

black lives, heavy truths

preface

i am two years old when they
murder stephen lawrence

in the land before memory,
the six o'clock news
feeds me

Black Death

to cut my baby teeth on
long before i learn
the colour of my skin,
it is bathed in
blue light
buzzing with
heavy truths:

Bright Black Things
are built to shine,
but aren't always
built to last

**a man was lynched yesterday
golden shovel after 'strange fruit' by Abel Meeropol recorded by billie holiday**

his death travels 4000 miles to rage with us **here** /
ignorance swells tongues / it is
thicker than blood / harder to scrub out / **a**
man was lynched by police yesterday / and we talk and talk about **fruit** /
we argue that it's just one apple / we argue that it's the whole barrel / **for**
those of us, whose blood is sharp with the anxiety that chews up **the**
Black Body / our cynicism **crow**s /
"where were you before?" / "why are you listening **to**
us now?" / we forget to be grateful, when thousands of white people **pluck**
up the courage / to share Black Suffering™, **for**
mass consumption / we struggle to remember / ever collectively feasting on **the**
white body's last breath / don't see any disrespect retweeting Black Death / **rain-**
making deaths, like trayvon and tamir, flooded streets with grief / only **to**
dry up in the mouths of the judge / but i have never seen storms of people **gather**
/ like they do **for**
george floyd / we are calling this **the**
catalyst / a change is going to come / the answer is seething in the **wind**:
/ if Black Lives don't matter / Black Deaths will sow martyrs / and we are here **to**
reap / we sharpen our scythes and **suck**
our teeth / a man has been lynched every yesterday **for**
centuries / is this the sound of **the**
bough before it breaks? / the last breath we take before we reclaim a **sun** /
that was never built to burn strange fruit / we want so hard **to**
believe that Normal is a peaceful country we can return to / but the routine of **rot**
and rage warps the everyday / makes us refugees of a place we've never seen / **for**

the internally displaced, hope can be a treacherous thing / **the**
message that swings from the **trees** /
maybe this time will be different / threatens **to**
quench a thirst for justice / i have heard too many names **drop**,
heavy, like premature plums / but still, you defend the soil **here** /
because to admit its toxicity / **is**
to acknowledge our complicity / **a**
man's death travelled 4000 miles to a **strange**
land / we fed, clothed and watered it / **and**
couldn't recognise what we harvested / from our own **bitter**

crop

why i'm no longer talking to white journalists about race

radio scotland phones me
to ask if i'll talk about
george floyd's funeral,
when the living are
driving home from work.

i decline.

i can tell them how it feels,
when people are surprised
that my palms are so much
lighter than the backs of my hands.

how a curiosity so sharp and white,
can cut and burn.

but i don't have anything to say
about a funeral i never went to,
for a man i never met.

this poem was written on what would have been anthony walker's 34th birthday

i.

the media is a scalpel.
cold and precise,
it detaches your skin

fastidious hands
unpick a patchwork
quilt of melanin —

the stories it has carried
for years laid bare when,
suddenly, everyone wants

to hear your flesh sing.

21 years after macpherson and his report
15 years after jean charles de menezes was shot
9 years after tottenham burned with grief
5 years after sheku bayoh couldn't breathe
3 years after grenfell coughed up clouds of smoke
2 years after the windrush scandal broke

1 year after we elect a prime minister,
who says the problem with africa
is that we aren't in charge anymore

and people will
ask if you think
the uk is racist.

as if this most basic of
questions gets to the
bottom of anything.

ii.

their first mistake:

assuming a definition of racism is entirely subjective. there's simply no objective way to identify it. no diagnostic criteria. a symptomless killer.

