

## Ear Hustle

Get down to the smallest birthright  
I cannot claim: say beignets  
and doesn't the stutter of hot oil start  
to sizzle on the small plates of memory?

Faces powdered with sugar, no thought  
to whose ancestors cut which cane, sing  
a hymn of "mmm, mmm, mmm."  
Jackson square hangs its portraits

on the iron gates. And who can hold a horn  
note as long as the midday sun? Look up  
from that small plate and café  
au lait, and see the bent levees

of language I cannot break. I will shame  
every shibboleth. And every house is lifted  
like a paused rapture. This cruelty and more  
fries the Godhead in lard. Pour me a cup

of chicory. A saxophone player cuts a canal  
through the breakfast din, playing Tank  
and the Bangas *I gotta make a quick decision*  
about how often I can be rescued.

Neither I nor my children will ever ride  
the roller coasters at Jazzland  
where a sign still hangs as it does in the heavens:  
*will open after storm.*

## Creolite I

Mist on the marshlands of the tongue.  
Here we say *store* and *flow* rhyme. Contrarians.

Born into the family of auto-antonyms we *cleave*  
any countersign, any accent, *bolt* to the speakeasy door:

*Do you belong?* Candor. Born in a basket  
of idiom. Go down Moses, cleave the sea

that first taught us neither its great hexameters  
nor its plain iambs. Low tide, low parish, low chariot

swing and swing. Carry us. Lightning.  
Help us to conjure another homeland. The most specific

pain of exile is boredom, heavy as the humidity,  
which always hangs like a carcass of wind in Louisiana.

The earth inside your skull, America across your face,  
The South chapping your lips. Mist on the tongue's marshlands

## How Our Sons Learned to Fight

The same chest-thumping tableau  
of two men disrobed and so close  
their fears thin to apple skin.

We ain't hear nothing. Drum kit,  
we forget whose breath broke  
the silence. In the dark

can anyone tell one groan  
from another: the angel's  
or Jacob's, or the subwoofer

praying hard to our knees,  
which fall and rise, unrepentant,  
to the parquet floor? The punchbowl

gloriously shatters, slapped  
with strobe light. Our bodies  
remember our fathers

saying throw the first fist  
and buck. We remember  
we invented our fathers'

advice about how to fight  
another man, because we  
did not know how to begin

a love, only how to bruise the end.

## Supremacy

Consider the shuttlecock  
its deft lightness, its rubber nose  
unbent, its attention to racket,  
its fear of the ground, its willingness  
to lob or smash, its whiteness, its penchant  
for being held  
afloat by the slightest breeze and histories  
of swing, how it needs to be  
batted between two players,  
how it recognizes their want;  
consider its feathers, its plastic, its conical  
shape suggesting hierarchy, and always  
its weight in your hand, how it seeks to be served.

## Unmasking the Chorus

July doesn't beg. The cicadas are coughing  
through their tymbals and couldn't care less  
whether anyone dreams of wings.

*Acquire a husk* they hum  
like a cigarette hums alone in an ashtray  
(tree?), a sound that stretches like the skin

of a snare drum. Dunce.  
Abandon has its own bandwagon  
and the confederacy of late summer's heat  
can't assuage. Boredom. The horizon

sighs like a churchwarden pipe. *I could die  
on this tree* the cicadas sing,  
coughing themselves rare and blue  
like a husk of song, the lyrics but not the tune.

## Ode to Lando Calrissian

If you were stuntin' in a galaxy far, far away, blue cape  
suave, with a gold lining that would shame the sun  
with a cool walk and a gambler hustle,

if you had a hair style so fresh, you'd claim  
to have won it off an out-of-work cloud  
city cosmetologist, if even your eyebrows

had scoundrel in their arch, if everybody knew  
the music bumped cargo hold to cockpit in the Millennium

Falcon, a name straight out of P. Funk,  
if everyone could see those hands churning  
the dark dream of stars into the butter milk

of a hip brother running his own city,  
if we asked, *where are all the black people  
in the galaxy?* Would you help us? Would you bet on us?

## The Silver Screen Asks, “What’s Up Danger?” After We Enter

a lobby shaped like a yawn, lined with lodestone  
leftover from making the marquee. The congress

of picture shows and pulp flicks it seems  
named this movie house, the Senator.

Or maybe the city loves to signify. I guess  
it matters little to a mill worker,

stevedore, or teamster how the name  
came to be. My son and daughter

who will never walk home covered in soot,  
longing for a moment in the mud room

to be responsible for nothing  
but removing a coat, unlacing a boot,

my children slide like two slightly rusted magnets  
toward the aluminum rail posts guarding

the popcorn counter. All the candy encased  
in glass like masks in a museum. They’ve forgotten

our talk in the parking lot about Miles Morales,  
about his animated face being so near to us

even without 3D, that this afro-latino Spider-man  
could be our cousin, in a more marvelous universe.

But when they sit in the Senator’s un-stadiumed  
seats, with the ghosts of reel-to-reel clicking

their tongues, what I see on my children’s faces  
is not a season of phantasmal peace, but what’s left

when the world’s terrors retreat. Their whole brown  
skin illuminated, like a trailer for another life.

## Anti-Confessional III

This isn't a secret; I have failed  
to love with the patience of hibiscus root  
whose buds bloom with no thought  
of being tea. I have not loved  
my innocence, overdressed in morning light.  
How can the earth keep turning  
to the thing that will kill it? Oh Sun,  
bring me a warm hill in August,  
an echo of a fragile and immortal green,  
a better remembrance  
of my grandma's eyes. I have failed  
to forget love is one of many  
higher choruses, and yes there are octaves  
of light that linger. Can we still call love  
love anymore? Or have we avoided failure?  
Every ode must fail, if there is to be a higher love.