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**Black Doves**

**Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for Departmental Honors in  
English**

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**Black Doves**  
**Poems**

**Hadiyah Rajeeyah Abdullah**

**For Earl**

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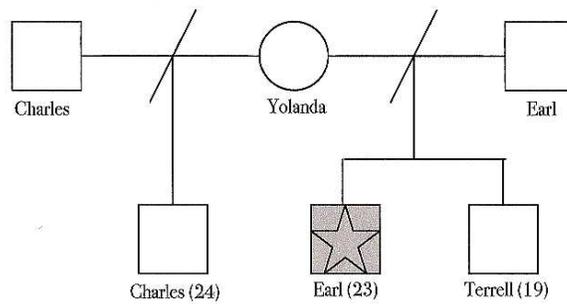
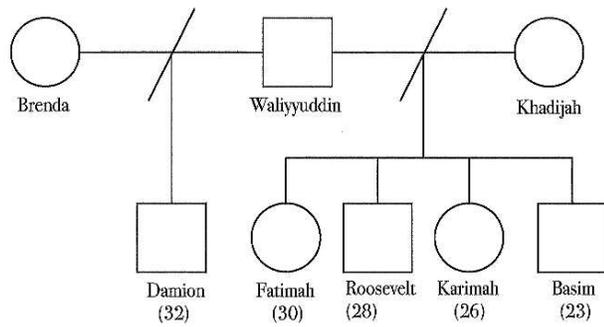
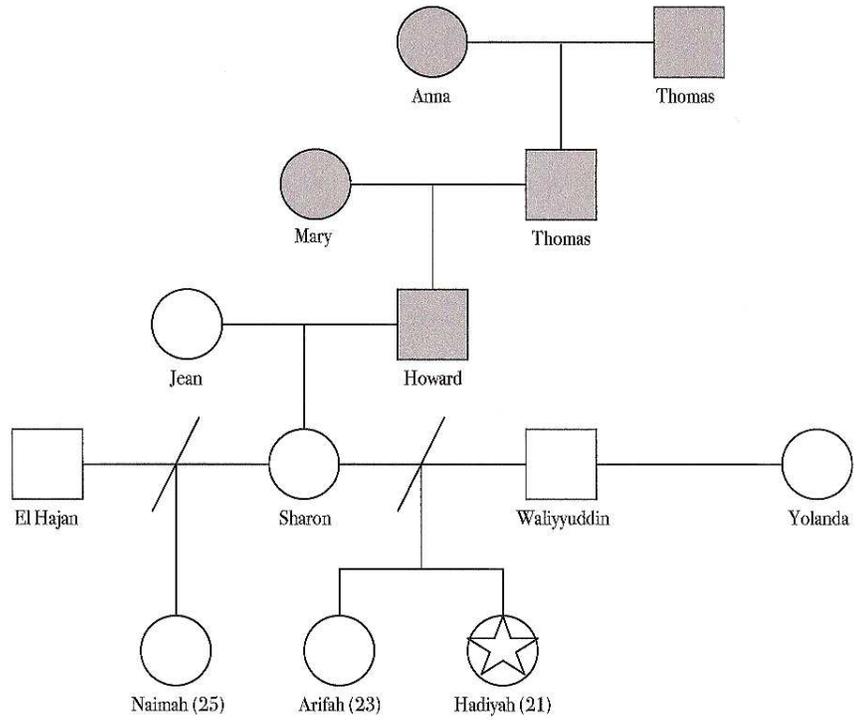
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I

# Family Tree



Pride

I. Thomas and Anna (1897)

There was no smell of sea or burning turf  
In Sumter, there was just Anna. She sang

Hymns to Tom's curved back as he cut and turned  
The soil, her father filling the sack

Next to Tom. She was barely a woman,  
Skin like the burnt sienna earth he worked

And her hair dark like the nights in Dublin.  
"He might as well be colored," the white men smirked.

