SHORT FILM STARRING NY BELOYED'S RED BRONCO



Ballard Spahr Prize in Poetry Selected by Tyehimba Jess

SHORT FILM STARRING MY BELOVED'S RED BRONCO

poems

K. IVER

MILKWEED EDITIONS

© 2023, Text by K. Iver © 2023, Cover art by Pace Taylor All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher: Milkweed Editions, 1011 Washington Avenue South, Suite 300, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55415. (800) 520-6455

milkweed.org

Published 2023 by Milkweed Editions Printed in Canada Cover design by Mary Austin Speaker Cover illustration by Pace Taylor Author photo by Brooke Opie 23 24 25 26 27 5 4 3 2 1 *First Edition*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Iver, K., author.

Title: Short film starring my beloved's red Bronco : poems / K. Iver.

Other titles: Short film starring my beloved's red Bronco (Compilation)

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Milkweed Editions, 2023. | Summary: "Short Film Starring My Beloved's Red Bronco, selected by Tyehimba Jess for the 2022 Ballard Spahr Prize for

Poetry, is an aching tribute to the power and precarity of queer love"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022036848 (print) | LCCN 2022036849 (ebook) | ISBN 9781639550609 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781639550616 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Poetry.

Classification: LCC PS3609.V46 S56 2023 (print) | LCC PS3609.V46 (ebook) | DDC 811/.6-dc23/eng/20220822

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022036848

LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022036849

Milkweed Editions is committed to ecological stewardship. We strive to align our book production practices with this principle, and to reduce the impact of our operations in the environment. We are a member of the Green Press Initiative, a nonprofit coalition of publishers, manufacturers, and authors working to protect the world's endangered forests and conserve natural resources. *Short Film Starring My Beloved's Red Bronco* was printed on acid-free 100% postconsumer-waste paper by Friesens Corporation.

For Missy April 24, 1981–July 4, 2007

Contents

Nostalgia

For Missy Who Never Got His New Name

Family of Origin Content Warning

Tupelo, MS

Boombox Ode: Enjoy the Silence

A Medium Performs Your Visit

fifth position (intrusive thoughts at ballet camp)

Missy,

Short Film Starring My Beloved's Living Body

Anti Elegy

1987

Second Position (Home Practice)

Gospel for Missy During Our Three-Day Birthday Season

Sleeping Beauty

New Testament

Fairy Tale Prologue

Family of Origin Rewrite

god

Mississippi, Missing, Missy, Miss-

Jane

a mother's advice

Body Mark

Who Is This Grief For?

[Boy] Meets Girl

Fantasy with No Secrets

Short Film Starring My Beloved's Red Bronco

Fantasy in Which There Was Nothing for Us to Survive

April 25, 2020

Boy Meets Them

Missy Asks Me What the Next Century's Like

Because You Can't

Notes

Acknowledgments

"There must be a girl, there has always been a girl. There must be a boy, there has always been a boy.... There must be a ghost. They must be hungry."

-OLIVER BAEZ BENDORF

"How should I greet thee?—"

-LORD BYRON

Nostalgia

In the beginning, yes, a garden. As lush as you're imagining. Even the grass grows mid-oak. In the beginning, the grass and trees and birds are already tired of their assigned names. They consider rebellion. The green blades think of rounding, feathered wings dream of swimming a backstroke, but someone assigned "woman" beats them to it by eating something edible. In the beginning, in a hospital in north Mississippi, a mother holds her new baby, calls this day her happiest. The baby is you. The mother is surprised you're here with only a heart murmur. She says having lived through her bloodstream's birth control and, later, tequila, you must be a fighter. In the beginning, there's much holding. There's not enough holding. In the beginning, a father says you're beautiful because you are. In the beginning, you're three years old and crying too loud on the beach because a surprise wave knocked you down and the salt won't leave your mouth. The salt won't leave your eyes, your hands, each fingerprint. In the beginning, while you're still walking down the shore, still crying, a father slaps you on the thigh. Hard. You stop crying in your purple one-piece. Here, a beginning: a small house on a wooded hill where dogwoods bloom when they're supposed to. If you're wondering what the cardinals would do for you besides moving bright color around, you're twelve. If you're wondering what parts of life are survivable, you're fourteen. There, the beginning, a boy, fully clothed in flannel and denim. He tells you, only you, that he's a boy. You understand. He knows nothing of your uncertainty about lip gloss, what makes you a girl. He might not understand. In the beginning, he looks at you the way someone must have when you were born. Here, in the forest, a ripeness both of you can eat but somehow shouldn't. A fruit bored with sinless afternoons and aching for teeth.

For Missy Who Never Got His New Name

I hear the stars are sentient. Which gives me hope for the nitrogen feeding your grass. Even more for the mole ending the day's burrow in your skull. I'm told your atoms are still atoms. Somewhere you're sitting by a pool picking apart the physics of swimming. In the hallway of a large high school in Mississippi, you're again the sophomore guarding my classroom entrance with a letter, like an undiscovered prince. I've resumed my surprise at desire I thought for cave dwellers. This is where I go wrong. I loved a body you didn't. My younger self wants the word to rebuild, rather than stop at the blond hair, middle part, low ponytail, the impressive manliness with which your hips carried utility denim. I tell my young self to flatten her memory's landscape. Picture two scars liberating a torso. A first name that doesn't hiss. Soon, a Brooklyn apartment. We pretend it finally happened for you. It really did.