their second mistake:

worshipping binaries. Black or White / One or The Other. people of no colour need to know if something *is* or *isn't*. there is a box labelled **RACIST** and you will have to squeeze people inside it for the sake of a soundbite. by this point, we should all know what racism smells like. but when someone's mouth and deeds reek of it, we waste time debating the existence of a racist bone in their body — as if racism were an essential quality you either have or don't. Black or White / One or The Other. if it were that simplistic, melanistic folk could finally stop talking about race. when a person upholds racism, it's not their bones talking. it's an idea that has corrupted their body. it isn't an immutable and personal characteristic, so it shouldn't hurt to challenge it. racism is a spectrum disorder. it is expressed through a cluster of traits and behaviours triggered by the same underlying mechanism. this complex condition links other syndromes, like sexism, ableism and queer antagonism, like disaster capitalism and environmental terrorism. marginalised bodies suffer chronic comorbidities. when our lives aren't singular, there can't be one single cure to alleviate symptoms of oppression. every system is complex in its contradictions and multiplicities, we can never address these if we insist everything is Black or White / One or The Other.

their third mistake:

thinking they can take racism 101 every year,
while Black People have to learn on the job.

iii.

put the scalpel down and ask me about the blood-language of The Diaspora,
how it fills my veins with whispered names of the dead / ask me the colour of the death soaked
thread that connects the cultural, economic and legal traditions of a rusting empire desperate
to stay relevant / ask me why the heart of every fight for freedom beats the same rhythm, and
how our song is stronger when we sing together / ask me about the equalising social process
of being blackened that makes us Black full stop, and erases our Black *and* / ask me about
people who are Black and trans, Black and disabled, Black and doing sex work, Black and
Muslim, Black and without recourse to public funds / ask me how it feels to talk about racism
on television when Nigel Farage was given a disproportionate amount of air time for years, then
ask me if journalists have a duty of care / ask me who was killed by Scottish police on a sunlit
street in 2015 / put the scalpel down and i will read freely from my skin

iv

Anthony Walker should have been eating cake today. i wish i didn't know his name. i wish you
didn't ask the same questions you were asking back then.

on statues

some things age like milk.
tweets trumpeted from an orange gas bag,
January 2020's "best year ever" plans,

but racist ideology double dipped in bronze,
is timeless. that shit is built to last.
unless

you arrive at a generation, tired of fighting
the same war their grandparents fought.
when an object you thought was

immovable is met with an
unstoppable force, does it feel
like you're sinking?

and will it ever sink in,
if you shout,
"there ain't no Black in the union jack"
when The Empire strikes,
The People will strike back.

on gratitude

when i see the granite streets
that skinned the brown knees
of my childhood, exploding
with posters and slogans —

something behind my ribcage
starts to unstick. for years my
chest has been thick with
every "where are you really from?"

that has clung to my heart
and stung every part of me.
friendly smiles that shine
with the kindest of knives,

make the deepest cuts.

the city that birthed me has
also cursed me under its breath,
but when george stopped breathing,
these streets breathed for him.

and i breathed a sigh of relief.
unaware, i was even holding it in.
this gratitude is blood-tinged,
obscured by the shadows of guilt and grief.

sometimes, i feel like a thief
pick pocketing the death of a stranger.
but research suggests, being grateful
improves mental health.

not that it it did stormzy much good
when the daily mail said he should
thank the uk for letting his poor,
Black mum stay. so he could be born in

the land of

milk
 (coloured people)
and
honey
 (coated bigotry)

when a Black man is choked to death by racism,

i don't want to be grateful for anything.
i don't want to be grateful,
i want to be equal.

the revolution will be televised will be televised will be televised
after gil scott-heron

the revolution will be televised **the revolution will be streamed live** by melanated millennials serving hashtagblackgirlmagic **the revolution is one click away** the revolution won't believe you when you say *you didn't know the revolution sees you every time you scroll* past fibreoptic freedom calls + hi-res redemption songs **the revolution will make your timeline bleed** the revolution will burn up your news feed **so you can't escape the blood + heat from the street** the revolution would like to remind you **when our house is on fire you can't just walk by any more** the revolution won't be long **'cause it's already here** the revolution will be long **'cause it is never ending** constantly rebuilding with each new generation **+ although our phones are getting newer / faster / smarter** our revolutionary fire is **much much older** + it has slowly burned from ancestor to ancestor **those who bestowed** genetically encoded **gifts** of hearts in flames **+ hands in fists**

