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Observations



Natasha Thomas

A collection of compositions created for
Buckham Fine Arts Project's Writer in Residence



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A collection of compositions
created by Natasha Thomas for
Buckham Fine Arts Project's
Writer in Residence
October 2021 - August 2022.

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Installation views courtesy of Buckham Fine Arts Project

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*Personal Compositions

Forward

At the core of Buckham Fine Arts Project is the guiding principle of providing opportunities for our community to engage with innovative contemporary art, both visual and non-visual, of the highest quality and standard. Our vision includes supporting and nurturing artists, building community and inclusivity, while challenging our audience to engage with and look at art in new ways.

The Writer In Residence project was launched in early 2021 to engage contemporary literary arts and Flint's Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) community. It's an opportunity for literary artists from Genesee County to immerse in their appreciation of visual arts by experiencing the exhibits in the gallery. The resident writers produce written components responding to each exhibition, plus additional content that responds to topical issues and personal research. We hope this collaboration provides an opportunity for our resident writers to engage with their interest in visual art while gaining exposure for their literary arts and engages Flint's BIPOC community in a meaningful way.

This second publication features Natasha Thomas, Buckham's 2021 - 2022 Writer In Residence recipient. Thomas attended nine exhibitions at Buckham Gallery, including 658 works of visual art by 157 artists. Using her literary arts magic, she created 12 compositions responding to her communion with the visual artworks. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with Thomas.

Many thanks to the artists who exhibited with Buckham Gallery and shared their images for inclusion in this book. The artists delve into personal and cultural experiences. I believe the power of art is to create shared experiences and build empathy. Something we all need more of these days.

A profound thank you to my colleague Katie Cotton, and to Buckham's Board of Directors, Buckham Arts Collective, and Community Members, whether directly or indirectly your support is appreciated!

We are forever grateful to the individuals who donated to our sponsorship call, helping us to produce this second physical Writer In Residence publication. Next, I would like to say thank you to all the individuals and organizations who support Buckham Fine Arts Project and Gallery, including Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Michigan Arts and Culture Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Greater Flint Arts Council Share Art Genesee Grant program made possible by the Genesee County Arts Education and Cultural Enrichment Millage Funds.

It is with gratitude and optimism that Buckham Fine Arts Project shares this publication, the culmination of our collaboration with Natasha Thomas.

Michele Leclaire
Executive Director
Buckham Fine Arts Project | Buckham Gallery

Introduction

I write because in doing so, I seize the power and permission to claim the multiplicity of who I am.

For me, writing is a recurring baptism.

One that can be just as transformational as it is terrifying. As healing as it is harrowing. As numinous as it is paralyzing.

I believe that in any act of creation - intentional or not - there's the potential for seismic shifts to occur within and around us. There's always the possibility that in a brazen act of rebellion and vulnerability, the doors to the innermost chamber of who we are will decide to fly open, pushing us into uncharted territories of intimacy, power, and awareness.

Whether we are creating or beholding art...or both...it is a liberating ordeal, indeed.

We are surprised by versions of ourselves over and over again.

As the 2021-2022 Writer-in-Residence at Buckham Gallery, I have had the privilege of bearing witness to the bold and brilliant works of artists in my city and beyond. Through these works by fellow creators, I have been inspired, moved, and sometimes, challenged when creating my own responses.

I believe any reader of this collection will see clear themes emerge.

As a writer, creator, and woman - Black-Indigenous woman, specifically - I feel spiritually and politically mandated to use my voice and live my life in ways that highlight the magic and the knowing, the bounty and the brutality, the trauma and triumph, and the grief and the grace of this life.

You will see that worldview reflected throughout.

Both my politics and my spirituality are deeply rooted in radical social justice movements and the varied mystical wisdom traditions of the global majority (often referred to as “the marginalized”).

You will see that worldview throughout.

Lastly, I am a womanist/feminist. A devotee of the Divine Mother who firmly believes that women are the soul of this world, that the Earth itself is an embodiment of feminine expression, and that patriarchy (in the virulent and violent ways it has manifested in this world) has proven to be fatally detrimental to women and to life, itself.

You will see that worldview throughout.

The poems in this collection are a meaningful and necessary collaboration between myself and the talented and vibrant visual artists who used their gifts to provoke and inspire.

My hope is that people read this collection and then feel (even) a bit of the sense of sacred responsibility that informed it, and that is this:

We have a moral obligation and spiritual mandate to excavate and bring forth the creative treasures within us in order to free ourselves and become luminous forerunners of the new liberated worlds we know are possible. Set loose your gifts.

In Solidarity,
Natasha

Eulogy for a Light Beam



Image: Jennifer Bock-Nelson, "The Threshold of Observation," oil on basswood panel, 30" x 40"

"The Threshold of Observation," was featured as part of *Entropy*, a group exhibition featuring the works of Bock-Nelson, Kelly A Mueller and Amy Sacksteder, October 8 - November 6, 2021.

Because of school,
I learned about infinity as a concept.

Because of my mother,
I learned it as muscle memory.

As way of being.

The world told me I was just a girl.
My mother taught me I was a gateway.

Meant to stay open.

Meant to know myself as both
complex math and moving prayer.
As ancient light and living waters.