Family of Origin Content Warning

Detailed descriptions of a father's brutality. Graphic images of a boy, dreaming about food at night, his stolen transistor radio spilling James Brown's good, good lovin' over his pillow. This poem may unfold, in detail, a husband's violence toward a wife. May run time in a circle. May reveal the husband's plush red hands abbreviating his wife's neck on a crisp November afternoon, their child watching from the porch. The husband is my father. Is the dreaming boy. The wife is my mother. Sometimes, she forgets. Sometimes she thinks she's ten again, watching her bedroom door, afraid her father will turn the brass knob. That was decades ago. He must've stopped. This poem may mention sexual abuse in the abstract. This poem doesn't know why it must tell you. It wants you to resist brightsiding its tragedies. It's tired of hearing that everything worked out, didn't it? Tired of hearing the mother loved the child. So much. Everyone says so. Everyone who knows that, on an April weekend, the mother left me, the child, in her very first bedroom whose door opened—while the child sleptto a grandfather's outline. Don't think this poem wants to stay in that bedroom. It wants to swaddle the impossible contours of joy. It's tired of hearing joy is possible. It wants joy.

Tupelo, MS

Crop dusters have gone missing. Storm clouds, missing. Every owl has gone missing. Entire foothills. There are no dogwoods or foxes to miss them. Radio towers are missing. An archive has always been missing. Unmarked graves have not been missed; have been missed to death. Downtown is missing, the hardware store where Elvis bought his first guitar. The songs he robbed from juke joints. Original names for the dirt have been missing a long time. The namers have not been missed; have been missed terribly. A gospel just went missing. A gospel took all the blood it needed for its metaphor to work. My lover went missing today. My lover went missing fifteen years ago. When neighbors spoke to him, they spoke to someone else. I found his old letters missing from their hat box. Each penciled word called from my mother's chimney. The brick said nothing.

Boombox Ode: Enjoy the Silence

A landline lets me dance with you.

My one-deck and your two-deck

are dialed to 98.5 FM without

an echo. If we speak aloud

this miracle of fiber wire

and radio wave, harmony

could split. From our speakers:

soft synth, a baseline, a choir

reverbing, a guitar riff that rises

and falls, asks and answers. I can't

see your movement, the bedroom

you're quiet in. Somewhere, bodies

like ours are pulsing under the same

pink neon to the same words

like violence, break—Torsos like ours

are touching and strangers watch

only because they're gorgeous.

Let me pretend you're back in my

bedroom, before my mother found us.

You've risen from the pine floor

and pulled me up. You want me

to stand for this. Let me pretend

all I've ever wanted, all I've ever needed

is here. Tell me that'll be us. Soon.

A Medium Performs Your Visit

You are, according to her, whispering *candy* through her mouth

and suddenly I remember why so many have a sweet tooth for belief.

I'm waiting for class in the high school courtyard where we met

& where you offered me an open pack of Reese's Pieces.

I took several. Closed my mouth around Yellow No. 5

where it steeped until homeroom. Even then you were looking

everywhere for a new name, signing all of your notes *Reese*.

So when the medium looks up from her black tablecloth

and says *candy*, I almost believe your mouth is her mouth

like I almost once believed a god could hold me with words.

That was during a time when you, a blond boy forced to call

himself a girl, stood in my driveway under a glazed moon,

saying one day you won't be scared which meant one day my mouth

would touch the mouth our church couldn't categorize. Right now,

I'm arguing with belief again. The everywhereness of candy,

how easily anyone can recall stories of hard and soft sugar playing

a supporting role. I'm writing this down hoping you'll see it

and argue back. Remind me that before we met, I'd turn

the pages of our junior high yearbook,

& stop, at a landscape spread

of an ice cream social & you, the one closest to the camera, holding up

a Snickers bar with both hands & an ad-ready wink.

Say it again, Reese. Prove me wrong.

fifth position (intrusive thoughts at ballet camp)

the feet form two parallel lines the toe of one foot in as much contact as possible with the heel of the other WIKIPEDIA

you were practicing an adagio

and moonlight sonata played from a live

piano guiding the mind to a thought

that hovered over your leg extensions

and you waited for it to pass the way

thoughts do it followed you out

of the mirrored room down the hall

through the house of your longest

dream yet this will be your mind now

and doctors will want the thought's content as if the content were scarier than its frequency tell them it's a voice because a rule of dance is the body's every move gets a name though there's none for this technically you can hear only today's piano and your feet landing together in opposite directions and right now you think your head is the only one needing a blow from the floor to forget itself for just a beat when every beat carries an underbeat now and now and now this is your mind now

Missy,

11-20-1997

in the hospital I'm high on antipsychotics *high* meaning you stopped calling stopped answering the phone but I can sleep meaning my thoughts aren't chasing me toward permanent relief in the hospital on my industrial twin mattress a nurse hums me to sleep my roommate's also a sophomore she's been here two days and wants to leave she says they think I'm too sad to go home but I'm sad because I'm here I can't tell you any of this how much I want to stay in these fluorescent rooms last night they kept me awake until 8 a.m. for a brain scan I don't mind these temporary parents the nurse wakes me up tells me when to eat gives me the medicine I'd once begged my mom for my mom called an exorcist instead I can't tell you that he waited with a large hand on my head for a metaphor to take literal shape I emptied my mom's bathroom pharmacy of Benadryl I can't tell you how instinctual the planning how accidental the surviving my mom pulled me from bed and drove me to rehearsal my friend caught me from a falling spin while "Waltz of the Flowers" was playing my friend the sugar plum fairy noticed I couldn't lift my arms she asked how many pills she cried as I spoke about your eyes from last year's balcony how you watched a man in a soldier costume wind me up how you waited in your red sweater for kids to take pictures with the windup doll I never told you my thoughts hurt unless you were talking tonight I'm not wondering what scared you away I'm pretty sure it was mom I'm pretty sure this very clean lobby is also the courtyard three miles from where you first looked at me first poured candy into my hand is your bedroom where you said *god child I miss you so much* and the landline's delivery of the word *child* diverted my plans to break up with you my plans to let god win I paced around my room past an open latch it cut so deep I could see muscle a nurse sewed your voice into my knee with seven stitches one word for each stitch I'm not making this up the scar is still pink after three months this tattoo of your voice no one can take away my one thought how alive and gorgeous we both are

