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Black Doves

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

**By
Hadiyah Rajeeyah Abdullah
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Black Doves
Poems

Hadiyah Rajeeyah Abdullah

For Earl

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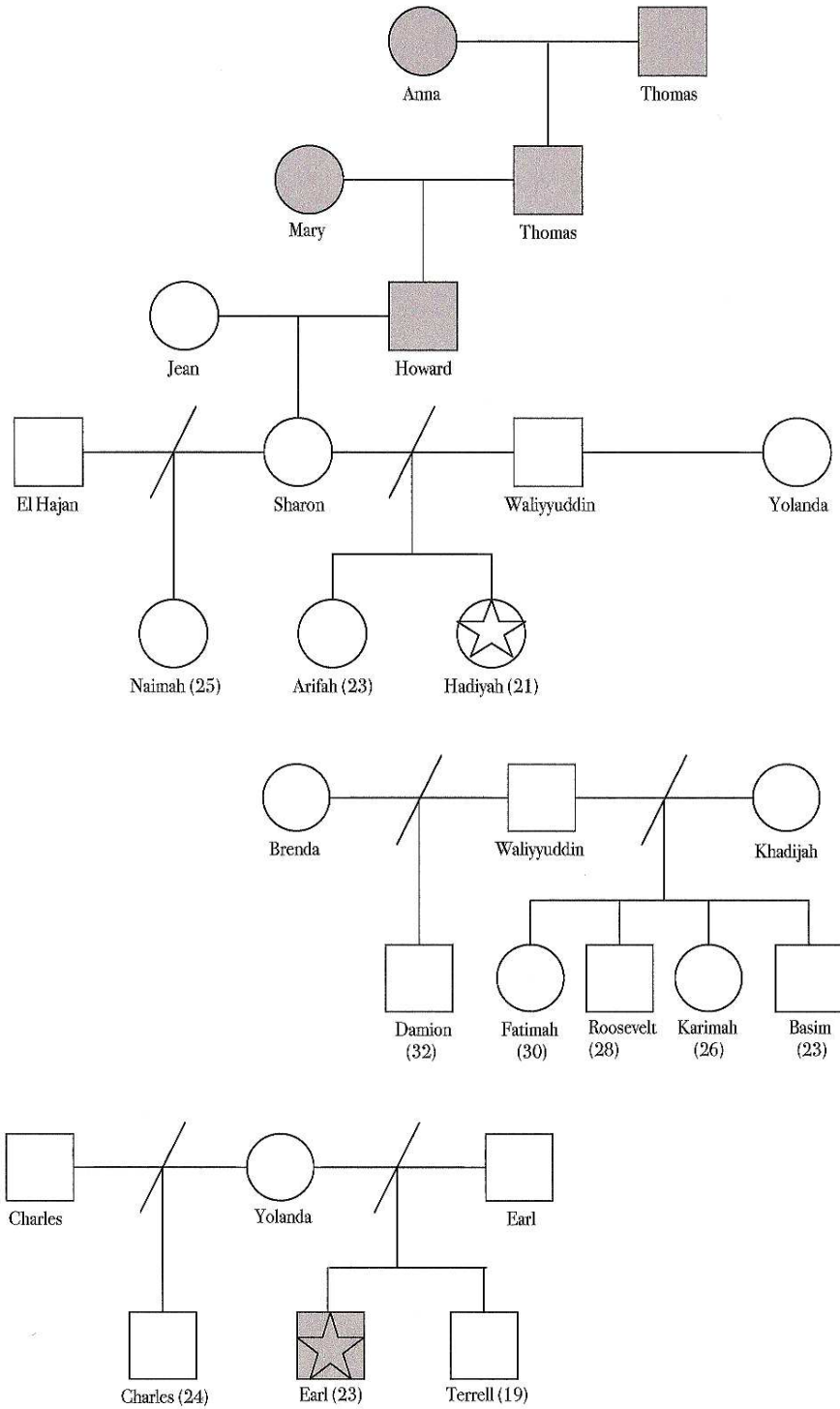
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I

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 30th 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 . . .

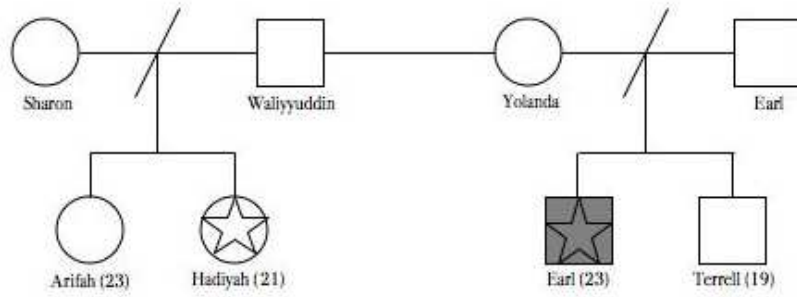
Is that why the embryo died
In my body? Only alive eight weeks
Yet I carried it for ten
Like a tumor. It would have

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 6th 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 10th 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 8th 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