinged women beg  
the witch grave for blinding love, a book deal.  
I love your tiny regional airport with one cashier  
and one brown hallway, gates like harmonicas' gapteeth.  
I love the first morning I spent there hungover  
beyond the cure of a ten dollar croissant and I love  
that five years later, two years sober, I will never have to

ride another plane hungover. I love your unbothered skies  
dripping Spanish moss like rotting art nouveau.  
January lemons that pale and droop from bare branches  
like overripe Christmas baubles. October when humidity unclenches  
its fingers from our necks and in our first new breath

we yearn, unheld. How you disappear a cardinal  
feather by feather, while seagulls pluck fries

from a crushed diaper in the Publix parking lot,  
and to know the favorite vegetable  
of the woman who watches on the curb  
feels approximately holy.

The era of Bark Rats is over,  
has long been over, before the virus  
migrated our minds to an *after*, our friends'  
lives to the variable Midwest.

Yet when the Midtown streetlamps sprout violet bulbs  
I am compelled to text N: *the city is starting to look like what it used to  
in our mind* but I'm no longer sure who I mean.

And remember the rough light of before,  
when Collin made us shiver hypnagogic telephone wires  
And Lauren was betrothed to Bruce Springsteen's teeth  
And Brett necromanced Emily Dickinson to the gay bar  
And Nate cawed from the backwoods,  
from the rubble of an obelisk

I dreamed you a future and I forgive you,  
Tallahassee, for saddling me with unbearable beauty  
to let go of. Your name the clink in my teeth  
shuddering toward a bolder coastline, the fear  
of strange pines, awe of a half-decade piled  
into your magenta underbelly. Even your name  
a prayer of coming home  
to a ruined land. You were never mine

to abandon, I am not the only raccoon  
to drag its gashed belly through your suburbs, clung  
with desperate wonder made manifest in ivy.  
I am not the first to say goodbye.

Let me land  
drenched upon new shores  
with a damselfly's optimism. I still love you,

Tallahassee, for creating one place where we were beautiful  
enough, and if we never see each other again, know I am thankful  
for your opaline moths and the way you unwilded, slowly,  
parades of sorrow into tended vines. Here I reclaimed them  
as docile houseplants.

And bled an aninga into my thigh only to find it again

posing for a swarm of cameras, wings outstretched  
like she knows she deserves to be remembered.  
Reincarnate me, Tallahassee, as that bird  
so I can spend the flat circle of time growing

from warm wet egg to hatchling, onyx descent of fur  
clumped between feathers, waiting in the swampy brush  
for one perfectly gray late December day

when the riverboat loops cargo of a past life—let me live again

through that bird simply to see myself as you've remade me, naked  
with astonishment, floating months removed from the sweet knife  
of my next impending future, floating at the helm of a manatee

in the arms of a gorgeous man, the mystery of springs and his gentleness  
the most brilliant blue. How gratitude sunlights through me like an axe.