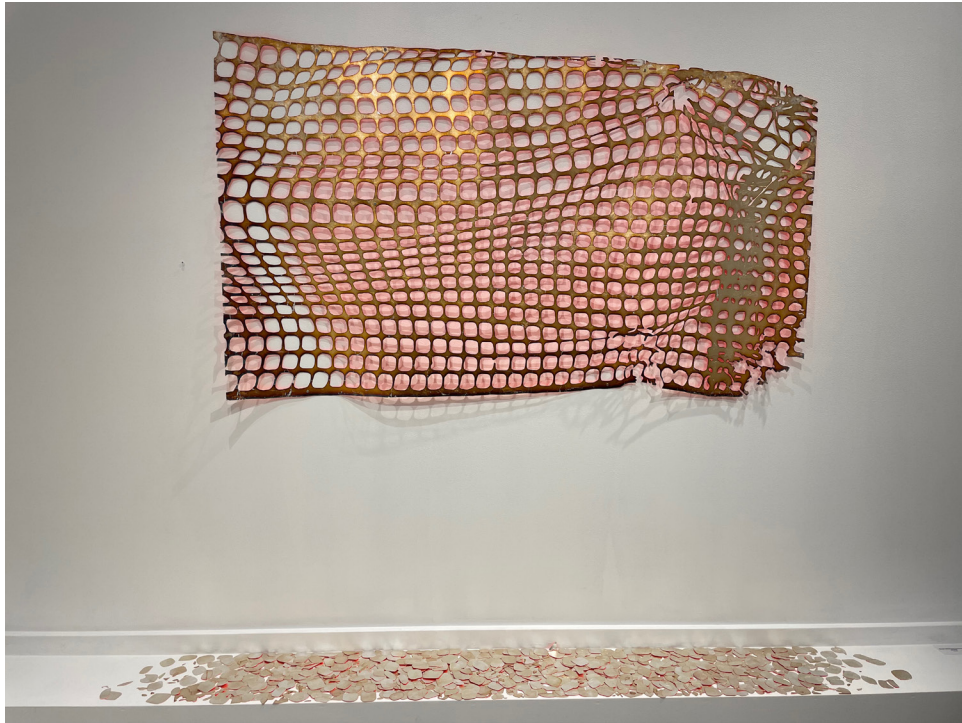
Ad infinitum.

So, I model myself after Time,
who continues her perpetual dance towards forever through a
staunch refusal to cling to anything...

Not numbers, nor lovers.
Not wounds, nor worlds.

No thing.

Making it all possible.



Who Will Pay for the Wall?

Image: Amy Sacksteder, "The Other Side of Light (NOLA, Detroit, Ypsi, Flint)," Silver leaf and acrylic on hand-cut paper, 80" x 62.5"

"The Other Side of Light (NOLA, Detroit, Ypsi, Flint)" was featured as part of *Entropy*, a group exhibition featuring the works of Jennifer Bock-Nelson, Kelly A Mueller and Sacksteder, October 8 - November 6, 2021.

Building the walls to hide behind is easier than finding the words
to say.

There are feelings.
And there are fences.

I'd rather take my chances with the latter.

My fence is made from the thinnest parts of my skin.

Without it, I might start talking to you without fear, with the front
door of my heart standing wide open.

But I have my walls and I have my fences.

And I make sure that front door - with you on one side and me on
the other - is closed before I speak.

Now, we can ignore the terror that is tenderness.

Because who really wants to be a refugee trying to cross these
open waters between your heart and mine? Your voice and mine?

The shores and borders we have been so sure of all this time
would dissolve...and who would we be...then? Without them? With
no fiction to hide behind? With no fig leaves to cover us?

No...Other?

Could we survive that kind of displacement?

Are we ready for that harrowing migration into the dark fires
where intimacy, connection,
vulnerability, authenticity, transformation,

entropy...

love,

death...

rebirth...

& liberation all burn the same?

I



When asked who she is, she lets her eyes answer.

Because, unlike mouths that are trained in the ways of surnames. Titles. Associations. Borders. Degrees...

Eyes will tell about the longing she can't dislodge. The tender parts of herself she won't divulge. The crystallized joy and liquefied grief that marks her days.

Her mouth will merely utter her name but it's her eyes that take me through her...as rite...as ritual.

Her mouth? King's English.
Her eyes? Mother Tongue.

