

**Tawanda Mulalu** / 3 poems

## **Aria**

*Nigger-eye*

*Berries cast dark*

*Hooks —*

— Sylvia Plath, 'Ariel'

An aria's any song's sympathy with Ophelia

An aria's any darkness

Then any light involved in darkness

Then an aria's like a pool of water

Then an aria's like a painting

Then an aria's like any other sound.

When you're sleeping you sound

And the sound sounds up Karen

And the sound is how I would like to paint

Karen's sounds on my darkness.

The sound is what I would like to be like the mirror

That Karen sinks into her darkness.

Mirrors are little darkneses

Not unlike my mouth how I try sounds

But find water.

I hope someday my mouth finds Karen Carpenter  
Even if my mouth is not a mirror it is darkness  
Even if the mirror is where her skin eats itself like paintings.

Your skin's not a painting  
It doesn't eat itself it doesn't eat my skin's darkness  
And in darkness your skin's also darkness.  
Your bedsheets make a sound  
And the sound sounds up Karen's  
Sounds again. You wake and consider me. You pass me a bottle of water

And I drink it. *Then take the bedsheets as water. Then take the air as water*  
And now I'm drinking all of you as a painting  
— Which is when I hear horses, hear Sylvia:  
She's swallowing everything as paintings and her darkness  
Is a red eye rising as morning's first sound  
Then the horse into that red eye is darkness

Then reading her horse into my black eyes is darkness  
Then words are sometimes water  
They're the flow of sound  
From each to the next, little sips then swallowing then with them we paint  
Each other — the darkest darkness  
— And I paint you, hear horses, hear you, Ophelia, Karen, Sylvia

Still painting over all of us and the darkness is painting  
And the mirror is every little sipping sound in your room's darkness  
And the sounds are everywhere like skin like *in this darkness how mine is yours*  
like any other white girl's, an aria.

## Aria

*O half moon —*

*Half-brain, luminosity —*

*Negro, masked like a white...*

— Sylvia Plath, 'Thalidomide'

There is not enough light inside this poem to

Lie to you. All my poems are in whiteface. Which makes me clean, bearable. Is my life viable. This poem

Is not mine. Every morning I carry it

More than this strain in my jaw. When I recite you my memory does not recite me back. I call out for you

And my mother answers *please call*

*Us back.* I am compared to my father. A moth falls from my lamp. Choked by light, by glass. Choke me

Harder. There is pleasure inside

This horizon, bending. These legs sleeping in my bed, they vessel me. Peel him. I taste of lobster beneath.

You peer at me. I am peerless. The best

Of my skin you will witness. I am all bodies like this body — yours to take only if you will have me dark

Enough. As a horse's eyes, like berries I  
Rot black in your throat. And I am so pretty with the chance of my blood in  
the air, these clouds suffused

With a warmth unseen until police draw real guns at me. Remember the boy  
with a name with a toy gun

In the park. Their imagination kills him.

My mouth is a real gun. My ears warm in  
Your tongue. It, too, sang America. Poem, stay with me. Float with me. This  
white page peels a black boy

In a park. There is no light inside him.

## Poetry in America

Green, firm, your father prods at the stems above with a fruit-picker pole. Mangoes. From Florida. Mailed from Massachusetts to Nebraska. Large letters name me, name you. Open the battered box, think *Egypt*. And the purple petals you mail from Massachusetts to Vermont. Wipe down flight seats with wet-wipes, sudden air. From Vermont. Hear you here now in Nebraska, where spring gutters in the back of my throat. Where my nose leaks. Where my right ear refuses air. Hear you from the hospital where you call in Massachusetts. Let my left hand hold your throat through my phone. Hear your brain swallow you. *Be sure to put them in a brown bag to ripen*. I watch the faucet spill at night—the slightest turn— my fingers gummy with orange flesh and orange threads of flesh. You snap yourself in mask, before air. To Florida. My phone streams you. You prod at the stems above with a fruit picker pole. And what is it? Too many birds, none of you. See the hazy look of you with white sterile background before they take your phone from you. Wait for *Unknown Number* to light up during the day while scrolling through remains of eyelids burst by rubber bullets, bitter clouds of tear gas passing through crowds, police cars roaring towards bodies. Listen to my friend's neighbor cough bulbs of mucous into his kitchen sink. And while walking past his backyard, stare once by accident through the glass door. See it. The purest white flowing from his throat. Hear you ask again when I can see you. In Massachusetts. Say my luggage just arrived from Vermont. Wonder where you get your phone. Wait for your friends to tell me what your doctors say. Reflect on synapses. Imagine yours stirring while you said just two days before the sterile white— how America is watching you. Realize that America is. Remember you with your hijab. Remember your hair instead. Laugh with you about mangoes, this century's season of diasporic karaoke, classics from the ancestors, the lyrics read *please be with me*. I don't want to sing anymore, now read *I don't want to be alone*. In Nebraska. Place more orange flesh in my mouth when my friend's mother again asks me to eat. Taste how the sun glows from Florida, think *Egypt*. And what is it? Dvořák, String Quartet No. 12: *I am*

*convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. I say this land does not belong to anyone. I let my hair kink in shapes. I try to love myself in the mirror. I conjure you next to me before closing my eyes. Listen. The waves. The screaming beneath them. It carries over to you. Walk with me there. The shore. The ships. And then name what it is: Alabama. Alaska. American Samoa. California. Connecticut. Delaware. Florida. Georgia. Guam. Guantanamo Bay. Hawaii. Louisiana. Maine. Maryland. Massachusetts. Mississippi. New Hampshire. New Jersey. New York. North Carolina. Northern Mariana Islands. Oregon. Puerto Rico. Rhode Island. South Carolina. Texas. United States Minor Outlying Islands. United States Virgin Islands. Virginia. Washington. Philando Castile's daughter, *it's okay Mommy*. Philando Castile's daughter, *it's okay I'm right here witchu*. Philando Castile's daughter, *Mommy please stop saying cusses 'cause I don't want you to get shooted*. Philando Castile's daughter, *I can keep you safe*.*