Short Film Starring My Beloved's Living Body

Open with the two-lane highway. The ice truck and the ice. Your elbow resting on the driver side window. Zoom in on the toned forearm. The goldenrod rushing by. Missy, our audience can see you now. Show them the gas station delivery where a drunk lady screams about your good looks because there's no original way to say a man is beautiful, and the lady really did scream. Our audience will believe us and they won't. They'll say people this lovely are only in films. No one with lips this pillowy needs to deliver ice. And here you are, lifting bags and saving up for a weekend in Memphis at the Motel 6. There's no time for dialogue about class or gender. No room to signal that your time with goldenrod is limited. Your time awake is limited. Look how awake you are. How the facial bones move with perfect alignment under the dermis. Cut to the motel, leaving its light on for your red Bronco. Now the motel's dark interior. Now the bed nearest the window where you and a just-out-of-high-school date can finally make contact after years of parentally-imposed silence. I'm sorry. This film can't access your interior. Your date is the only one directing her memory. Your date is me. My memory is the shower scene, already zoomed in on your face. Open your eyes again. Look directly at me. Hold the camera's gaze through the falling water as if this were our last frame. Missy, this is our last frame. *Body* is the only

good word for body. I'm afraid of home's hunger for yours, but off camera the interstate is waiting and my lines are *let's go*.

Anti Elegy

If you were here the Mississippi would still run south. Would still drop its griefs into the Gulf where our friends would still swim in summer. Water would touch us If you were here like water. the river that is your body would magically. While not move from the bladder's it emptied headwaters. from tear ducts & pores, public officials would still turn the fact of your body into arguments. You might've struck the impossible: surgery, own boat. & a new name, your someone beautiful to name it after. Someone beautiful & their baby. From one dorm room landline to another, your wish list sounded like a fairy tale. Like growing a merman's fin between classes. I thought we were playing pretend when you said *Goodnight Tinkerbell* & I said the boy's secret. Even then name you wanted a boy when speaking strangers spoke to twenty years ago, to you. That was a plan, already gliding the list already an undercurrent sprung twenty

years before that. If you were here, still drinking cold tea in a cold diner, conference rooms men in state capitol hours down the highway would still draft bathroom laws for adults. Your mother would still sneak taffeta & silk in your closet of fatigues & say she loved you. I wouldn't imagine your capillaries reassembling. If you like the rest of us, were still dying a young ghost how I wouldn't tell far we've come as if I believed how far we've come was enough. Wouldn't worry about who else gets more than 27 years. Your body wasn't a national average. You wanted more than safety. But I didn't wake until I heard the sore in the jaw numbers. Until a nation, an entire nation, couldn't offer an alibi. Missy, my grief is righteous & problematic. It floods the last four walls holding you & begs for time. It hurls absurd reasons from a future: a handful of trans film stars humanizing a handful of trans characters. Better doctors. My grief says it's helping but argues only for me. The relief, the microwhen I achieve second of relief hope you find out. the unexpected & This means I forget you're gone. This makes my grief a loose dam. Still, I talk to water that unrivered your body for dirt. I float fantasies of dirt that holds us up. Longer.

I say to the water if you were here, you'd be here.

1987

When my mother's body said America. When a police chief stopped our Mercury to ask her on dates. When her body said a woman is only a woman if she's beautiful and a beautiful woman cries in her dress when her husband leaves. She cries all night, all 90 pounds of her, both thumbs and index fingers failing to trace the fat her husband referenced on her thighs and arms and belly. She listens to the rub in Tanya Tucker's voice and unties her magenta dress at the shoulders. Unzips the side and floats across the room, floats in place. Even the body has forgotten it's a body. Its bright lipstick comes off with grease. The face, pinkened by the vanity mirror's lightbulbs, says it's not pretty without the lipstick but everyone else says my mother looks like Melanie Griffith. Everyone else says I could too, soon. Now, the toga-inspired dress in the closet, I'm close by, wanting to wear it. I'm five years old and I want the ties on my shoulders. I ask her. I ask her again. She hears nothing, so I put it on. Soon enough I'll have someone

to undress for.

Second Position (Home Practice)

the feet point in opposite directions, with heels spaced approximately twelve inches apart WIKIPEDIA

It's important to practice while your mother's out of the room, because the white curtains seem sad but they are not sad and you are the happiest when she slow dances to "Love Me Like You Used To" with your ghost dad who isn't dead but Tanya Tucker's voice makes him seem so. It's just you now and your mother's sadness down the hall, a comfort not at all strange when the bright pink of her room is only seven steps away and there's nothing safer than this distance between your own feet, even when toes must open even when aunts and cousins remind them to keep stride after you'd found your dad's hands closing in on her neck and sounds came out of her you'd never heard as he asked her questions the way he would the dog while holding the dog's nose in her own accident. Even now you wonder how he got your mother on her knees like that, her feet usually firm and close together once he said the army taught him how to kill someone in thirteen seconds which is how you learned what kill meant. Already you're wondering why she and her friends want to talk only about beasts which is how you think of men in fairy tales but no giant boot shakes the hall tonight and your legs are best at leaping far apart from floorboards that you and your mother can stand on and you'll never love her more than on these nights when neither of you know what's missing.

Gospel for Missy During Our Three-Day Birthday Season

April 21–24, 2019

I rise on Easter to my thirty-seventh, hear *He* is *Risen* and resent his attention. Each morning I peel the linen from my face without an angel's announcement. Somewhere, not far, you keep jumping from a mountain. Once, you talked me from the same smooth edge. Now, I eat olive and fish, stay active by hiking the foothills. On weekends. I float the femur's heaviness in a heavier sea. This, Missy, is not survival. When I ask the villagers Why survive, they look out at their boats. Once, you and I spoke our own gospel like mad messiahs. The neighbors kept whispering you were not a prince. We said that's the way of all heroes. In three days, on your thirty-eighth, I'll visit the valley of your bones, tempt the Lord by reminding him

these bones are very dry. When I say son of man, can these bones live? your ankles will not be rattled, will not sprout cartilage, will not be blessed. Meanwhile, not far, Lazarus keeps wandering from his tomb. Every night he gets a parade. I can hear their lutes from my bedroom. A song about who gets miracles.