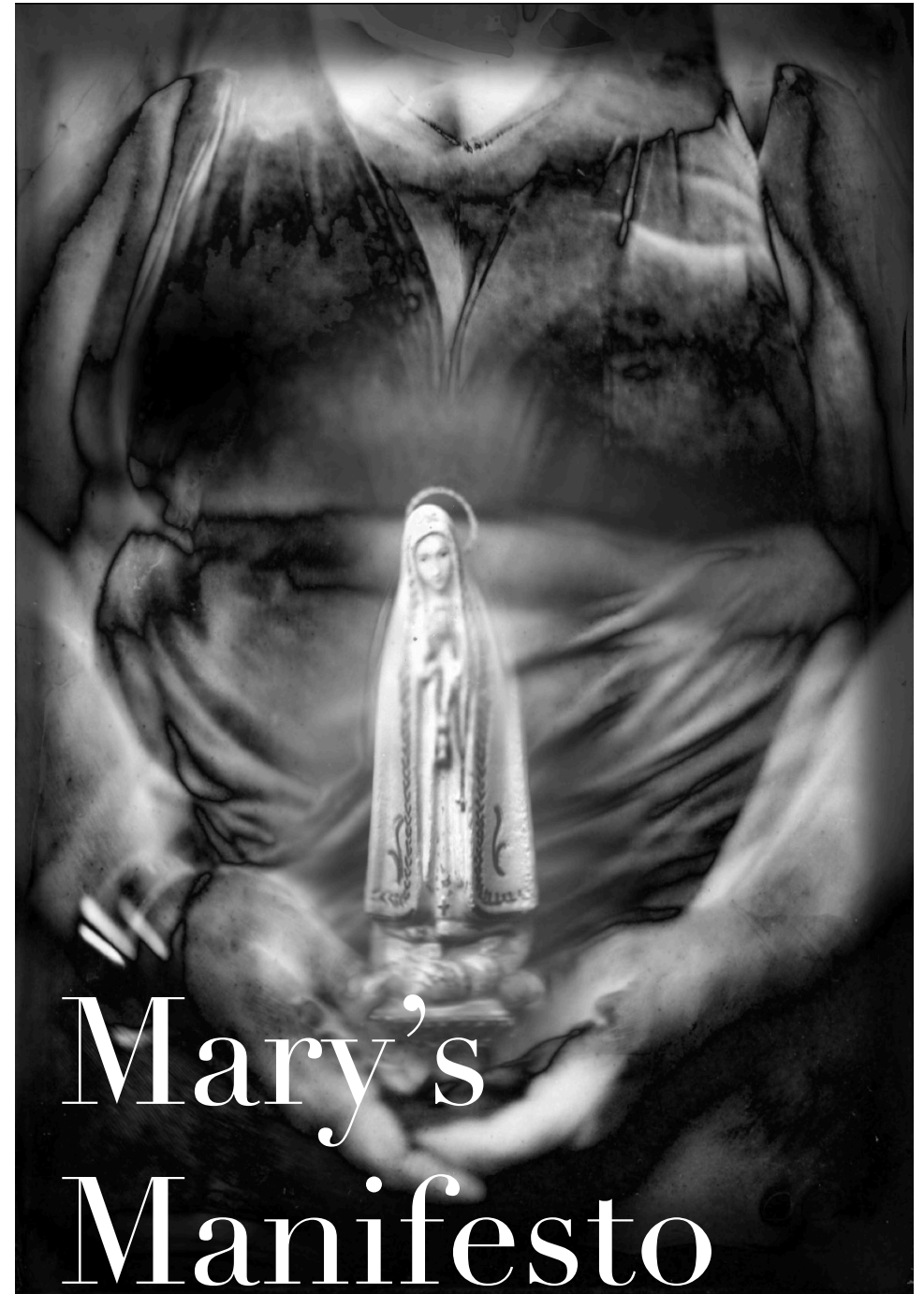
Her mouth? I hear.
Her eyes? I believe.

Image: Sifus Thompson "Black Girl White Field," graphite.

"Black Girl White Field" was featured as part of *Black & White*, a group exhibition featuring the works of Buckham Artist Collaborators, November 12 - December 4, 2021.

Image: Rebecca Zeiss, "Seeking Solace XXXV," Pigment print on Hahnemühle Baryta with resin, 26" x 19".

"Seeking Solace XXXV" was featured in Rebecca Zeiss' solo exhibition, *Seeking Solace* from December 10, 2021 - January 8, 2022



Mary's Manifesto

Children, kneel.
Sayeth the Church.
Sayeth the State.

Pay your alms. Tithe your tenth. Volunteer as tribute. Swallow this dogma. Embrace this fear. Choose your denomination. Canonize this saint. Quell your curiosity. Follow this prophet. Deify this guru. Silence this heresy. Burn that witch. Abuse that child. Hum this hymn. Drink this blood. Eat this flesh. Sacrifice this lamb.

Forget. Yourself.

Children, kneel.
Sayeth the Church.
Sayeth the State.
Sayeth the Crown.
Sayeth the Authority.

Vote this way. Swing this state. Rep this party. Pledge this allegiance. Support this bill. Push this policy. Salute this flag. Fund this war. Ban this book. Build this wall. Lionize this politician. Misappropriate this spending. Maintain this patriarchy. Perpetuate this misogyny. White this Supremacy. Ban this Trans. Disseminate this misinformation. E(race) this critical theory. Whitewash this curriculum. Change this climate. Drink this Kool-Aid. Meta this verse.

Forget. Yourself.

Children, stand. Sayeth The Mother.

Spark the revolution. Trust the intuition. Unseal the scrolls. Unlock the heart. Tell the truth. Untether the soul. Reclaim your wild. Undo the damage. Dismantle the system. End the oppression. Unify the fragments. Heal the wounds. Protect the children. Know the rites. Cast the spells. Be the ritual. Dissolve the facade. Venerate the body. Purify the mind. Light the fire. Break the chains. Demand the justice. Embrace the shadow. Embody the light. Tap the source. Savor the mystery. Challenge the narrative. Shake the cage. Stir the pot. Upset the applecart. Do the work. Show your face. Speak your piece. Spread the salve. Be the balm.

Remember. Yourself.

Children, emerge.
Sayeth the Mother.

Sayeth Fertility.
Sayeth Sacred Birthright.
Sayeth the Church, Crown, and Authority that lives within.

