

MAYDAY POETRY PRIZE WINNER

An abstract painting with a textured, brush-stroke appearance. The top half is dominated by warm, golden-yellow and orange tones, with a prominent, vertical, reddish-pink brushstroke on the right side. The bottom half transitions into a dark, almost black, textured area. The overall effect is one of depth and movement, typical of an oil or acrylic painting.

Neat Panic

Julia Mallory

NEAT PANIC

Published by M3 Books

An imprint of New American Press
www.newamericanpress.com

Winner of the 2023 MAYDAY Poetry Micro Chapbook Contest
www.maydaymagazine.com

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ISBN 9781941561362

Cover design by David Bowen
Cover image by Julia Mallory

The poems in this collection were first published in the following journals: “The Magic Church Bus for Sinners” in *Voicemail Poems*.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Incunabula | 5

Pit | 6

Vanity as a Mask for Sadness | 7

Propagate | 8

For Black Women Who Go Chasing Waterfalls
When the Lakes and the Rivers They Are Used to
Are Polluted | 9

Mourning Melody | 10

Black Mermaids: A Reprise | 11

Gen No Side | 12

Thinkingboutchu | 13

I Still Can't Account for Those Fifteen Minutes
Outside the Grocery Store | 14

The Magic Church Bus for Sinners | 15

Acknowledgments / 16

Dedicated to everyone as sad as I still am.

INCUNABULA

Lemon cream chifferobe with hand-painted pastel blooms
in my grandmother's bedroom. Testifying about
the trinity— the possibilities of big, bold
and delicate. Beauty like only one was ever
crafted in any universe. On its companion
chest of drawers, a too small and silly me, acting
out my own beauty rituals. Painting immature
nail beds. Underpalms chilled and stiff. Frost forming in the
canal of my lifelines. Where acetone flows, errors
erased, eating through the varnish under my childish
hands. The dessert hue swirled into a dull blur. Toxic
vapors eating through my asthmatic grandmother's lungs.
My budding vanity eating through my future self.

PIT

after a day of sun turned sweat on our skin, when dusk
dragged the effulgent halo from the sky, I could not
yet name why it broke me open each time they'd drag their
feet across the filament that gave the lightning bug
its source, its come hither, chartreuse bulb pitted across
concrete, until it faded, until it undazzled,
a stone forming in the pit of my stomach, mind my
feigned innocence, when we turned empty soda bottles
and jars into voyeuristic vessels and trapped their
brilliance, naming ourselves entertained, until their back-
sides slow-blinked and glitched under our attention, before
we slowly released them into the swell of summer.

What's light to a world that merely wants to humble you?

VANITY AS A MASK FOR SADNESS

I trace the fine lines across my face and neck where the texture shifts, as my emotions dance across my face. For a second, I am vexed by vanity and wonder how deep these grooves will grow. How age, lineage, and sun will conspire to form a family of moles. Then I remember my boy, the fat in all the peak places. Cherub cheeks that hint at a younger age and how his face will not inherit laugh lines or crow's feet or facial hair. And I have to marvel at the miracle of having any face at all, when the bathroom mirror offers a reflective reminder of what I have endured and cared enough to honor.

The ghost knew its fate when it could not feel its teeth.

PROPAGATE

Oh ordinary hands, undertake significance
through salvage, through photosynthesis turn over a
new leaf, push through this rescue mission, restore clippings,
incubating their freshly snipped ends. Endings into
beginnings into random containers. An empty
spice jar. An old baby bottle. Faucet water turned
amniotic fluid. Jellyfish roots, brined overtime.

What blooms, and creeps from the crown of the container in
pursuit of the sun, breaks the border of the window
sill. Growth looks like tender roots wrapped around each other.

Entangled—some upright towards the heavens. Dangling—
some kneel toward earth. Count it all abundant prayer.

I pick at the scab of survival until it bleeds.

FOR BLACK WOMEN WHO GO CHASING WATERFALLS WHEN THE LAKES AND THE RIVERS THEY ARE USED TO ARE POLLUTED

I.

Mother Nature, can I sit at the foot of your falls?
Can your waters wash away this nervous condition?
Quiet the grief trying to talk through me?

II.

Can you summon my ancestors to lay hands on me
and hold up the earth under me when my joints want to
collapse? Will the trees whisper a remedy in this
forest? Will I leave with something? Will you learn me some-
thing? Thought I heard you say you will not let us kill you.
That it will be us before you. And if this earthly
ejection means our demise, will you miss us? I come
humbly and hungrily. Starved. Seeking sanctuary.

III.

Bent to your will. Might you be my alchemical ally?

IV.

I have emerged from troubled waters. Please take me in.

MOURNING MELODY

The tiny bird misjudged the air, missed the wave of wind
and met the concrete. Its birdren—black birds on black tight-
rope, taut telephone wire, sending down sorrow songs.

Baby girl, aged vertical infinity, beads bounce
as she springs into action. Empathic witness. A
concerned choir of AHT AHT! DON'T TOUCH IT! trouble her
intuition. The flock flutter, calculating the
risk of presence. Their mourning melody growing in
volume as their kin writhes against the cool slab of gray.