Sleeping Beauty

You've never seen a lilac in Mississippi. Backstage you wear lotion laced with its chemical imitation. A ballet mistress says relevé always as command: lift onto the toe using only the heel. Your ankle's bewilderment old as the horned owl gaze from your mother hunched in the audience. You enter the stage as Lilac Fairy & fairies make critical things happen, though underneath your tulle brushing sleep over a kingdom, you're a mouse who gets eaten every night. No audience wants to see that. Not the barbed feathers tucked in your mother's cardigan. If you pretend rescue is coming, it might. Relevé meaning rise & also relief. Lift your head along with the heel. A boy your mother says is not a boy follows your pirouettes from the balcony. Already wondering, *rise to what*. The ballet can't perform without fairy tale. The stage is safe for magic, or at least pretend. Almost everyone gets a solo in *Sleeping Beauty*, so no surgeon's daughter has hidden your pointe shoes in the dressing room couch. The boy

was careful not to bring flowers but you can feel his eyes bending around the shoulders, clavicle, and neck you forgot existed. When these minutes end, these minutes of spinning his eyes in their own pirouette, the world won't allow you to leave in his red Bronco, not anymore. Already, *hope* sounds like the adult word for magic. *Relevé* meaning how much choreographed relief a kingdom tolerates. Already you are learning the offstage rules about who gets rescued. Who throws flowers, who catches them.

New Testament

When my lover disappears, my dad wants to smite the town. I say forgive every cowhand and mother for the hell they think we're in. Forgive the forests they stalk. I'm trying to unwrite these grassy hills they made so dangerous. When my lover was alive, my touch could unslaughter a calf. Could reassemble anything young. I remember my lover's hand opening inside me. Thought our spasms would shake death. I look for his outline at the mall where we walked without touching. Now, in the department store where he draped a trench coat over me, even the crowd has died. The business bureau revived the historic downtown where my neighbors dance like no one's missing. When one of them gets promoted, a cancer remission, a newborn, they say my name and the word *praise*. I'm trying to unwrite this place. What they say about snakes, touch, forever. I'm unassigning every element. I tell jokes to the dirt and it coughs up baby goats. Once I told Pharisees I'm not a man and they laughed up nails. Now they travel in SUVs and sing hymns about a man who needs too much. When news of my lover reaches their prayer circle, when someone mentions the hell they think we're in, this town becomes more like it. This town could be my home. It isn't.

Fairy Tale Prologue

The dress is beast or witch. Your mother says she's the heroine, but no one knows what that means. Your mother has no time for bedtime stories. Every night before bed, she takes a *Pretty Woman* videotape out of the sleeve, and the VCR plays it automatically. At eight years old, you dream of skyscrapers and red ball gowns. You dream of your mother as Vivian. In real life, your mother makes \$8 an hour answering phones but finds ways to dress like actresses. Her body wins the village prize. Her body wins the kingdom prize. The kingdom says beautiful is a divorce-shaped body of 90 pounds, towered with shoulder pads. She walks through every room flashing swatches of bright red from her nails, lips, and heels. On weekends, you stay inside, though there's a horse outside and there's a pasture outside and there's a forest outside. None of it belongs to you. Somehow you know this.

Some nights, you watch *Pretty Woman* all the way through and somewhere —maybe the 34th time—around the pickup scene, it's clear that only the beautiful are worth rescuing, and they are never desperate for long. Your mother and all her friends are movie beautiful. Your mother doesn't like it when her friends talk to you too much. Your mother didn't go to college. She says she isn't smart but you don't believe her. She says her one skill is dressing above her station. She catwalks down the mall runway in a starched linen hat like a farmhand posing as a baroness. A beast follows her from the mall to your house and never leaves. You start playing the *Pretty Woman* tape yourself. Begin reciting the script. Nothing outside your room is yours.

Miles away, in town, other kids push each other on swings. They leave for dinner by walking to their own houses next door. They come to your house on Friday nights, and, after they leave, you scream and eat too much ice cream. So does your mother, when the beast goes hunting. When you get older, the mother smells like him, sounds like him. He starts to dress in witch clothes. He locks you in your room, keeps the key close. You beat on the door, sometimes to get out, sometimes to touch a thing once alive. Your mother says it's not her fault. Try being once-beautiful in this terrain, your only chance at safety from the beast resting on his need to look at you. The highest cheekbones in the land still belong to her. Tonight, Vivian's meet cute reminds you what's possible. In the morning, you'll wake to loud static.

Family of Origin Rewrite

My father teaches ethics at a university. My mother teaches ethics at a university. They save. Their money. Buy a large bungalow in Connecticut. They continue. Saving. Enough to support the San Francisco AIDS Foundation *and* their baby. They read the news and wish kindness into our laws. One of them will say Sweden hasn't been to war since 1812. The other says you can start a business in Sweden *and* get free healthcare. They're excited. About my arrival. They remain. Calm. When midnight cries wake them. My father waits. For my mother to heal. Before asking for sex. She's good. At saying no. She throws meditation and exercise and intense therapy at her trauma. Still goes to AA. When wrong. She promptly admits. It. Every night she arrives home from the university. Her soft. Low voice. Builds a replica in my throat. She wears minimal. Makeup. Cuts her nails down because *who needs the fuss*. When I walk. Into a room. And see my father. I continue walking in. When my father

and I leave. The house. Lots of women introduce themselves. When we get back he tears. Their numbers over the trash. On weekends my father and I dig in the dirt. I watch him plant lilac bulbs around the spruce. He lets my small hand pack the ground. Affirms it as help. When my father puts. me to bed with true stories of him sewing clothes for new mothers in Ukraine. I fall asleep fast. god

So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. ROMANS 12:5

And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee. MATTHEW 5:30

At my beloved's burial, I can't see his body.