Tom, though banished, couldn't forget her voice  
Guiding the swing of his arms, but he knew

Once Anna was alone, she'd see no choice  
But to go down where the irises grew

Since their son was sent Upstate in silence,  
To live with his aunt out of Christian kindness.

## II. Thomas and Mary (1935)

Thomas was born with ravens in his eyes,  
Knew his mother drowned herself at sixteen

In Black Swan Lake. His aunt tried to baptize  
The white sin from his skin, to hide, demean

The affair of his parents, but he wore  
Yellowness like a tattoo to escape

The fields of his grandfather. Once secure  
As the Steeles' cook, he finally created

At thirty-eight a family with Mary.  
She told her sons their history, explained

Their brown skin and blue eyes, but then quickly  
Sent her children to Cameron where the trains

Still ran on steam, although she begged Thomas,  
*Boys need a home, not money and a promise.*

### III. Howard and Jean (1955)

He waited for the steam engine's shrill blow,  
For the quick jerk of the wheels to displace

His uncle's face from the corner window  
Frame. The last time he saw his birthplace

He could still fit into his mother's lap.  
Now, at sixteen, he hated her, her will

To work incessantly, white apron strapped  
Around her waist even on Sunday. He'll

Reject all moralizing, evading  
Churches—there are no answers for racial

Slurs, or why he *Looks like a devil*. Wishing  
Later to escape with Jean, he's hopeful

Following the delivery and sighs,  
Praying, *Please God, don't let her have my eyes.*

## Burial

Grandfather, your flesh required cremation  
to cleanse the cancer from your chemo-ridden  
body too weak to cut even fingernails. Jasmine  
oils couldn't revive the fierce blue eyes once hidden

beneath sunglasses and cowboy hats. Your daughter  
wanted fire so your body couldn't rest in the earth—  
not in Maui, below palm trees and magma,  
nor in Egypt beneath the sands and desert growth.

But for selfish demands she keeps you here,  
above her mantle, to question why your drunken hands  
drove her mother to run at night from Philadelphia—curled hair  
covering her bruises—stopping only when she touched the land

of South Carolina, red leaves of the flowering  
dogwood outside her mother's farmhouse kitchen.  
And your five children still lying in the car, slumbering,  
waking to wonder how many teeth she's missing.

## Caterpillars beneath My Skin

That's what my granddaughter thinks  
the welts are on my mahogany-  
hued arm. She caresses one  
creeping beneath my cropped sleeve.

*When will butterflies appear?*  
I haven't told her how, at thirteen,  
I marched down Sixth Avenue North,  
Birmingham . . .

In jail, officers opened my skin:  
beat me with telephone wires  
while cells full of children  
resounded with *We Shall Overcome*.

My daughter's daughter is more than  
strong hazel eyes and fair skin.  
She's Rajeeyah, who hums while she eats  
and swings with her eyes closed. I know

some caterpillars transform into European  
gypsy moths, searching for nourishment at night.  
Others evolve into monarchs, using the sun  
and earth's pull to find their way.

## My Mother's Hands

Turquoise beads form a jasmine flower  
on her left hand, the silver band  
no longer framing a diamond or inscription  
of love. She wears it because it fits.

She holds her pink-and-white tea cup  
with her left so friends won't notice  
the half-inch scar she got from unpacking  
picture frames at work. The imperfection spots

her once smooth and prideful hands.  
Fifty winters, yet these fingers  
can still stitch in gold thread  
the Arabic calligraphy first learned

from her grandfather's etches  
in the South Carolina dirt.  
They shape broken china dishes  
of amethyst and jade into mosaic flower pots,

antique mother-of-pearl buttons  
lining the rim. She should show the world  
these hands that never hit her children  
out of anger, that paint birds

of paradise and orchids, that yield  
no scars, only beauty marks.

## My Mother Carries Heavy Water

Only pictures of saints and Jesus  
hang on my mother's wall  
as she does needlework in  
her rocking chair. I ask if my  
almond eyes resemble my  
father's more than hers. But  
she vows the only man  
who's touched anything  
close to her soul is He who  
we worship every Sunday.