The grown-ups only know to wait out the wire-side
wake taking place above their heads. Until quiet breaks,
and a small winged life swept to its final resting place.

The illusion of life in my son's body saved me.

BLACK MERMAIDS: A REPRISE

If you asked me today, a decade later if I
believed in mermaids, I'd name them black. I'd name them me.
I'd catch you up on my survival with water still
on my face. I'd catch you up on my revival with
water still in my leaky lungs. As if gills could be
converted to emotional will. Is resilience
still a dirty word? So if you asked me today the
story would have to be more wild but more true. Unstamped
mythology, all the ambiguity removed.

I was in the deep blue(s), pulled to the shore. Life snatched back
from the trip wire of fate. Breath back in my body.
Back upright and against the tilt of destruction.

A swirl of spirits upon me. Salvage my whole life.

GEN NO SIDE

I do not have leathered language that wears out good sense,
emerges from the caverns of sanguivorous
men who eat their own logic and who exist with the
convenience of being believed, rationale threadbare,
concealed with coercion or calamity, tactical
masters whose mathing evades bombs and body counts, a
number will not become a name, a name will not be
remembered. Their record will reflect a tally of
objects obliterated and life called more precious
than us. A selective screening of atrocity.

If we do not make it into the calculus, how
should we be counted, we who have been called a third thing?

Write us into the future and make it mean something.

THINKINGBOUTCHU

Remember when I got the Lincoln truck and the sound system was still superior to the Suzuki, even with those new speakers? I no longer needed the AUX cord cassette adapter. Cruising. Car concerts. Your face an echo of mine. Y'all were my choir. Until y'all became bitter fans in the stands of the back seat because I ran the track back too many times. Probably had secret resentment against Frank Ocean. Son, I'm sorry, I still needed to believe in forever beyond the tornadoed mess of my life. I was so far ahead. Dreamt of you inside your dreams. Bright. Bullish. Alive. Beyond the nightmare of what came. Not alive.

It's been raining for six years. This is our forever.

I STILL CAN'T ACCOUNT FOR THOSE FIFTEEN MINUTES OUTSIDE THE GROCERY STORE

I don't say that sometimes my brain doesn't work and it took me days to remember your name. I was folding clothes when the synapse woke up and rolled your name from its mouth. No. I don't say my mind is stronger than my brain with its potholes and rubble broke open by trauma.

I couldn't remember your name. Then I read about an artist that lost her dad too and about her dreams when my memory passed me a note that my dad was buried in a deep brown suit. The dress I wore to the funeral whose shape shifted each time I walked, was also brown. Did that mean a part of me had also died?

Or that I wanted to die, too? In the same week, I shaved half of my eyebrow off. *Precious Lord, take my hand.*

THE MAGIC CHURCH BUS FOR SINNERS

We were sent to church. Yellow capsule time-traveling across river. Across racial lines. Integrated into hearts wanting to save our dark souls. Salvage dark us. Salvation from darkness in Sunday school: *Deep and wide, Deep and wide. There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.*

Mr. Clark, giving back Bible, said he grew up on the Southside with families that looked like him and we were astonished each time he said it. 1940s war-time public housing. Turned projects. Turned war on us. Turned no where to go. Turned trapped. Turned trap. Sewage treatment plant fumigated childhood. Then junk yard smog that clogged lungs.

When the blizzard of '9 - 6 took their part of the bridge,

the townspeople threw up their ~~racism~~ hands:

God's plan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the editors of *Voicemail Poems* where "The Magic Church Bus for Sinners" first appeared in their Summer 2023 issue.

Thank you to my ancestors who cemented my belief in words as a form of waymaking.

Finally, deepest gratitude to my love, Sterling Walden, who teaches me how to listen differently, helped me name the haiju in 2017, and for being my earliest reader of these works.

AUTHOR BIO

Julia Mallory is committed to being a good steward of, and vessel for her ancestors' stories. As a storyteller, her foundational creative love language is poetry, and she moves between genres from fiction to filmmaking, with a range of mediums from text to textiles. In addition, she is the founder of the creative container, Black Mermaids.

Julia's work can be found in *A Gathering Together*, *Barrelhouse*, the Black Speculative Arts Movement's "Curating the End of the World: RED SPRING IV – Wildseeds & Black Futures", *The Offing*, *Raising Mothers*, *Sugarcane Magazine*, *Torch Literary Arts*, *68 to 05*, *petrichor*, *SISTORIES*, *Emergent Literary*, and elsewhere. She is also a poetry editor for *The Loveliest Review*.

Julia is an emerging filmmaker whose work has screened from Toronto to Iceland. Her latest loves include creating stop-motion animated collages and building TEN OH! SIX, a multi-generational community space for collective learning, connection, and creativity.

Julia is the mother of three children and is from the Southside of Harrisburg, which she affectionately refers to as "the lil chocolate city that tries." For more information, visit www.thejuliamallory.com.