

# EXERCISES IN PAINTING

poems by KHADIJAH QUEEN

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*I had to paint them in order to know what was going on.*

—Sam Gilliam

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## performance with little evidence of research

Use the crouching woman  
covering her ears—in new drawings  
she should wear a nude suit  
under harem pants. Consider control  
vs. giving direction. Observation vs.  
action. Expanded emotional levels move  
from humor to grief. Master  
the modulation. Crank up to hellish,  
yet very subtle at first.

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## I80 white gloves

after Lorraine O'Grady

smacking that ass  
making a phat beat  
(the thinking man's Beyoncé  
endlessly sketching  
Isaach de Bankholé)

hair as urgent bulletin  
cosmic drifts of hair  
emitting *important information*  
untapped talents and salted bravado  
a syntactic turn-on

a paragraphic chasm  
stirring up hallucinogenic  
invader magic  
resembling a hoarded apocalypse  
fetishized resistance  
against a corridor of wounds

a honey pot hand in a real  
busy honeycomb  
watching the bees  
suck on brown girls' legs—sharp  
like hustlers or suicidal stargazers  
pink lips first  
pulling on a Kool

---

with quotes  
from Axel Munthe & a cartoon

*The wild, cruel beast is not behind the bars of the cage. He is in front—*

*I despise all of you  
who hooded me  
so I couldn't feel  
my hair anymore*

Important at the time:  
my damp head  
at the cigar shop

I could scoop all the men  
into my eyecups &  
my black head  
& look as long as I wanted  
as long as I didn't go in

Down into the mystified head  
my blue head  
I listened for the small voice,  
the undefended, I heard it break  
my glorious

The real model looks at me with her nails out.  
Overdue living the dream. I had a city before  
I knew what a city identified as. Boats crossed  
to & from Jersey, upstream, downstream. Slick  
men, slick hairdressers. Sergio's sexy gap.  
Oh New York. You have so many turning into  
something long lenses could immobilize. So many  
washed out accustomed. The real model talks up  
her lake house friends. Tech guys set up  
& the women, us, robed, volunteer. Blocking occurs.  
The loft wall has three radiators. The light moves there,  
the screen, the sunset view. *You have so much*  
*hair*, they say, running water to warm  
in the deep sink, mixing color. I imagine Funky Dineva:  
*Laid to the gods, hunty*. I pull wet strays from my face.  
Someone kneels with duct tape. A bulb shorts.  
I hear the food cart push in & sneak a homemade-  
tasting ginger cookie. Later, I learn to curl  
my eyelashes. Then Wella.

As kids I swear we lived for hair pins,  
bobby pins, sometimes we kept them  
in our pockets.

We had little combs  
and endlessly styled our hair, Barbie's  
hair. Sometimes the pins ended

in strange configurations, semi-  
paper clips,  
                    mini Barbie knives,  
the rounded tips bitten off & made razors.  
Sometimes Barbie got so mad at Ken

she'd have to cut him. Of course, we  
didn't call them by those names.  
Our Barbies were Mahogany, June Blackout,  
badass Grandma Cecil.

Now the withering games between us,  
all but one a mother,  
  what we offer  
each other is more than comfort. We  
expect a wounding.  
We marvel at the needle of love.

Armed with those pins,  
we found plenty to do. It's not important  
what we found:  
                    we were gifted.



---

with  
localization & taxidermy

Bare-breasted, a woman dons a bear's nose—  
another, a lion's mask; broken teeth

clinging to her loose hair, bits of bark  
piercing one arm, poorly amputated



A wolf lies  
crushed between floral cushions

& the fur, gleaming  
from a gentle brushing—

FKA Twigs on the playlist



Rip & the furrow deepens & decorum  
accumulates.

Claws blend  
with the wood. The body

bends into the shape of an eye,  
or into the shape of a root.