She's engaged in this fabrication  
for eighteen years, swearing:  
*Dewdrops fell into my Red  
Rose tea and poured down  
my throat like mercury in water,  
filling my belly with a heaviness  
I endured because I knew  
you came from a place of angels.*

Yet inside her gold fleur-de-lis  
embossed cherry chest I found  
yellowed letters from Ishmael,  
photos of a man in Naval uniform,  
and dried roses: a time  
before I had a name  
and the scent of a lover  
still permeated the white  
lace sheets of her four-post bed.

## Old School

My dadi walked a syncopated beat,  
clinking the coins in his pocket, crooning:  
*ba-bababa-baah.*

I hurried to catch up, his feet  
cutting the sidewalk short,  
but my dadi walked a syncopated beat.

And didn't you see my head bop  
as he bounced me on his right knee—  
*ba-bababa-baah—*

and when he brought my ma  
watermelons and mangoes, you bet  
he walked with that syncopated beat.

He said don't ever call him Pa,  
or interrupt when he caught that Blue Train—  
*ba-bababa-baah—*

Not that he thought he was cool, but  
we knew when his hair turned gray  
he'd still be walking with that syncopated beat,  
crooning: *ba-bababa-baah.*

The Color of Water  
(Wife's Voice)

You yearn for this to last,  
for love to engulf us like water  
until our skin wrinkles and the sky  
blurs from our hazy vision.

You kiss

with open eyes and hold  
my arms when I begin to pull away,  
but we've sambaed the same way  
all night. You lean in to kiss

my temple and I continue to hold  
my body taunt, trying not to miss the last  
step. We cease when the sky  
changes from black to water-

color hues of blue.

The crisp smell of rainwater

lingering from last  
night pulls me to the window. I hold  
the sill and you come to kiss  
my neck. *Let's go away*  
*for our eighth anniversary, you say, where the sky*

*is always grey with snow.* I keep watching this sky,  
tracing my finger over the water  
on the glass pane.

*Come away,*

you plead but I hold  
still. *Please, tell me one last*  
*time.* I kiss

your lips, not with a feverish kiss  
that will satisfy, but enough to last  
while I ignore the water  
blurring your eyes. You start to move away  
from the windowpane. I look again at the sky,  
then to the hand you want me to hold.

I yield but continue to hold  
onto the truth: The kisses  
you question, the reasons I pull away—  
I don't want you to be my last  
lover. You drain me like water  
from sand. I need someone as giving as the sky,

who'll notice when the sky kisses the earth  
darkness washes away to a color of water  
that will last as long as the clouds hold their rain.

## Eighty Shades of Crayola

My mother started dating  
when I was four. I didn't know  
you were white, thought  
your skin fair like my sisters'.  
For kindergarten, we drew  
family portraits, but I didn't see  
our tones, so I colored you  
Peach. I ran Indian Red.  
In sixth grade you drove me to  
school and my friends thought  
you a chauffer. When we took  
Arifah for her learner's permit,  
the man insisted a parent be present.  
*You need the same last name.*  
I couldn't help but laugh  
as he stared, unblinking,  
eyebrows raised,  
lips pulled down thin.  
I saw in a box of colored wax  
what he disregarded  
in the people before him.

## Stepdad

For the Father-Daughter Picnic  
in fifth grade, you rushed home  
to tell your mom,  
and, not seeing me, asked,  
“Can I call him now?”  
When your mother said  
I was here, you said, “No,  
I meant, can I call my dad?”

In high school you stepped  
over my name like a hole  
in the floor, asking questions  
only if we made eye contact.  
To your mom, I was referred to as “he.”  
To your friends, I was a joke:  
“The man who feeds me.”

“Time goes by so fast,” your father said  
to me at your college graduation.  
I didn’t have the guts to answer,  
“Especially if you’re not there,”  
didn’t have the heart to move  
forward when your friend asked,  
“How about a picture with your parents?”

