

HELP

I'm not a curl anymore—
unremarkable, I'm unremarkable
in my recent hair loss.
I'm angrier than I seem.
I'm a bullet in a temple.
Tell mommy
I'm tired of forgiving.
My desire to fix this hole is rotten.

At the mortuary, a stranger hugged me like a mother.
Please, no, I hugged back. I don't hope
anymore. I do the job as daughter
(angry, loving) from afar. I cradle
the hole. I fight a
relapse then kiss a unicorn urn.
My father wears a cross
on his neck.

Brother, show a sign.
My memories are losing blood.

2.22.22

IT STARTS WITH

the door *the door*
 of a *of a*

church he *car she*
 walked through *sat in*

officers came *men ran*
 they shot *they shot*

he ended *she ducked*
 with two *as two*
 bullets inside *bullets flew*

one kissed *one burst*
 the temple *the window*

then he *then it*
 became ash *became diamonds*

the other *the other*
 went through *went into*
 a wall *the door*

did he *did she*
 see the *sense the*
 bullets coming? *bullets coming?*

officers watched *officers watched*
 the blood *the breath*

flow from *flow from*
 his mouth *her mouth*

THEY SHARE THE SAME NOSE
 AND HAIR AND BROWN EYES
 AND ALMOST SHARED
 THE SAME KIND OF DEATH

THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER

a golden shovel after Lucille Clifton

This year he should be thirty-three but what part of *he's dead* do I not understand? If even after hugging his urn each day then re-reading the death certificate, I'm still entering doorways believing there's a chance my brother is alive, he might even be in the next room ready to charm or burst into laughter, brushing back his curls with a grin against whatever or whomever stood in his path. The pull of loss repeats like shadows of memory, lapping through them until the memories turn into fragile pieces of rust or how a picture of her-before-self becomes a soft reminder how grief's paw crushes the will to live, it's weight extended for the rest of a brotherless lifetime. She spoils or realizes who she had too late. Like when he called she thought, does he want to talk to me or is this another *sis, can you help me out?*

Looking back, I wonder what difference answering could've made, if it could've saved him then. But mostly, I wonder what might've changed had we stayed together, reared in the same house up in the Tehachapi mountains, baying at stars for somewhere more and growing older. Then he could've followed his daughter to the desert where her laughter whistles along the dunes, off into frigid fall nights or into the wound of a vixen searching for safety in the country

that works tirelessly to take away what
joy one might have then
shoots our brothers in the head? Of
course I don't understand the
why or the *reason*. Like the moon,
some things can't be explained away. The
stillness of him on the viewing room
table is the closest memory now. The
sleep embalmed on his last bed,
later wheeled off and set through the
fire. I return to poetry
to keep him alive as ashes of
what might've been rest like regret.

TO THE SLOW BURN

after Ross Gay

weathering each day in the city
that took away the one person
I couldn't know would be
the person
who told the truth
(yes I do get everything)

things like books or
clothes but mostly
time and breath

the sounds of sirens echo like
the crows hunting above
they wait until their prey relax
believing they're safe under a dangerous sun
hoping to have another day
but don't

as clouds blanket bodies
a body burns in time or by fire
or both without cause

the remnants become Other
(new seeds for harvest)
and who's left lies about survival
when we don't know if the moment
the bullet catches dura mater in a brain
is when the soul escapes a body

listening to the crying
come back home
big brother, please, come

but the new seeds (shaped like daughters)
grow despite permanent absence
and I was without a dad too so maybe
the ocean will be enough
to swallow God's plan and eddy
grief into a reason for living

in a home where
vaulted ceilings make more
space for ghosts

then maybe rain will come
sprinkle or shower
refreshing the drought
so flowers can rest
like an honest rage after learning
he was unarmed

and knowing the how of an officers' fatal force
only changes the knowing that bad things happen
that don't make sense

someone is still dead
the murderer wakes
breathing in this City of Champions
rubbing his hands under a
leaking faucet while pockets of smoke
still drift from his active guns' chamber

while I offer my body to the waves
wondering if I'll understand what it's like
to be swallowed too

rather than hold ashes of
a smile (split among four boxes)
and another Black man disappeared
then we return to our everydayness
without questioning the night
since daylight will come

it always comes to give us oxygen
but doesn't hear our suffering to stay cool or
to slow the burning

over and over and over the
reaping repeats itself, which everyone knows
is part of living, so being
innocent or ill or peppered with demons
means we're still worthy of breath
and looking to the stars

or the rocks
or in the eyes
of an old photograph

when everything wasn't a thing but a who
(with arms to hug back)
playing in cold winds where laughter froze
at grandma's house in the tehachapi
mountains where we'd eat snow

with no inkling the crystals would mimic the vaporizing
he'd undergo at thirty after his head rested
on ice and felt my last kiss

PLAN FOR A POEM

Open [Plan for a Poem](#) in a new browser window. Read information in tab labeled *About the Data*. Once understood, select tab labeled 2015–2022. Unless otherwise prompted, use the entire database to complete the following:

- ❶ Focus on the Name column. Handwrite the contents in one sitting. For rows denoted as *Unknown*, burn any source material (e.g. family photos) until there are four boxes of ash to split between your family.
- ❷ Focus on the Date column. You need a printed calendar for each year. Select one symbol to indicate column contents on printed calendar (e.g. March 27, 2019). As dates recur, write symbol in rapid succession (e.g. 🗓️ 🗓️ 🗓️).
- ❸ Focus on the Manner of Death column. Given there are only two types, define one as *No* and the other as *Please, no*. Using the front of a 3×3 sticky note, write translations. Superimpose the text until you can't go on (e.g. breathe).
- ❹ Focus on the Age, Gender, and Race columns. Using a recording device, recite the contents of the columns (e.g. 30, Man, Black). *Optional*: record in a public place (e.g. Church, Hospital, Morgue), understanding your existence is a threat.
- ❺ Focus on the City and State columns. You need a map of the United States and pushpins. Using column contents, puncture map (e.g. Inglewood, CA). For City areas overwhelmed by contents, aim at State indiscriminately.
- ❻ Focus on the remaining columns except: Armed, Signs of Mental Illness, Threat Level, and Flee. All of which (in addition to Name, Age, Gender, and Race) are irrelevant in justifying the outcome (e.g. Homicide) due to the systemic inadequacies of de-escalation and mediation training. Scream until it makes sense.

Refresh [The Washington Post's Fatal Force database](#).

Repeat above plan until the shootings stop.

You've completed the poem.