A portrait with unused legs—

---

an ode to mending

*after Beili Liu*

Fawning scissors a steelcloud  
suspended open-mouthed

above a peaceful mender  
& fan of white scraps at her feet

She makes it her business—  
stitching in contrast

The finger loops, overlarge,  
undulate invisibly

Good threats of repetition

---

as studio practice  
with Michael Ondaatje quote

*You have snappy eyes,*  
the artist's child says  
as he plays, & she notices the round  
bamboo eyes on the stone table:  
placemats. Crumbs stick in  
the swirls mesmerizing  
her son, tiny fingers  
tracing from edge to center  
like she traced his pinwheel  
of hair, sinuous as when  
he was born damp & rooting  
for milk. An art object  
does not always do as much—  
the universality myth crows like  
paperboys on old street  
corners she could not have  
stood on  
untouched in  
previous centuries,  
& sometimes not even now,  
no matter how she dresses  
the natural critic,  
although she has ensconced herself  
into a possessive luxury  
of mind. She buys little  
but books, therefore,  
*in the same way assassins  
come to chaos neutral*

---

my loved blacknesses  
& all the blacknesses I knew

especially the rarest kind named Priscilla G & drowning  
not in bleach cream / creamy spin / but spinning blades on a black Nina  
gunship in the gargantuan ghetto killing & maiming my brothers & potential  
husbands /// when the working mothers give up & when they do not  
& when the boys in their mad survivalist tactics  
want a movie sex parade / lace-edging their sweaty fists  
just because / death switch of a future /  
none of that has to do with any kind of blackness or a crazed horizon  
in the plumed summers of Los Angeles wherein television reenactments of real  
fathers didn't occur enough for news sidebars / but more than generally believed /  
they showed up to dailiness / cash in hand but as the school year revved up  
the rest of the madness had nowhere to hide /// ballooned horizon /  
chemical concerns / fire up the blue turbines / fire up  
unconscious intention plus the acne of ignorance / on the city's façade  
but not because of blackness / not for me /  
when I would get home sometimes there might be food  
sometimes just blackness which I loved

If petalesque fingernails  
absorb the couple's palmed diamond-  
shaped leaves as they face each other,  
pointy shoes overlapping—  
they are not a couple



Her gray hair & XL muumuu  
say mother of the bearded man.  
The grassy hill behind them

looks soft & multicolored wheat stalks  
make him dance—another dunce-  
capped golfer hiding from sundry motifs



Her triangular mouth leads in smaller figurines,  
carting more hoard than they think she can handle.

In headscarf & stiff  
burgundy A-line, munificence, all hers—



A slight imbalance about  
the face. Inclined toward  
a trio of doorways  
as if about to choose, decided against.  
She wears men's boots & a mouth so dark

a red you know  
the wound cannot heal.



They don't want to exchange daisy bouquets.  
Most delicate, he pivots away.  
They fight, the marmot between—



She says, *I am bigger than you*  
& *I grow in half. My vest &*  
*your cardigan match—orange-red.*  
*Our anger makes us positive.*



The red-eyed rabbit eats inverted seams  
at the solstice. All the tricolored tulips  
slashed from too-bright stems.



Now blue poppies want some of this  
horse-legged woman leaning back:

Her smile cherry & tilted  
Her yellowed sleeves belled at plainer wrists



Her back to the overloaded bookshelf, her lips  
almost a black beard, so wide

a sham grin upward. One open  
on her lap, to a blank page. Her sailboat  
dress & X-acto  
thrust toward a sinister  
reflection of braided carpeting in antique window glass.



Dogs as CMYK      wolves at her feet  
Wet beaver hat              knit snowflake socks—



A flower sword, deadly beige,  
pierces wagon wheel shields  
as opponents bleed rainbows, freeze  
mid-March, facing ribbon treasure  
well in hand: double eagle star,  
hexagonal chunk of sky



Rainbow upside down, denting the earth.  
Wilted red poppies attack. He feeds the largest  
the shadow of his hand.

---

after dreaming  
that hungry women may resort to violence

An all-woman riot in the wilderness &  
chained vultures & wolves smell the brawl  
from their caves & forests policing, by force  
of habit wanting everything for themselves  
but the women channel a raging  
feast, raining from the sky &  
pushing up from the ground, so the animals  
only end up eyeballing  
bits of sky between the dull cloud of rank  
wings & bared teeth



---

the usual old shoe  
still lives in October, birds again

On the roof's right corner  
a thuggish blue jay lands  
heavily on the tarred shingles &  
departs after a feral glance  
my way. Lighter, sparrows  
inch closer in, nesting under  
eaves. Flashes of jet  
on the jay's face, its tail,  
white on azure, such a serious  
flight, in my sunstroked eyes  
make a faded photograph  
I double-expose, which reminds me  
I left a hair tie in your bucket seat.  
But I'm alone at this  
cabin. The floor's woodgrain  
so old it snags my good socks.  
What would I do barefoot?  
Tire my legs out & splinter,  
trying to run from soft creatures.