The Heat Wave Before First Grade  
(Sisters in North Philly)

We flung our dirty shoes  
Over telephone lines,  
Used sticks as tools  
To craft fine  
Letters in matted  
Dirt outside our cool  
Cardboard house. We didn't mind

The woman, white and rough,  
Shouting obscenities  
Across the street. I was old enough  
To understand. We just kept knees  
On quilted newspaper mats,  
Gathering in lines all the stuff—  
Fake butterfly wings and maple leaves—

Essential to transform  
Paper walls into the thick,  
Luscious green that warms  
Skin in mythical forests. We'd mimic  
Bird calls, speak in riddles and spats  
Until street lights buzzed on.  
Then we'd return to our house of brick.

## Indebted

My two sisters and I would stop  
to taste honeysuckle growing  
on the brick wall behind Meade Elementary.  
The full vines could momentarily  
overpower oil and gasoline of the streets.

In winter, we'd meander home  
and write our names with  
pilfered chalk on grainy surfaces—  
neighborhood rock garden barriers,  
the outside walls of corner stores—

anything to delay the chores at home  
that earned us praise from our stepdad  
(if we shined the marble countertop  
enough to reflect the overhead lights).  
When he found dust beneath

oversized wicker chairs,  
he'd lecture for a full hour  
on how to earn our keep: *a man doesn't want  
a woman who can't clean.*  
We lay belly down on the hardwood floor

to pick up the hair and dust clusters,  
then filed into the living room to start schoolwork.  
When our mother returned home,  
she'd thank us for being such helpful girls  
and run us a bubble bath with honeysuckle.

The Persistence of Memory  
(Sister's Voice)

Only half my face reflects in the scratches and shadow  
of the train window, the other side overcast  
in a blur of trees and telephone lines until we stop  
at Unionville Station. Salvador Dali's

clocks melt in an advertisement  
along the way to my sisters' house—the time drips  
over a barren tree, breaking into blocks of space.  
Sun disintegrates yellow between sky and cliff.

Before I can read the print, we move on. . . .  
My niece greets me, I hug her head to my belly.  
The crisscross of her cornrows run like  
the tracks pulling into 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station

when vibrations knocked my leather purse to my stomach.  
I'm still sore from trying to please  
my conditional lover. What did he say  
despite seven years together? *No kids.*

My pregnant sister approaches me.  
*Third times a charm*, she says. The third time  
gave me a used engagement ring. The first would have been  
Isaiah, then Elijah, and this last one, she would have been Sophia.

## Candles at Noon

Between us sisters, there exists a secret  
told only with averted eyes and voices  
lowered. Though we know your painful  
youth didn't fuel our mother's divorce.

Even before my birth they dismissed  
Your exposure to the desires of men—  
our uncle—everything hushed. A few sessions  
of therapy. But I saw and heard the meltdown

after years of inappropriate relationships  
with boys and continuous lectures on sin.  
You stood fully clothed before a steaming tub,  
right arm holding a hairdryer still plugged in.

You remain like a candle glowing at noon,  
appearing strong and unwavering in the light.  
Yet I recognize the truth beneath your smiles  
and know you burn in the shadows and at night.

Witness  
(Sister's Voice)

*Let God be found true,  
though every man be found a liar.  
Paul Romans 3:4*

Only 144,000 people go to heaven.  
I used to believe  
A mustard seed of faith  
Was enough. At sixteen

You told me we'd get married;  
I'm twenty-five—*This year,*  
*I promise*—I slept in the other room  
So we'd stop living in sin,

But you still came to me—  
*This child won't be*  
*A bastard*—I don't mind denying  
All celebrations except for Him,

But it's been years  
Since you promised to make me  
Honest. You say I need to try harder,  
That He needs more . . .