Only carnations. I hear your name and my beloved's

in the same sentence. I didn't come to meet you

whose men are everywhere, calling themselves your *body*

singing about their own beautiful *blood* which I've never

seen but am willing to bet isn't

as beautiful as my beloved's

jacket, full of his skin cells and waiting to reincarnate

from a Goodwill medium rack. In the room of my beloved's

body, no pictures. Only carnations. They spill over

his box like misplaced grief. Underneath them he dances

with strangers at a gay bar two hours from town.

Unbuttons his uniform in a desert barrack an ocean

from town. Leans on his red Bronco smoking through relief

in the middle of town where too many exes are watching

the club door. Lord, in the room of my beloved's

body, your men won't admit the fact of his body. In the foyer, one room away, a decade-old portrait of him

in pearls and a black dress, his expression proof

your goodness doesn't extend where it counts, the stories

I hear about my beloved as mistaken as your miracles.

Lord, when I loved you, I didn't know

so many of your men would exile so many of us.

When I was ten, I wrote volumes of letters addressed

Lord and warned classmates about the rapture and called

televangelist hotlines for assurance the devil's lava wasn't waiting

beneath sleep. Later, my beloved took your side

in debates about your existence.

If he was right, you owe

him a confession. Tell him how your body wouldn't take

your advice, how its right hand severed an entire demographic.

Look at him, in his new eyes. Say what you can redeem, and won't.

Mississippi, Missing, Missy, Miss-

July 2007

I drive from the graveside to my apartment, 59 miles from your body. Your villain has yet

to go public. She's larger than the highway. She says to keep your name quiet and I bury

each holy letter in the undergalaxy of dreams. In the car, I scream for a raccoon

failing to lift his own body with his tail. A grief more bearable than getting lost in the dual

image of you squatting in the gym one day and dangling from a light fixture the next.

At home I begin playing videos of a cow weeping for her child who's left the pasture

to become veal. I think maybe their villain is the grass in their bellies.

In my dreams you call from the decade-old

landline that held our breaths until 3 a.m.

There, I can see you leaning on the blue wall, saying you're alive and so sorry. In the daylight,

I drive an earless cat home from the highway, juggle this new obsession with nonhumans

alongside the old obsession with people who insist on my wanting them until I do.

I do not believe you are here now and so sorry. I believe the soreness of each woman

you collected is worth your warm, aboveground body collecting more women.

That is to say I am inconsolable. Every day a new definition

of inconsolable. Yesterday: I have a body and you don't. Today: your villain is a place.

Jane

because mothers are more deserving of poems than fathers even this one

whom the therapist calls a sadist though the therapist is careful to say *she's not in my chair*

meaning one can't be too careful when naming a thing but I've sat in her chair seven years

and it took ten minutes rocking there to wish the therapist were my mother as I do most women

as I do most animals who are more deserving of poems than this mother whom I can love only

when imagining her scuffed mary janes her double braids undone after she'd jumped

on Carolyn's back after Carolyn had stolen her ballet costume which meant there'd be no recital

for Jane who was not allowed to slam doors or scream when Jane's father said no more

dancing period her bedroom door had no lock so most nights she didn't sleep

didn't even lie down her knees holding up a sheet tent which is the metaphor

for the big question of this night and this night which is this is he mad enough at Jane

to drink more than usual because if he drinks more than usual he'll open Jane's bedroom

door and if he opens Jane's bedroom door she might again feel the kind of dead

you might not come back from and who wouldn't love this version of anyone who wouldn't soften

while watching someone make her first list of everything the world won't allow

a mother's advice

if you didn't live in bed if you prayed

at all if your laugh wasn't a bark

if you shopped ever if you loved

only men didn't talk about yourself

so much if you cared if i cared if

when you were on all fours i'd let you

crawl over me on hungover mornings

if I hadn't rolled up a newspaper to swat your head as if a fly if infants

weren't infants if you hadn't thrown up

on the drapes if i didn't need weeks

away if men didn't want so much if men

weren't men if my boss hadn't chased me

around his desk if my father hadn't chased me

around my bed if i didn't want

their want so much if i hadn't left you

so young with my father who didn't

have to chase you to catch you

if i felt as pretty

as men say if my

creditors understood if they hadn't called

you if you hadn't gone and checked

your credit report if your generation weren't

so sad Kelly get up now it's high noon

Body Mark

Whenever a man follows me too close, I think of the nights my mother unrolled the day

with her pantyhose, having been chased around a desk and the afternoons she insisted on posing outside the car

so fifth-grade boys would gawk, glazed as her hair frost. Without warning she undressed and dressed in my presence.

I pretended not to mind until one night I saw her hysterectomy scar, the pale softness

above stretched into a mouth—her body grimacing at me as if I were the one who opened the skin.

Who Is This Grief For?

1.

My acupuncturist says why so hungry these days knowing I'm alone too much.

I say my tongue wants forkfuls of warm, white cake, then, more forkfuls.

She says what it needs is another tongue.

Her needle tries to release a decade-old phone call stuck in the tight meat between my index finger and thumb.

I pretend my body's ready. Picture the old phone receiver's words *Missy* and *suicide* pressuring into steam. I pretend the needle doesn't hurt. She says how does that anger work for you. I say it works because it's mine.

2.