---

fashion, grocery items  
& a nod to Richard Serra

While discussing the pairing of houndstooth & tie-dye,  
we see a plain brown thrush pierce an overripe  
gutter strawberry, mold under the stem, but later

we devote our time to taking calls from friends  
whose existential crises do not threaten  
their habit of crumbling—

After all, we have that habit ourselves  
despite a very encouraging streak—

More than a midday slash through clouds  
in a serpentine illuminated garden, or on Provincetown  
cobblestones covered in gelato, dropped sample spoons

& lit cigar butts of laissez-faire men in pink  
plaid oxford shirts, seersucker shorts & Gucci  
loafers, sailboat art on too many gallery walls

A speaker blasted “Misty Blue” then “Moon River”  
out onto Commercial Street, even though it’s August  
& no one wore crinoline expressions at ShopRite

Strangers say things like *Little girl, you dropped the Kleenex*  
while noticing pigs’ feet & peas arrayed circularly,  
sushi platters and sunflower bouquets  
rather forlorn, even in updated LED condition

Not a factual brink  
Not a smoking quibble  
Not a barn collapsing  
Not unused implements or a hammer's bass

Instead, klezmer & sequins  
Goat bleats & too much popcorn  
Analog radio tuner & space heater smell  
Not an impossible battery

Not a shivering candidate  
Not a partnership of buckeyes  
Abundant mulch & a moth fold

Not spoiled carnitas  
Not paisley furniture  
Not nacelles as new planetary fusion clues  
Not fault collections  
Not blowing hard death from anything  
Not that raft of deadweight

Ridiculous iridescence & bedazzlers  
In a color not seen yet

Lowell jewels  
Bruise ash & porches swept rich again  
Here in the rag paper knees & now

---

\_\_\_\_\_ , suddenly flying

Or, surrounded by objects  
almost like you: a striped curtain,  
arrayed over c. 1908 radiator pipes,  
turquoise & a little taupe

Steam came out, some rust  
trickled down the ornate six-row  
& your laugh, a sufferance—  
rankling, metallic in the tornado

---

the abiding  
of temporary failures

To give anything for disarray tends toward fault.  
Some hotel rooms scream a going-along to ignore. Some men  
so slim they can't exist inside enough women. Could an open mouth  
ever not be an invitation to whatever curious appellation passes by?  
This untold scuttling has to contain more than its remainder.  
This habit of breaking whatever presents itself for presentation's sake  
as distraction. Too-intricate curtain rods don't make good subjects—  
once upon a time choices had to be made about fucking & a clean  
feeling of surprise. Once upon a time knit blankets meant  
a warm head in the fucking cold. Silhouetted  
apartment complexes never seem as deliberate as quilts  
on a bed in an old house or even a squirrel on the edge of a bristlecone  
branch, so browse for a real thought: i.e., showers make the best  
escape from those who need more than privacy or takeout, &  
Andes mints left on a filthy sill do, in fact, become filthy.  
How do these interchanges work? Fight diminished to sleep.  
Faded noise is still noise. What endless feels like—  
delay of hand-sewn raw silk & raffia hat. Look up:  
The ice-gray sky has a calm splitting open with calm.



# Notes & Acknowledgments

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Axel Munthe, *The Story of San Michelle*: “The cruel wild beast is not behind the bars of the cage, he is in front of it.”

Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

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## About the Author

**Khadijah Queen** is the author of five books, most recently *I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On* (YesYes, 2017) and *Fearful Beloved* (Argos, 2015), and four chapbooks. In 2015, the Relationship theater company staged her verse play, *Non-Sequitur*, in NYC as part of the Leslie Scalapino Award for Innovative Women Performance Writers, with publication by Litmus Press. Individual poems appear in *Brooklyn Magazine*, *Tin House*, *Fence*, *jubilat*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks from Vietnam to Iraq*, and widely in other journals and anthologies.



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