The Ticking & The Tocking

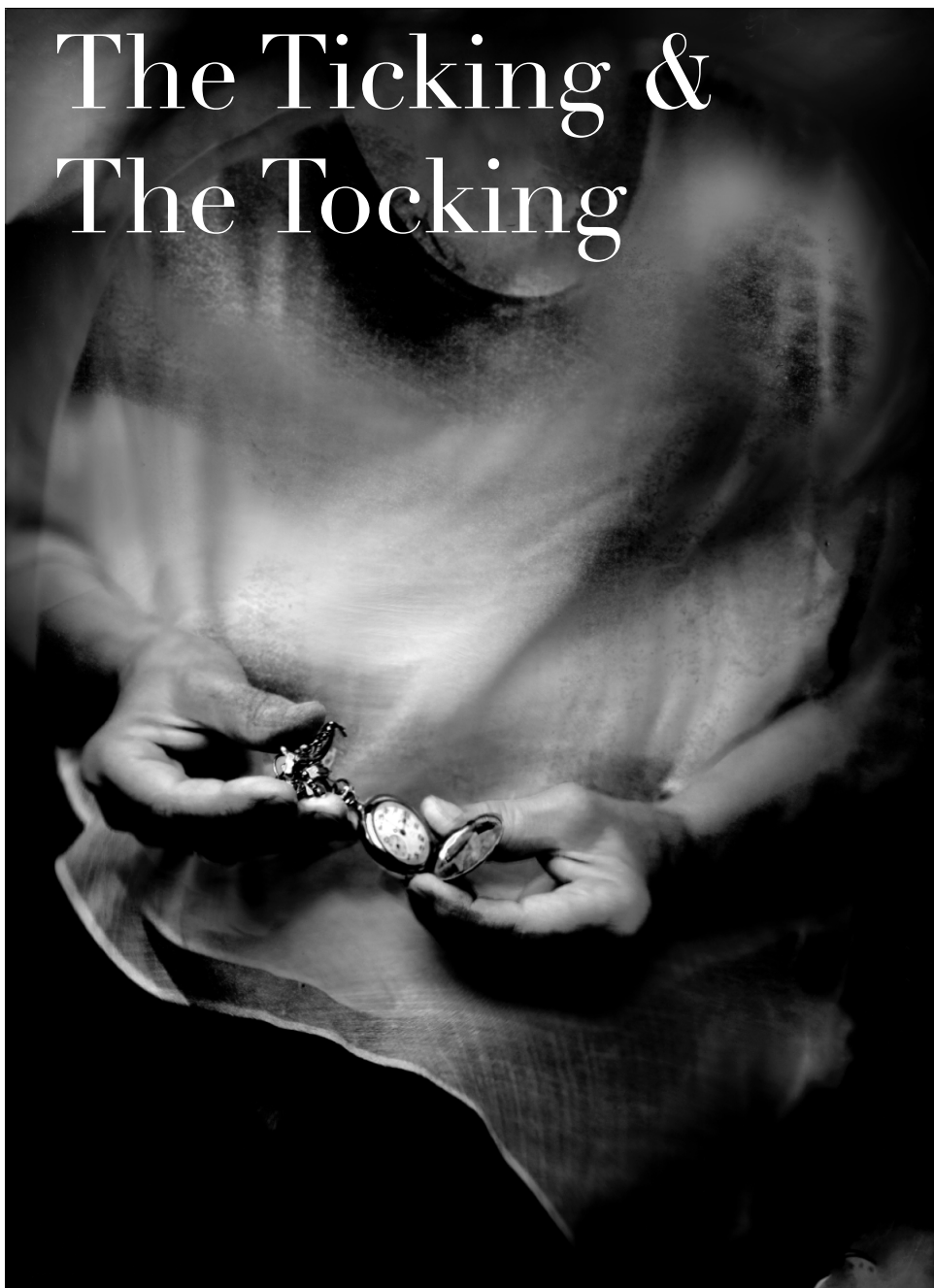


Image: Rebecca Zeiss, "Seeking Solace XXXIV" Pigment print on Hahnemühle Baryta with resin, 26" x 20".

"Seeking Solace XXXV" was featured in Rebecca Zeiss' solo exhibition,
Seeking Solace from December 10, 2021 - January 8, 2022

Time,

I think about all the minutes you gave me that I left to die at the
bottom of old hurt.
Sacrificed as burnt offerings to a lesser life that wasn't worthy of
them.

We deserved better, Time.

The way existence works, I can't retrieve you.

Revive you.

Revere you.

Can't snatch you back from the derelict systems, half-lovers, dis-
tractions, addictions, false friends, abusers, self-sabotage,
ruminations, compulsions, & oppression that drove wedge after
wedge between us.

When you're gone, you're gone.

No amount of bargaining can change that.

Forgive me for my betrayal, Time.

We deserved better.

But, wisdom has taught me that even those sacrificial moments
mattered.

Made me open and soft.

Discerning.

Faillable and forgiving.

Imperfect and humble.

An excavator.

A diver.

Purified in the nether and by the fire of awareness.

Made malleable by meaning.

Eras and errors.

Understanding.

All the minutes. The ugly ones. The brutal ones. The searing ones.
The wrenching ones. The aching ones. The terrifying ones. The
lost ones...
are our love story, Time.

Prodigal



Image: Michael Reedy, “Explusion,” Mixed media on paper (charcoal, color pencil, stain, watercolor, and glitter), 42” x 42”

“Explusion” was featured as part of *Small Talk*, a group exhibition featuring the works of Jillian Dickson, Brian Spolans and Reedy.

January 14 - February 12, 2022.

A collection.

Crevices. Orifices. Creases. Curves.

Scars. Stretch Marks. Stripes.

An electric smile.

An incisive mind.

A prodigal heart.

Within every fold, there is folklore.

There is honey in the hips.

The wrinkles talk back.

The backbone?

Still straight and unapologetic.

Like my mother's and

her

mother's

&

her

mother's.

A collection.

Meridians. Pathways. Synapses.

Nerve endings. Pulses.

Fire in the belly.

Juice in the bones.

Fat gathered in the middle.

A soft animal.

A ritual that never ends.

The tension between

the muscle &

the memory...

holds it all together.

Returning to the homeland that is myself.

Tilling the chaos until it is coherent.

I left singular and returned as a pantheon.

A collection of gods: grief, gratitude, song, vulnerability, hunger,
inquiry, resonance.

Love.

Now. This body
is ecstatic prayer

set on fire.

Lucid.

All the errant parts sewn together

by the spells-prayers-frequencies-gospels of my mother

&

her mother

&

her mother.

A collection.

Decolonized.

Everyone can see my wilderness now.

I no longer have to feign as neat or near,

I'm neither.

I'm home.

528 Hz

I thought of you today. Your heart, specifically. And mine. About the rivers that run between them. Warm and churning.

But, also wary.