I keep thinking how my grief makes you small. How you didn't want to be a god I've asked everyone to love. Didn't want me holding

strangers, so many strangers, responsible. You had 9,566 days before your last. You held many more objects than a chair and a rope. Faces have softened in your hands. Steering wheels have lived there a long time. But I can't celebrate that. Not yet. I can't praise the smooth contours of your nose without wishing it were still a nose. Without asking Mississippi where it was that night. My grief is precious. My grief thinks it's you. If I wake tomorrow, content with the sheets and square bedroom, where are you. Where am I.

3.

My acupuncturist warms my feet with an infrared lamp. Turns off the fluorescent overhead. Before she leaves

the room she says *I* know you won't stop thinking but try to think happy thoughts.

In ten minutes I'm asleep. Some of my muscles relax. Some twitch on the loud crinkled paper.

4.

Because my grief is asleep, then, the news. Years ago I quit a job reporting government affairs. I no longer have to visit the desks of suits who say I don't exist.

But headlines now wait from our phones. Last week upon waking—SUPREME COURT ALLOWS TRANS MILITARY BAN TO GO INTO EFFECT—you died again. I walked, again, through forests and streets and the stale air of my bedroom. Again, the brainbound ritual of holding photos of you—a sergeant, backdropped by an Iraqi desert, my neurons careful to keep each muscle's geometry in place. When you were alive and your photos lit up Myspace, I mourned such need for soldiering. Later, I mourned how quickly the internet lost them all.

5.

My acupuncturist says you enjoy this, don't you. She's talking about my grief. I say who else will. I tried returning to Mississippi where everyone remembers only what they want. There, I said your name as if to no one. Visited your buried bones, alone. They would not be blessed by this. I should not want to hold one the way we hold relics. There are so many gods wanting my soreness. I can bruise my forehead bowing before so many statues.

I don't drink anymore. Don't binge on fresh-baked softness if it's out of sight. Still my grief habit says what's wrong with a little pain? Who else does it pain? I think again of your face that's no longer a face. I don't argue back.

[Boy] Meets Girl

Missy

K.

Tell me again about the courtyard.

It was August. 7:30 a.m. and sunny. My first day of high school. 1996.

I saw you standing with my friends and wondered if you had any in your grade.

A friend whispered [he's] a tomboy. She said you played five sports. *A little overkill.*

Who spoke first?

I asked your name. I knew your name.

I handed you some candy.

I took some, saved some.

I walked you to homeroom.

When did you know?

We had many questions.

There were days I thought you stayed home. Then you appeared by my classroom door with a note. We passed several each day.

One said I like good conversationalists

Another: I don't know what to wear to the dance. My mom's on my case about my style.

Another: I'm sorry about Travis. You deserve better.

You signed them all Reese.

When did you know?

We were walking down the stairs and, on the landing, my wrist button fell off.

I rolled up your sleeve and looked at you.

Your eyes grew large. They made me think of stained glass at my church, how something pure must be burning through all that blue. I wanted to stay there, standing in holy shock.

You said,

What?

And I said,

Nothing.

Fantasy with No Secrets

Instead of staring at each other on the landing you touch my face and lean in. My mouth opens

to soft possibility. I go home wearing your class ring, that cold silver,

lab-grown sapphire, exactly my size.

The next morning my mother wakes me, picks up my hand, reads your engraved name

out loud. The steep angles of her jaw sharpen when she says I better treat you right.

Short Film Starring My Beloved's Red Bronco

I want the impossible. Another

genre. Time for opening shots of gravel, a small brick house

where my beloved comes of age.

McCollough Boulevard,

its elevated loops taking him east away from flat suburbs.

I want you to see his soccer cleats

thrown in the back, fitted for a girl's nine. The girls on his team

deserve an entire storyline: the one in the passenger seat trying

not to look at him, surprised

by her want.

Her mother who knows and doesn't care deserves

a bigger part. At least a stylist. Let the mothers who do care,

who punish their daughters' desire with exile, let their punishment

remind you that choosing genres

is a luxury. Not for the queers

washing their own used cars.

Shots this film can afford: mud on the wheels.

Abundant soap and water. More

mud. The bumper sponged by my beloved's right hand. A night

drive. A gaping moon. Watch

my beloved reach for the knob, let the moody synth

of "I'm on Fire" swallow the view. You won't see flames. Nothing that burns burns a long time.

Still, I need you to stay with it, this wide frame of a salvage yard,

our Bronco's new home of rust

eating red. Watch everything I love now

flattening.

Fantasy in Which There Was Nothing for Us to Survive

Instead of war / you choose / the fire / department where no one / dies because / of you / we talk / abstractly / about war / on the patio you built after we moved / from our parents' homes / our parents who / at first cried in their palms but read enough books on supporting queer children there's no / reason to leave town no hidden / torches waiting for us to fall asleep / on the nights you're off / duty we watch the distant corn grow remember our chase down its rows the satisfaction of wanting / to be caught / how your gold hair canopied my face when you said / for the first time *I am / a man* / and my body shucked itself to bareness / and your body / remained safe in its husk this we don't tell our friends who / visit the patio / where our tongues creep around superstition that speaking such magic aloud / could sink this dark and this cornfield and this patio you made lovely out of cheap stone / could sink into earth / too soft / to carry us / even if we ask nicely / it's enough / to look at corn that isn't yet corn / then at each other / it's enough / we hope it's enough

April 25, 2020

Yesterday, your bones turned 39. Three days ago, mine turned 38.

If materialists are right, you're nowhere and the shrine I've built is nothing

but dry wood and paint and numbers. Yesterday I woke up happy and didn't think

about you until midnight. This means my shrine is on fire.

Which is another kind of grief. As if we said goodbye in my sleep.

I keep every memory sharp, hoping it will haunt you, if materialists are wrong.

If this is my last chance, remember again the night I turned

fifteen. The shoulder strap of my ballet costume, your soft fingers tracing it, afraid to touch the skin. My mother didn't see

this when she found us, but she recognized the want

of our bodies, leaning on the heat of your red Bronco.