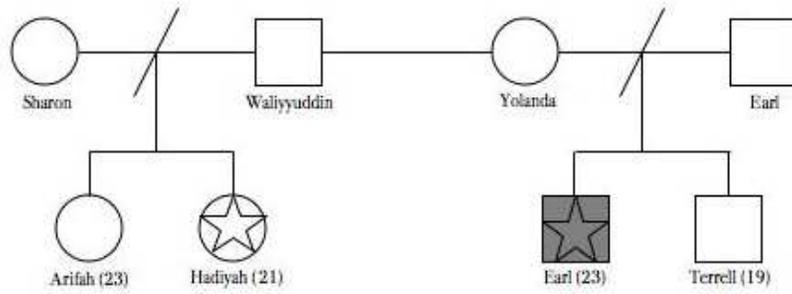
Is that why the embryo died  
In my body? Only alive eight weeks  
Yet I carried it for ten  
Like a tumor. It would have

Killed me had doctors  
Not sucked the flesh from my womb.  
Only those 144,000 get to see  
Heaven, drink immortality.

But what of deliverance for me,  
And my child, who didn't have a soul?

II

# Family Tree



## Descent

Men shouldn't have to die  
on the sidewalk, their remains  
bagged, the blood not even  
scrubbed clean but rinsed  
with a hose or bucket of hot water  
so flies won't gather.

It still leaves the concrete  
burgundy brown. Not all men need  
to die warm and old in their beds,  
all pain of life eclipsed  
by what awaits.

But a man shouldn't bleed  
while the killer runs,  
just like someone who hits a dog  
and keeps driving, though, momentarily,  
and without fear,  
looks in the rearview mirror.

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

Is the man who killed Earl Holt in this room?

*He's right there, staring at me.*

I don't know, I can't remember.

What do you mean, weren't you there?

*I remember everything.*

Yes, but it was dark.

It was 8 pm in June. It wasn't that dark.

*I'll always remember his face.*

I got scared, so I turned away.

You identified the defendant.

Yes . . .

I'm not sure why I picked him.

The man had a sweatshirt on. He didn't in the line-up.

He could have taken it off as he ran.

*He said his friends would kill me.*

I can't be sure it was him.

You're under *oath*.

*God.*

It's not him.

No further questions, your Honor.

*Earl, forgive me.*

## Two Weekends a Month

The first time I came to visit  
my new brothers, I stood  
in the hall for half an hour,  
despite assurance: *You'll like it here.*

In less than a year we transformed  
from neighbors to siblings.  
Since I was the baby girl,  
they'd send me upstairs

to my father's room to ask  
for video games and movies  
though it was past our bedtime.  
We made habits of staying up,

the five of us falling  
asleep in a queen-sized bed  
watching movies like *The Color Purple*.  
They'd protect me whenever I left,

walking me to the Chinese store,  
keeping with my stride, though  
their friends called out to them.  
Earl even went to see

movies I wanted,  
once standing in the back  
to keep from drifting off to sleep.  
We never bought presents,

but we'd always make the other's  
lunch without asking, even after  
I didn't visit for months and only  
heard his voice changing over the phone.

## What You Don't See in the Light

When we shared  
this room at night,  
moonbeams cast men  
with top hats behind the lamp,  
above the eyes of our calico.  
Armed with school-ruler swords,  
we prepared for the laundry pile  
monsters. In daylight  
we'd share dreams and play video  
games, your mom's footsteps  
down the hall our only nemesis,  
When staying up late  
didn't involve panicking over  
a man with a gun in his pocket  
taking you places  
I couldn't follow. Before  
I first heard and felt  
the silence of the night,  
and couldn't sleep  
for stillness.

## Stepmother's Voice

I washed his infant body, reared him,  
taught his mouth to speak.  
I braided his hair, cooked his meals,  
listened to his troubles.  
My child.

He frustrated me by cutting school.  
Fought with his brothers.  
Knocked holes in the bedroom walls.  
I argued with him.  
My son.

Old football pictures bring new grief.  
I cried for the first time  
when his eyes and chest lay still before me.

Barely 21.  
I bore him in my youth.  
I bury him in his.