Your deltas, like mine, empty into waters with no bottom.
Into oceans never named.
Nobody sees these parts.

Of you.
Or me.

Not the settlers.
Not the thieves.
And certainly not the lovers.

In this way, we're made for each other.

Last week, in my dream, I was a roiling current running through your channels. I had heard rumors about the garden in you.

So, I went searching for buds I could coax into bloom.

I'm still hoping to watch you flower into something feral.

We get each other.

So, many of the people who loved us in the past simply wanted us to be answers.

Easy.



But, you and I were born questions.

Marked.

Hard.

Natives of that open-ended, wild, and restless expanse situated between the intuitive heart and the instinctive body.

If we were capable, I would tend to you as ritual. Bathe in your residual. Seep through the strata.

And render you loved.

If we were capable.

If we were brave.



Images (Right): Jillian Dickson, "Bloom 2," color pencil and marker, 36" x 28"

(Previous Page): Jillian Dickson, "Bloom," color pencil and marker, 36" x 28"

"Bloom" and "Bloom 2" were featured as part of *Small Talk*, a group exhibition featuring the works of Dickson, Michael Reedy and Brian Spolans.

January 14 - February 12, 2022.

Mary's Manifesto 2.0



Image: Robert Huebel "Black Virgin," photography, 10" x 8"

"Black Virgin" was featured in Robert Huebel's solo exhibition,
Textures of the Southwest from February 18 - March 19, 2022

There is the Mother Mary that men like to peddle.

A direct line to warm succor and tender milk

Mary.

A holy womb jar.

Mary.

The cross your T's and dot your I's and eat your greens and pay
your tithes

Mary.

In Vacation Bible School, they snapped us open wide and
poured a melting pot/I don't see color/all lives Mary down our
gullets.

We swallowed.

She tasted the way she's supposed to taste. Obedient.
Palatable.
Digestible.
Unproblematic.

But in September 2020, 2 months after his 28th birthday, my
brother, Brandon tried to save a life and in the process, lost his
own.

Then, I was ready for a different Mary.

The other Mary.

The one only spoken of in hushed tones, quick glances.

Mary with fangs.

With fire lungs.

With bite.

Who lunges for the gun and snatches it from the hands of school
shooters, child stealers, life eaters, womb raiders.

Fierce Mother Mary whose love is as militant as their fear. She
who was here before us and will be here long after we're dust.

Black Hole Mary.

Medusa Mary.

Woman Earth Body Mary.

Lunar Mary.

Blood Fury Mary.

Oya Mary.

Durga Mary.

Kali Ma Mary.

Not One More Dead Child Mary.

The Mary who stands in the gap, singing Brandon Williams'
name, Tasheonna Jones' name, Breonna Taylor's name, Emmitt
Travyon. Uvalde, Palestine.

The Mary who knows we are burning and there is no more
time.

Mary of the outcasted, oppressed, raped, desecrated, exploited,
colonized, trafficked, burned at the stake, executed by the State.
Stolen. Trafficked. Brutalized. Sterilized. Denied.

Shadow Dance Mary.

Liberator Mary.

Environmental Justice Mary.

Mother Mary of rivers and oceans and ozone and species and
coral reef. Mary of the bees and polar bears and political pris-
oners.

We will not survive with the Mary that men give us, with her
stitched lips, empty eyes, bowed head, resigned soul.

We need the other Mary.

A crook in one hand.

A flair in the other.

Our new world readying itself
in her unlegislated womb.

Under Her Watchful Eye: A Remembrance

I'm grateful to have grown up under the watchful eye of a mother who refused to let my mind be chained to the idea of "what must be."

My mama was and is iconoclastic.

A woman who sets her own standards, lives by her own rules, and operates from a place of humanitarianism, love, compassion, nonconformity, and autonomy. She loves other people deeply and wholly...but also loves herself deeply and wholly enough to not let other people decide who she is.

I am the product of being raised and loved by a woman who possesses herself.

What that meant for me is that if, as a child, I told my mama that I wanted to build an eco-village on Mars....she wouldn't have laughed at me. She wouldn't have told me I was "delusional" or "unrealistic" or "stupid." She wouldn't have tried to steer me towards something more "safe" and "realistic" like accounting.

My mama would have started researching which programs in our area offered kids opportunities for STEM and space exploration.

My mother taught me my power by modeling it.

She never belittled any of my dreams.

She never made me doubt my ability.

Every dream I shared with her (no matter how outrageous) was watered with her belief in my ability to achieve it.

As a result, I grew up believing in limitless possibilities.

As a result, I live a life where "sky's the limit" isn't just hyperbolic self-delusion or empty affirmation. It's the guiding force that has placed me at tables where people didn't expect me to be. It has compelled me to access opportunities that people didn't expect me to have. It has helped me to identify my life purpose.

But ultimately, she taught me that none of these things define me.

That I am sourced from within.



Image (Previous Page): Ed Watkins, “Dorcas, A Charible Servant,” mixed media, 46” x 28”

“Dorcas, A Charible Servant” was featured as part of *BIPOC is The Theme!*, national juried exhibition. April 8 - May 14, 2022.

Image (Right): Margaret Davis, “Embarking,” Acrylic, Spray Paint, Resin, Oil, 50” x 38”

“Embarking” was featured in Margaret Davis’ solo exhibition, *Barriers & Preservers* from May 20 - June 18, 2022.



When the end comes,
When my history is extracted from bone and belief and placed
on the scales,
When they record the final tally and cut the silver cord,

They better tell the truth about me.

That I danced through each of my days like ecstatic prayer set
on fire. A dervish, and above all, a devotee.

That I was sometimes combustible... but always lucid.

That I reserved the highest reverence for those who knew love
as a North Star.