Hours later, in a courtyard outside a cast party, I had to tell you

it was over. Which meant I couldn't celebrate your sixteenth.

If I don't remember your letter smuggled from school to school—

if I don't remember the three sentences

confessing your candle-blown wish if I don't remember you with so much

frequency, will your vanishing feel sudden? Because it does.

Boy Meets Them

You wouldn't want me now. Not like that. If you'd made it to 2020, instead of 2007, we'd compare jowl lines & say we don't feel almost 40 but the young somehow look younger. I'd tell you that, last week, someone called me "sir" from behind & apologized when I turned around. I couldn't get them to believe I didn't mind. I really didn't. In 1996, when you wanted me, my long hair offered its youth to bleach & coiled heat. My makeup labor clocked twenty minutes for each eye. You had a type & it was me, two hours after waking for school. I'd watched my mother do the same, leading with lacquer, frost, & shoulder pads. She didn't know, I didn't know, there were other ways so many other ways—to wear a body. Back then, I cataloged your masculine markers as the rebellious exception. Something to be drawn to, not imitate. If you were here, I'd tell you that I now live in a swamp where nothing dies. The air two-thirds water & full of microbial grandparents. There's no room here for polyester or bracelets or hair. The swamp gave me permission to shed. I'd tell you my first name

is now one letter. Under it I grow like a plant that can finally see the sky. I relax in mirrors under a new uniform—a shirt buttoned to the neck, flats, a small watch. I think of you after graduation, having finally cut your hair above the ears. Did you notice a lightness, is what I'd say if you were here. I'd tell you the moment my ankles rejected, out of principle, the stilettoes you once loved. How I started listening to each tired muscle's complaint of a work-payoff imbalance. We'd talk about this the way I imagine adult siblings bond over the likes & differences of their children. I say "imagine" because I don't have siblings. Meaning, if you were here on my porch stoop, our kids playing inside, I'd come out to you first, like I am on the page right now. You'd hear about the luxury of carrying less, of achieving what neither of us expected. You'd look at me differently, I can't know how.

Missy Asks Me What the Next Century's Like

Most of us are on TV. I have met the trans people who own a bar and bookstore in Madison, Wisconsin. I have shaken their hands. An elevenyear-old from my queer youth club says her hobby is trans liberation activism. Some of us still die. More of us want to. Undergrads are performing 90s nostalgia. I saw a freshman carrying a boom box playing "Bombastic." For half a second, I thought it was your red Bronco. I saw the stoplight where we danced from our bellies like Shaggy. This is a trauma response. Ford reissued the Bronco last year. The drivers are exactly our age, still flannelled and anxious. Strangers have read poems about you and published them in national journals. Strangers have read poems about you and offered me a fellowship to live in Madison, where I've never felt so comfortable around strangers. Climbing fake boulders indoors is scarier than memories. I'm told the past won't leave parts of my body. An androgynous climber with many muscles coaches my past up the wall. *Trust* your big toe. Reach. At a public reading, someone with frosted hair says thank you for bringing Missy to life. When you were alive, I would have gendered them. You would love the lakes here. When I look up from my campus desk, I see sailboats. I hold many people I don't know responsible for your death. They love us here, now. Right now, they love us here.

Because You Can't

I stand in front of paintings a long time and think about the bones once belonging to you and how Egon Schiele could line a body into movement. Because you no longer have a shape, I've made a practice of nearness. A hawk lets me stroke her mid-flight, I let comets land in my mouth, when they're small enough. My lover pushes all their weight on me because I asked. They flatten me into astonishment. Because nothing can astonish you, I tempt what's alive by doubting I could love it more. It's a neat trick. When I use it, raccoons visit often, their fingers closed around mud older than you. Missy, this is me moving on. There's a noon rain to get caught in and many clavicles to behold. I wish you could see this one, tilting across a century.

Notes

The epigraph "There must be a girl, there has always been a girl. There must be a boy, there has always been a boy.... There must be a ghost. They must be hungry" is from Oliver Baez Bendorf's poem "Field Guide" published in the book *Advantages of Being Evergreen* by Cleveland State University Poetry Center.

The epigraph "How should I greet thee?—" is from Lord Byron's poem "When We Two Parted." During high school, months after Missy disappeared without an explanation, the poem appeared, written in his hand, on my windshield. The next line: "With silence and tears."

"Mississippi, Missing, Missy, Miss—" augments a line from Richard Siken's "Scheherazade."

The lines "words / like violence, break—" and "all I've ever wanted, all I've ever needed / is here" in "Boombox Ode: Enjoy the Silence" are from Depeche Mode's "Enjoy the Silence."

Acknowledgments

- *Adroit Journal:* "Boombox Ode: Enjoy the Silence" & "Because You Can't"
- *American Literary Review:* "Missy Asks Me What the Next Century's Like" & "a mother's advice"
- *Boston Review:* "For Missy Who Never Got His New Name," "Mississippi, Missing, Missy, Miss—" & "Gospel for Missy During Our Three-Day Birthday Season"

Columbia Journal: "Short Film Starring My Beloved's Red Bronco"

The Common: "Family of Origin Rewrite"

Gulf Coast: "god"

Peach Magazine: "Anti Elegy"

Puerto del Sol: "A Medium Performs Your Visit" & "Fantasy in Which There Was Nothing for Us to Survive"

Queerly Magazine: "Second Position (Home Practice)"

Salt Hill: "Who Is This Grief For?"