Saudi Arabia: New Year's Eve, 2005  
(Father's Voice)

I shave my hair and dress in an *ihram*  
for my farewell walk around the Kabbah.  
The black silk *kiswah* with the *shahadah*  
stitched in gold calligraphy touches my limbs  
as I reach the eastern corner. I kiss  
the Black Stone pieced beneath the silver band:  
my lips are fresh, my *tawhīd* clear. I understand  
though sins are forgotten, grief cannot be dismissed.  
On the journey home, my wife telephones;  
she is alone in our home that once held  
her children and mine. She misses Earl, who, far  
from us and in the earth, has *Insha'Allah* begun  
in paradise to forget this life. I've failed  
in protecting them. But this is our *qadar*.

Dream from the 6<sup>th</sup> Week

It's July and I'm driving  
to the Chihuahuan desert, searching  
for the Queen of the Night.

Beneath the shade of the creosote,  
jagged-cut stems lead to a white bud  
four feet above ground.

My knees are used to bending.  
They've often sunk into  
this soft ground . . .

Half-past eleven, the petals unfold,  
releasing fragrance:  
It's February. Somewhere

behind me, Earl advises,  
*Don't dwell in the details of the night  
or you'll forget the beauty of the rising sun.*

## Umbrella

Someone left an African print  
umbrella in the doorway.  
And often when it rains, I  
remember days when  
you came home once  
a downpour started,  
pulling your bike  
through the wooden door.  
You'd wipe the moisture  
from your face but allow  
droplets to dry in your hair.

We'd sit in the dark,  
watching anime until 2 a.m.,  
with no other sound  
aside from the cat  
lapping water from your cup.  
And I think of the summer  
rainfall at your funeral,  
the champagne coffin  
lowered beneath my feet  
as we sang *Amazing Grace*.  
Then women lifted  
their skirts and walked back  
to the saturated cars.

Degrees of Grief  
*for my sister Arifah, and brother Roosevelt*

For a month Arifah feared  
answering her phone. She'd  
lie in bed and listen until

the voicemail turned on.  
*If Roosevelt calls, she thought  
someone else has died.*

Because everyone is over  
three hundred miles away,  
she sees no need for visitors

and rarely leaves her apartment.  
Her cabinets scarcely hold  
enough to feed her.



Roosevelt cries at night  
when he wakes to silence;  
you no longer sneak in at two

in the morning, using the light  
from street lamps to rummage  
through clothes on the floor,

moving aside basketball sneakers,  
socks, and magazines to find  
a pair of shorts to sleep in.

Nor is there your soft snoring—  
only Roosevelt's uneven  
heartbeat to soften his sighs.



Your mother can't leave  
her car to walk into the house  
unless our father's within sight

on the sidewalk. She clenches  
a ball point in her pocket  
while on her lunch break so if

she recognizes the man  
who shot you execution style  
in front of your grandmother's house

and sat in court without  
saying a word,  
she can gouge out his eyes.



Our dad never says much  
about pain and talks of you  
less and less,

mentioning your name almost  
in passing. Surprised when  
your mother cries

in the morning. He said Evil is  
responsible for your death,  
that malice takes countless

forms and lives forever,  
as if a man who dies  
will never be forced to answer.

Prayer in the Mazaar

I build my walls with rotten logs, live  
among the drying river, dead

leaves. The woods soften, then give  
over to hardness, leaving tread-

marks of known paths. In rank air, I survive.  
It's midnight in the forest but His face

shines with the dawn. Speaking  
as He approaches—

word by word He embraces me,  
line by line He uncurls the bleak.

He lifts and throws me and all trace  
of decomposed life below

into the burning embers' crack.  
I emerge with a golden glow

like the fire salamander: black,  
with blazing red and yellow.

To Yolanda

The radiance of your eyes  
Changed from ivory pearls  
To the red flushness of  
One who cries in the morning.

The wrinkles  
At your temples and creases  
At your lips can't be smoothed  
The way you ran your hand

Over his blanket,  
Deceiving yourself behind  
His creaky and locked door,  
Feeling for nights

When his body still lay  
Warm beneath your touch.  
*Life goes on*, you insist, though  
you don't hold me the same.