That I embraced the unimaginable radiance and the
cataclysmic ruptures that defined my life.

I turned everything into good soil.

That, I grew wise enough to know that anything meaningful
contains magic and mess.

And yet, I never lost my womanchild....the one courageous
enough to re-learn this lesson daily.

That I let the holy and heavy healing that had been stalking my
line for generations finally take me.

When I'm gone, tell the truth about me.

That I knew the futility of cheating the process.

That I did my most terrifying healing in the shadows.

Alone.

That I loved my demons with a commitment, intensity,
compassion, and consistency that, eventually, converted them
to allies.

That I loved all my lovers with such an intensity, they couldn't
tell whether they were being worshipped or devoured.

They loved it either way.

That I stopped looking for my land on other people's maps.

That I let both belonging and displacement lead me to my only
true home.

That I adopted every new name life handcrafted for me. And
during its season, I wore it like a crown.

M o n s t e r

Ed Buck did not have to wear a white hood.

He simply wore his privileged skin as he wrung death from black bodies.

Gemmel Moore.

Timothy Michael Dean.

A third who escaped.

Barely.

The beautiful and strange fruit Billie told us about.

Buck.

Wealthy. White. Protected.

Until he wasn't.

Until voices raised. Cried. Demanded.

Justice.

The hoods haven't disappeared.

They're simply hidden in the heart.

Folded in faux politics.

Buck was a Democrat.

Which means nothing.

Not to me.

Nor you.

Nor Gemmel.

Nor Timothy.

Nor the third who escaped.

Barely.



Image: Heidi Brueckner "Plux," Oil, Acrylic, Mixed Media on Canvas, 16" x 16"

"Plux" was featured in Heidi Brueckner's solo exhibition, *Monsterbet: An Abberant Abecedarius* from June 24 - July 23, 2022



Image: Donovan Entrekin, "The Magician," Oil on Canvas, 70" x 48"

"The Magician" was featured in Donovan Entrekin's solo exhibition, *Caution: May Contain Nudity* from July 29 - August 26, 2022.

Single Lady

A man was confused when he asked the woman why she was
always single,
And I wondered how he could look at her see one, see single,
This woman comprised of a few billion cells, a few billion ways
of being and loving and seeing,
This woman has never been single.

Look at how all the parts of her cling and cleave to one
another,
Look at how the cells become tissues, become organs, become
body, becomes minutes and memories, becomes hours and
understanding, days and devotion, becomes years and lifetimes,
This woman has never been single.

She is church and fellowship within herself,
She is a full congregation and master magician,
A nation of one,
A conversation fat with endless topics,
She has layers so dense and nuanced,
She could hide in them and no one would ever find her,
There is no such thing as a single woman,
When woman, by definition, is already a multitude,

Woman, remember. You.

Don't let them call you what you are not,
Don't let them make you an accessory to crimes against yourself,
Don't let them rearrange your existence or spell your name with
some scrambled and thirsty alphabet,
Don't let their words set up colonies in your mouth,
Don't let their definitions of who you should be take root in your
wild, feral, heart,
Own yourself and every place you ever set foot in,
Let them come back to the box, in the corner, that they try to stuff
us in...only to find you gone,
Only to find the shackles your feverishly chewed through
discarded,
Left behind,
Let them feel threatened by you,
By the walking revolution who loves herself as is,
In a world that tells her she has to be smarter, prettier, wealthier,
whiter, or straighter before she
can be free,

You are not single.

You are a big bowl full of the manna that feeds, nourishes, and
sustains every person and every situation around you,

You will never be single.

You are not anyone's lack of imagination, or limited vocabulary,
or narrow life experiences or monolithic fears, or raging inse-
curities.

You are not the abuse or the sexism or the patriarchy.

You are not the economic disparity. You are not the sex traffick-
ing or disenfranchisement.

You are not rape culture, honor killings, or glass ceilings.

You are not pay inequity or double standard.

You are not intimate partner violence or slut-shaming.

You are not oppression or a shrunken violet.

Some days you are wolf.

Some days you are riot.

But you have never been single.

And once you know it like I know it, you will set this world on
fire.

Home as an Act of Love

One of the many failures of imperialism and capitalism is the way it requires us to navigate a world that reduces our value to the profits we produce and the goods we consume. A world that inundates us with programming and propaganda that, often, attempts to disempower and erode us. A world in which we, collectively, still have so much to learn about how to treat one another with the respect, compassion, and reverence that we should.

In short, life is heavy.

Conversations about how one not only survives but thrives in this modern world are common. There's no shortage of prescriptive articles, books, podcasts, and YouTube tutorials, chock full of useful tips on how to find happiness in a world that works overtime to undermine us in that quest: Exercise. Meditate. Create a vision board. Make a gratitude journal. Eat clean. Cultivate a social life. Take some medicine. Fast intermittently. Adopt a pet. Join a cause. Phone a friend.

All helpful.

And yet, one of the most deeply satisfying self-care and self-love practices I've adopted is one I don't hear much about. I like to call it "home-ing."

Yes, I know that's not an actual word and I'm pretty sure there's a more official and precise term for it out there; but for me, "home-ing" is the cultivation of "home" in both the literal/physical sense AND the figurative/spiritual sense. It's the understanding that a sense of centeredness and belonging is critical to our well-being and ability to thrive. We need a home...around us and within us.

I regard my physical home as both my shelter and my sanctuary, where there is a letting down of the hair, a taking off the bra, and a breaking of bread with the people I love most. As a lover of all things cozy and an unapologetic introvert, home is a sacred, cherished, and medicinal place where I shake off the vestiges of the outside world and return to myself.