South Carolina Review: "Tupelo, MS" & "[Boy] Meets Them"

Split Lip Magazine: "Short Film Starring My Beloved's Living Body" *SWWIM:* "Nostalgia"

TriQuarterly: "Family of Origin Content Warning"

Tyger Quarterly: "Sleeping Beauty" & "Body Mark"

Waxwing: "New Testament," "fifth position (intrusive thoughts at ballet camp)," & "1987"

West Review: "Missy," & "Jane"

Absolute love for Kaitlin Rizzo, Steven Espada Dawson, Paige Lewis, Kaveh Akbar, Taneum Bambrick, Shalay Hudson, Rita Mookerjee, Dustin Pearson, Kate Whitely, Doc Lyons, William Fargason, Molly Marotta, Melissa Claire, Sasha Debevec-McKenney, Claire, Luchette, Leila Chatti, Amy Quan Barry, Beth Nguyen, Sean Bishop, Ron Kuka, Porter Shreve, Shaan Amin, Canese Jarboe, Claire Luchette, James Kimbrell, David Kirby, Barbara Hamby, Jen Atkins, Diane Roberts, Andrew Epstein, Erin Belieu, Deborah Teague, Elias Dominguez Barajas, Dorothy Chan, SJ Sindu, Ruth Ann, Yolanda Franklin, Marianne Chan, Norma Reesor, Linda Smith, Guo Gu, Nick White, Jessi Mills, Melissa Studdard, Sarah Kersey, James Davis, Nathan Spoon, Katherine Munson, Ryan Munson, Despy Boutris, Iqra S. Cheema, Haolun Xu, Cyborg Jillian Wise, Lauren Duncan, Brooke Iverson, torrin a. greathouse, Sarah Ghazal Ali, Peter Laberge, Heidi Seaborn, Adam McGee, Joshua Bohnsack, Richard Greenfield, Makshya Tolbert, Paul McVeigh, Rebecca Clarkson, Jesse Hammer, JainaBee, KB Brookins, Jason B. Crawford, Maya Carter, Dare Williams, r kay, and Alex DiFrancesco. I'll never forget your kindness.

Eternal thanks to Richard Siken, Danez Smith, Shira Erlichman, Oliver Baez Bendorf, Donika Kelly, Cameron Awkward-Rich, Anne Carson, Jeanette Winterson, Frank Bidart, Audre Lorde, Jack Gilbert, Egon Schiele, David Wojnarowicz, Cassils, Pace Taylor, Aaron Weiss, Bruce Springsteen, Dolores O'Riordan, Sade, Michael Stipe, and Martin Gore for inspiring and shaping the voices in this book.

Thank you, Tyehimba Jess, for the generosity of your poems and toward this book.

Thanks to Milkweed for making this publication possible, especially to Bailey Hutchinson for holding my hand through edits, Mary Austin Speaker for designing a stunning cover, and Morgan LaRocca for guiding me through promotion with enduring support.

Special thanks to Missy Knight whose memory remains one of my greatest teachers and sources of tenderness.

Deep abiding thanks to my grandmother, Libby Kelly, who loved me best.



K. IVER is a nonbinary trans poet born in Mississippi. Their work has appeared in *Boston Review, Gulf Coast, Puerto del Sol, Salt Hill, Adroit Journal, TriQuarterly,* and elsewhere. They are the 2021–2022 Ronald Wallace Poetry Fellow for the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing and the recipient of the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation Residency Grant. They have a PhD in Creative Writing from Florida State University. They live in Madison, Wisconsin.

The eleventh award of The Ballard Spahr Prize for Poetry is presented to K. Iver by Milkweed Editions and The Ballard Spahr Foundation

First established in 2011 as the Lindquist & Vennum Prize for Poetry, the annual Ballard Spahr Prize for Poetry awards \$10,000 and publication by Milkweed Editions to a poet residing in Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota, South Dakota, or Wisconsin. Finalists are selected from among all entrants by the editors of Milkweed Editions. The winning collection is selected annually by an independent judge. The 2022 Ballard Spahr Prize for Poetry was judged by Tyehimba Jess.

Milkweed Editions is one of the nation's leading independent publishers, with a mission to identify, nurture, and publish transformative literature, and build an engaged community around it. The Ballard Spahr Foundation was established by the national law firm of Ballard Sphar, LLC, and is a donor-advised fund of The Minneapolis Foundation.



Founded as a nonprofit organization in 1980, Milkweed Editions is an independent publisher. Our mission is to identify, nurture, and publish transformative literature, and build an engaged community around it.

Milkweed Editions is based in Bdé Óta Othúŋwe (Minneapolis) within Mní Sota Makhóčhe, the traditional homeland of the Dakhóta people. Residing here since time immemorial, Dakhóta people still call Mní Sota Makhóčhe home, with four federally recognized Dakhóta nations and many more Dakhóta people residing in what is now the state of Minnesota. Due to continued legacies of colonization, genocide, and forced removal, generations of Dakhóta people remain disenfranchised from their traditional homeland. Presently, Mní Sota Makhóčhe has become a refuge and home for many Indigenous nations and peoples, including seven federally recognized Ojibwe nations. We humbly encourage our readers to reflect upon the historical legacies held in the lands they occupy.

milkweed.org

Milkweed Editions, an independent nonprofit publisher, gratefully acknowledges sustaining support from our Board of Directors; the Alan B. Slifka Foundation and its president, Riva Ariella Ritvo-Slifka; the Amazon Literary Partnership; the Ballard Spahr Foundation; *Copper Nickel;* the McKnight Foundation; the National Endowment for the Arts; the National Poetry Series; and other generous contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. Also, this activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund. For a full listing of Milkweed Editions supporters, please visit milkweed.org.



Interior design by Tijqua Daiker and Mary Austin Speaker Typeset in Warnock

Warnock was designed by Robert Slimbach for the Adobe Originals type composition family. Slimbach named this typeface after John Warnock, the cofounder of Adobe Systems. The many weights, optical size ranges, and linguistic character sets in this typeface allow Warnock to perform a variety of typographic tasks with a classic yet contemporary elegance.



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.