## Quintessence

I can share  
stories of your days:  
how you fixed  
bicycles in the corner  
behind the stairs  
then rode them till dark,  
can describe the magazines  
you bought to cover  
walls with rap  
posters and how you  
sang the lyrics  
as you walked.  
I can tell people  
you hated school,  
and how I, a year younger,  
passed you in grades.  
But you didn't mind.  
I could say  
you weren't lazy,  
worked nights in  
fast food to save  
money for a car,  
then became a butcher.  
I can even point to  
men who wear  
baseball caps low  
over their eyes,  
men your height,  
with your smooth  
sepia tone.

## Jewelry Box

Open up and play a song  
of times when men marched  
and preached, fought and died  
for freedom, when they

weren't too high on idle thoughts  
to notice the music stopped  
but grew restless at the sound  
of silence and oppression and

decided to sit down only at  
lunch counter sit-ins.  
Open up and show me your gems,  
the men who used their hands

to build their own houses,  
grew crops to feed their families,  
tried to make it so their daughters  
would never be afraid to go to school

or pray alone in church.  
I'm tired of these painted jewels.  
Men believing they can ignore their  
history and forget they were made

to shine. These men who abandon  
and beat their women, kill their  
brothers in the name of greed. I want  
authentic obsidian stones. Hear me:

Take back these coals.  
Press them. Teach them to become black  
diamonds, or hold them in your shell  
until black pearls emerge.

Dreams from the 10<sup>th</sup> Week

I.

I rose from the sofa  
as you approached the doorway.

Arifah was there also, but I focused  
on how peacefully you held yourself:

hands in your pockets, eyes focusing  
on pictures around the room.

Oblivious to our nervousness,  
you turned towards the stairwell

and asked for your mother.  
I said not to yell for her.

You couldn't recall that night,  
the man approaching you,

the gun to your head.  
As we explained how the week

before we buried you in the hillside  
of Merion Memorial Park,

your shoulders fell.  
Arifah and I hugged you

and as we said your name,  
you rested your head on my shoulder,

turned your face away,  
and I felt your chest heave.

## II.

The steps creaked while you walked  
down to the second-floor landing

where I waited: sun from the bathroom  
window almost washing out your complexion.

You weren't wearing a baseball cap,  
nor did you have braids from that stage

when you grew your hair out. We hugged  
in the hallway, then descended

to the first floor. Before you left,  
we stopped on the front step where

our parents sat. You said nothing, smiled,  
touched my shoulders as they looked on,

confused by this affection. You waved,  
popped a wheelie as you rode

down the one-way street, the air  
catching the sleeves of your white t-shirt.

## Black Doves

I'll tell you your fortune, underground  
as we wait for the subway to take us  
from Leigh Avenue to 8<sup>th</sup> Street, The Gallery.  
I'll study the lines on your hand

as the musky and crowded train pulls away from  
the diminishing sunlight falling down the concrete stairs.  
Your fingers are round and your palm wrinkled  
like the red eyelids of the pigeons trapped below ground

who fly in search of natural light. I'm certain  
you'll be shot while you're still young but  
from the exit wound you'll bleed black doves  
that sing as they emerge from your crown,

flying higher than the road to *The Holy Mountain*.  
They'll deliver your essence and soul  
as they never could beneath the streets.  
And you will lie beneath my feet.

Dhikr

Breathe out the killer's name.  
Forget the hate of that instant

*Lā ilāha*

and let the resentment escape  
with the air from your lungs.

*illallāhu*

Don't let the grief shadow over you.  
Breathe in the name of your brother.

*Lā ilāha*

Remember his voice, his walk,  
impressions.

*illallāhu*

Forgive yourself for missing  
his last days, for your absence.

*Lā ilāha*

Trust fate to lead you  
to your proper place,  
and he was lead to his.

*Lā ilāha, illallāhu*