And yet, I know that my physical home is just part of the story. There is another home—the psycho-spiritual home within. It's the part of me that knows and takes comfort in who I truly am. It's the part of me that anchors and holds me steady during life's storms. This home is not physical, but energetic, and stands at that critical juncture where the head, heart, and soul meet and harmonize.

What I have learned in these past few years, is that pandemics and loss change a lot of things, including priorities. And what I know for sure is that while I can't control the outside world nor avoid the inevitable valleys that accompany life's peaks, I can create a home around and within that nourishes and fortifies my family and I through it all.

And by "all," I don't mean just the pandemic. In 2019, my children lost their grandfather.

In 2020, my younger brother was shot and killed while trying to protect his girlfriend's mother from intimate partner violence.

In 2021, my divorce which began in 2019, was finalized.

The losses took a devastating toll on all of us and my children had to weather them while also navigating the permanent closing of their beloved school, the isolation and unpredictability of virtual learning, and the forfeiture of in-person graduations, senior proms, and the social activities that made them feel connected to their friends and community.

I could change none of these things.

But it became clear to me that we had to rely on what was in us and what was around us to pull us through. How we experienced ourselves, our space, and our time together was paramount. The questions of what home truly was and how I wanted it to feel took precedence. I knew that, more than ever, home needed to be safe.

Soothing. Nourishing. Pleasurable. Comforting.

Tender.

I also knew that any attempts to cultivate this kind of sacred space would be futile without an equal commitment to creating it within myself. Sure, I could buy all the trappings to create the right look, but if the interior home of my head, heart, and soul remained cluttered with unresolved trauma, fear-based programming, festering resentment, and old paradigms that no longer served me, there would be no true safety or comfort for me or those around me.

Creating a sanctuary is an inside and outside job.

My healing and care for my own inner child took on the same level of prioritization that caring for others did. This “self-full” philosophy ran counter to the selfless approach that most women...especially mothers...are encouraged to take when it comes to loving and parenting. We have largely normalized and glorified the Mother Martyr, embracing the notion that it’s not only okay but noble, even for women to feel chronically stressed, burned-out, anxious, and unfulfilled so long as it means our children, partners, family, and friends feel good. Carl Jung said, “Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the un-lived life of the parent” and one of the greatest things we can do for everyone we love, is to heal and care for ourselves. The subsequent love, peace, and clarity that radiate from us, as a result, is a gift to everyone we come in contact with.

A healed soul is a powerful force for good in the world, indeed.

My “home-ing” has involved a deliberate deep-dive into my own soul, facilitated by intense introspection and regular spiritual and creative practices that help me become and deeply love who I truly am. The resulting light permeates my body, my life, my relationships, and the physical home I share with my family. I also support my children in unveiling their own light.

So, when house guests compliment us on how our home looks and feels, I know there’s more to it. While they may think they’re simply remarking on the creature comforts and the aesthetics the textures, colors, art, furnishings, and decor I know that what they’re actually experiencing and speaking to is the vibration of love that emanates here and is felt by those who enter. We intentionally built it. We vigilantly protect it. Home is both a place and a practice.

From the late, great, Dr. Maya Angelou I learned that “The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place we can go as we are and not be questioned.” So, I think a lot about those of us who are left unhoused in both the physical and spiritual sense. I know that for far too many, home isn’t accessible and even when it is it isn’t always the safe, loving, and nourishing place it should be. I know that much of what disrupts a person’s ability to “home” (in both the literal and figurative sense) is baked into systemic oppression, mass exploitation, income inequality, individual and collective disempowerment, and unfettered greed and corruption. Under such conditions, it is absolutely a privilege to be able to “home” in any sense of the word.

Those of us who understand “home-ing” in its truest and most authentic sense, know it must necessarily be contextualized within a framework of social justice and liberation. By any definition rooted in love, whatever and wherever we call home serves as our North Star, our personal Polaris. We can gauge the legitimacy of any endeavor we choose to undertake and the integrity of any path we choose to walk by its ability to lead us back home to who we truly are. And from the stronghold of our own home however we define it we should always be working, in our own way, to make it a possibility for everyone else, too.

Making the Case for Possessive Love

First, I'll start with this disclaimer:

I am, by most standards, an intense, proud, and passionate person. Like fire.

I am also extremely tender, compassionate, and sensitive. Like water.

For better and for worse, I'm an all-or-nothing, firewater blend of a woman who gladly rushes into battle for the ideas I believe in and the people that I love... because I love *that* much.

I feel all my feelings very, very, deeply.

Like the late visionary, Toni Morrison, I, too, believe that "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all."

And when poet and mystic, Khalil Gibran said: "Do not love half lovers. Do not entertain half friends. Do not indulge in works of the half talented. Do not live half a life and do not die a half death. A half life will get you nowhere for you are not half a being. You are a whole," I FELT that shit.

I not only recognize and accept these truths about myself...I also love and celebrate them.

Now.

But for a long time, I put a lot of effort into suppressing all the love-heart-heat-magic in me because I knew that many people wouldn't understand it, let alone accept it. Let alone love it. Like many women, I fell prey to the malignant and pervasive social conditioning that reminds us at every turn that the absolute worst thing any woman can ever be...is too much.

And like all of us who get caught up in that snare, I placed a disproportionate amount of importance on how others saw and felt about me to the point where it was in direct competition with how I felt about myself.

Simply put, like many humans, young Natasha liked being liked. And young Natasha loved being loved. And she didn't want to jeopardize that by being "too much."

Silly rabbit. I know.

So, when I opened up, for the first time, in one of my early relationships and expressed my desire for a deeply committed, one-on-one connection, brimming with physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual intimacy so electrifying and edifying that it would leave neither of us the way it found us, my partner was wholly fascinated.

And absolutely terrified.