the revolution is a blacktranswoman **the revolution is an undocumented african** the revolution is a youngblackman **with autism** facing deportation **the revolution is box braids, locs + bantu knots** it is a "yes bitch this is my real hair" / "no bitch you can't touch" **afropuff** the revolution is cassava / condomble / kunta kinte **kissing his teeth** when you have the caucasity to call him **by any other name** the revolution knows where it came from **it knows to get to where it's going** the revolution must be **wheelchair accessible / available in braille / with closed captions** + bsl interpretation **it must be digitised** so every mobile device **is weaponised** + those confined to a bed **are still armed in the struggle** the revolution doesn't leave anyone behind **it doesn't mind** if you can't take to the street **just sign + retweet** this petition

the revolution is the white man's burden
to bear as long as i wear this skin **i can't tune out so you have to tune in** hit like / click subscribe / **follow the revolution**

postscript

in June 2020, bookshop shelves

haemorrhaged

anti-racist bibles.

renni eddo-lodge became

the first Black British

author to ever

top the UK book charts.

180 days later,

a Black man was killed by police

in south Wales.

his name was

Mohamud Mohammed Hassan,

soon to be called *dad*.

he was 24 years old.

a chorus

of childless mothers,
sings in his blood:

don't forget about us,

please,

don't forget

about

us.

notes

a man was lynched yesterday

from 1920 – 1938, a flag with the message **a man was lynched yesterday**, was flown from the national headquarters of the NAACP to protest the lynchings of Black US citizens. in 2015, african american artist dread scott updated the flag, producing a banner bearing the message **a man was lynched by police yesterday**. this protest art was in response to the murder of walter scott, who was killed in 2015 by a police officer in south carolina.

the golden shovel is a poetic constraint devised by Black US poet terrance hayes.

this poem was written on what would have been anthony walker's 34th birthday

in 2005, anthony walker was killed in a racist attack in merseyside. His killers were convicted of murder and received life sentences.

sheku bayoh was killed by police in kirkaldy in 2015. he sustained 23 injuries and was dying within 5 minutes of police contact. in november 2020, an independent public inquiry was set up to examine sheku's death. his family await answers. in the UK there has never been a successful manslaughter prosecution of any officer either at an individual or senior management level for police-related deaths.

the revolution will be televised will be televised will be televised

this poem is of course a homage to gil scott heron's iconic **the revolution will not be televised**.

the young Black man with autism referred to in this poem is osime brown. in 2018, osime was unlawfully convicted and imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. it was ordered that upon his release, he should be deported to jamaica – a country where he has no support network and hasn't lived in since he was four years old. osime has since been released from prison (where his mental and physical health deteriorated rapidly) but still faces the threat of deportation. osime has autism, PTSD and a heart condition; deportation would be a death sentence for him. follow **@FreeOsimeBrown** on twitter for more information on how to fight against this horrific case of ableism and racism. **#StopTheDeportation**

on statues

there ain't no black in the union jack and **the empire strikes back: race and racism in 70s Britain** are path breaking cultural studies/critical race theory texts authored by paul gilroy.

postscript

mohamud mohammed hassan was arrested by south wales police on suspicion of breaching the peace. he was released without charge the following morning, at around 8.30 am on the 9th of january 2021. he was found dead at his home the same evening at around 10.30pm. it has emerged that mohamud came into contact with more than 50 police officers the weekend of his death. family and friends report he was seriously injured after leaving police custody and they encouraged him to go to the hospital. mohamud instead went home to rest, and never woke up. at the time of writing, south wales police have raided homes and arrested four people who protested mohamud's death. **one** police officer has been served a misconduct notice to investigate whether passed on information that mohamud was in pain at the time of arrest; the independent office for police conduct (IOPC) has stated that this does not mean the officer has committed any wrong doing, only that their conduct is under investigation. support the fight for **#Justice4Mohamud** at <https://linktr.ee/JusticeForMohamudHassan>