And like many men who see the women they desire express standards they know they're unable to meet, he tried to shame me out of wanting what I wanted.

Wasn't it selfish and possessive of me to solely want one man and to want said man to solely want me? Wasn't it crude and antiquated in this era of "woke" love to feel jealousy when my partner seemed to be getting too intimate with another person and vice versa? Didn't I know that enlightened and forward-thinking people loved without any expectations? Without any desire to lay claim to...anything?

And, when he grilled me on this, all those years ago, I was young and unsure about many things...especially, myself.

Maybe he was right, I thought. Maybe I was, indeed, doing too much. Maybe the way I wanted only him and wanted him to only want me was some old, primitive, model of love that had no place in this new age of Aquarius where free love just kind of blew around, well- everywhere... untethered to anyone or anything. Maybe what he thought about me had more merit than what I knew about myself.

So, I pretended not to love as hard as I did.

I pretended not to want what I wanted. I pretended to be who I wasn't. Until the charade exploded in both our faces many years later in a heart wrenching breakup that left us both emotionally scarred. After that, I made a solemn vow to never abandon myself to keep another. No matter how fine he was.

Yes, there are those who may like to frame the way I love as possessive. I'm fine with that. I would argue that those who correlate desires for deeply intimate, one-on-one connections with toxicity and codependency, may be doing so through the distorted lens of their own projections. But that's for them to figure out. Not me.

And to be fair, I understand the ways in which the church, the state, and capitalism have colluded to impose monogamy on everyone, enshrining it in public policy, and shaming those who choose not to adhere to it. These institutions have perverted the monogamous model of love by mandating it rather than simply offering it as one of many viable options.

I respect all relationship structures, so long as they are rooted in enthusiastic consent, mutual respect, and compassionate transparency. Each person has a responsibility to themselves to engage in the love models that work for them.

I respect, honor, and value the polygamous, polyamorous, and open relationship models that work best for some of my family and friends. I also know that monogamy and singular devotion is my jam. I know that I owe no one apology nor explanation for being the firewater soul that I am and loving in the intense and single-minded ways that firewater souls do.

I love how I love and I know how I want to be loved. It's a rigorous love not intended for the faint of heart. And to be honest, "possessive" would be an apt description.

But not possessive in any violent, abusive, or controlling sense.

Let it be possessive in the searing and powerful and magical and transformative and medicinal and healing and electrifying and imaginative and restorative devoted and mind-blowing sense.

Let it be a love that says:

I'll give you all of me and I want all of you.

I wear your name and claim on me...proudly and I want you to wear my name and claim proudly.

In a world where there are myriad options, I choose you and you choose me...singularly and solidly.

And as long as I choose to be, I am yours.

And as long as you choose to be, you are mine.

We belong to ourselves.

We belong together.



Natasha Thomas is a writer, performance artist, political organizer, community strategist, and visual curator with 20 years of experience working in the fields of arts-activism, public administration, public health, holistic wellness, spirituality, and advocacy. She is the current founder/director of The Nadoma Center for Social Justice & Spiritual Transformation and the Genesee County Coordinator for the Michigan Organization on Adolescent Sexual Health. In both her personal and professional lives, she is guided by the values, principles, practices, and rituals of liberation movements and ancestral wisdom traditions

As a writer, Natasha has contributed to digital publications and academic journals including *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, *The Body is Not an Apology (TBINAA)*, and more. She also wrote the foreword for *IMAGN – Increasing Minority Awareness of Genetics Now*, a report co-sponsored by the Black Congressional Caucus and John Hopkins University Genetics and Public Policy Center.

Natasha has performed for Harry Belafonte’s inaugural Many Rivers to Cross Music & Social Justice Festival, #SayHerName: An Evening of Arts hosted by the African American Policy Forum, *Busboys & Poets*, and a number of venues and events merging performance art and activism. As a performer and speaker, she’s shared the stage with Stevie Wonder, bell hooks, Janelle Monae, Andra Day, Chris Rock, Public Enemy, Musiq Soulchild, Dave Matthews, Carlos Santana, Angela Davis, Ryan Coogler, Robert Redford, John Legend, and more.

Through the African-American Policy Forum, Natasha has worked directly under the tutelage of renowned black feminist & legal scholar, Dr. Kimberle’ Crenshaw, a pioneer in critical race theory and mother of the term “intersectionality.” She was also a member of the Black Women’s Roundtable Delegation at the White House, which spoke to the critical issues facing Black women and girls.

With Gratitude

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ABOUT BUCKHAM GALLERY

It is the mission of Buckham Gallery to enrich the cultural life of its surrounding communities by presenting a broad range of innovative contemporary art, both visual and performance, of the highest quality and standard.

Buckham Gallery is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization located in downtown Flint, Michigan. The gallery has been an anchor of the Flint art community since its inception in 1984. Founded by a collective of area artists, arts professors, and arts professionals, gallery operations, exhibitions, and programming continue to be led by artists and arts professionals.

For more information about Buckham Fine Arts Project and the Writer in Residence program, please visit www.buckhamgallery.org

I write because in doing so, I seize the power and permission to claim the multiplicity of who I am.

For me, writing is a recurring baptism.

One that can be just as transformational as it is terrifying. As healing as it is harrowing. As numinous as it is paralyzing.

I believe that in any act of creation - intentional or not - there's the potential for seismic shifts to occur within and around us. There's always the possibility that in a brazen act of rebellion and vulnerability, the doors to the innermost chamber of who we are will decide to fly open, pushing us into uncharted territories of intimacy, power, and awareness.

Whether we are creating or beholding art...or both...it is a liberating ordeal, indeed.

We are surprised by versions of ourselves over and over again.

-Natasha Thomas



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