

# AMERICAN SONNETS

*FOR MY PAST AND*



PENGUIN POETS

# FUTURE ASSASSIN



# TERRANCE HAYES

*AUTHOR OF LIGHTHEAD, WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD*

**ALSO BY TERRANCE HAYES**

*How to Be Drawn*

*Lighthouse*

*Wind in a Box*

*Hip Logic*

*Muscular Music*



**American Sonnets**  
**for My Past and Future**  
**Assassin**

**TERRANCE HAYES**

PENGUIN POETS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, New York 10014  
[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-  
IN-PUBLICATION DATA  
Hayes, Terrance, author.

American sonnets for my past and future  
assassin / Terrance Hayes.

New York, New York : Penguin Books, 2018.

| Series: Penguin poets

Identifiers: LCCN 2017057838 | ISBN

9780143133186 (paperback) | ISBN

9780525504962 (ebook)

BISAC: POETRY / American / General. |

POETRY / American / African

American.

LCC PS3558.A8378 A6 2018 | DDC 811/.54

—dc23 LC record available at

<https://lcn.loc.gov/2017057838>

Version\_1

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*bring me  
to where  
my blood runs*

WANDA COLEMAN



# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

The black poet would love to  
say his century began  
With Hughes or God forbid,  
Wheatley, but actually  
It began with all the poetry  
weirdos & worriers, warriors,  
Poetry whiners & winos  
falling from ship bows, sunset

Bridges & windows. In a  
second I'll tell you how little  
Writing rescues. My hunch is  
that Sylvia Plath was not  
Especially fun company. A  
drama queen, thin-skinned,  
And skittery, she thought her  
poems were ordinary.

What do you call a visionary  
who does not recognize  
Her vision? Orpheus was  
alone when he invented  
writing.

His manic drawing became a kind of writing when he sent His beloved a sketch of an eye with an X struck through it.

He meant *I am blind without you*. She thought he meant *I never want to see you again*. It is possible he meant that, too.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Inside me is a black-eyed  
animal

Bracing in a small stall. As if  
a bird

Could grow without breaking  
its shell.

As if the clatter of a thousand  
black

Birds whipping in a storm  
could be held

In a shell. Inside me is a huge  
black

Bull balled small enough to  
fit inside

The bead of a nipple ring. I  
mean to leave

A record of my raptures. I  
was raised

By a beautiful man. I loved  
his grasp of time.

My mother shaped my grasp  
of space.

Would you rather spend the  
rest of eternity

With your wild wings  
bewildering a cage or

With your four good feet  
stuck in a plot of dirt?



**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

But there never was a black  
male hysteria  
Because a fret of white men  
drove you crazy  
Or a clutch of goons drove  
you through Money,  
Stole your money, paid you  
money, stole it again.

There was a black male  
review for ladies night  
At the nightclub. There was a  
black male review  
By suits in the offices, the  
courts & waiting rooms.  
There was a black male  
review in the weight rooms  
Where coaches licked their  
whistles. Reviews,  
Once-overs, half-studies,  
misreads & night  
Mares looped the news. Your  
jolts & tears gained

Rubberneckers, eyeballers &  
bawlers in Money,  
Mississippi. The stares you  
got were crazy,  
It's true. But there never was  
a black male hysteria.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Why are you bugging me you  
stank minuscule husk  
Of musk, muster &  
deliberation crawling over  
reasons  
And possessions I have &  
have not touched?

Should I fail in my  
insecticide, I pray for a black  
boy

Who lifts you to a flame with  
bedeviled tweezers

Until mercy rises &  
disappears. You are the size  
Of a stuttering drop of liquid  
—milk, machine oil

Semen, blood. Yes, you  
funky stud, you are the jewel  
In the knob of an elegant butt  
plug, snug between

Pleasure & disgust. You are  
the scent of rot at the heart  
Of love-making. The meat  
inside your exoskeleton  
Is as tender as Jesus. Neruda  
wrote of “a nipple  
Perfuming the earth.” Yes,  
you are an odor, an almost  
Imperceptible ode to death, a  
lousy, stinking stinkbug.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Probably twilight makes  
blackness dangerous  
Darkness. Probably all my  
encounters  
Are existential jambalaya.  
Which is to say,  
A nigga can survive.  
Something happened

In Sanford, something  
happened in Ferguson  
And Brooklyn & Charleston,  
something happened  
In Chicago & Cleveland &  
Baltimore & happens  
Almost everywhere in this  
country every day.  
Probably someone is prey in  
all of our encounters.  
You won't admit it. The  
names alive are like the  
names



In graves. Probably twilight  
makes blackness  
Darkness. And a gate.  
Probably the dark blue skin  
Of a black man matches the  
dark blue skin  
Of his son the way one  
twilight matches another.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Are you not the color of this  
country's current threat  
Advisory? And of pompoms  
at a school whose mascot  
Is the clementine? Color of  
the quartered cantaloupe  
Beside the tiers of easily  
bruised bananas cowering

In towers of yellow skin?  
And of Caligula's copper-  
toned

Jabber-jaw jammed with  
grapes shaped like the  
eyeballs

Of blind people? Light as a  
featherweight monarch,

Viceroy, goldfish. Pomp &  
pumpkin pompadour,

Are you not a flame of

hollow *Hellos & Hell Nos*,

A wild, tattered spirit versus  
what? Enemy to Foe of

Those Opposed to Upholding  
the Laws Against What?

I know your shade. You are  
the color of a sucker punch,  
The mix of flag blood &  
surprise blurring the eyes, a  
flare

Of confusion, a contusion  
before it swells & darkens.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

I lock you in an American  
sonnet that is part prison,  
Part panic closet, a little room  
in a house set aflame.

I lock you in a form that is  
part music box, part meat  
Grinder to separate the song  
of the bird from the bone.

I lock your persona in a  
dream-inducing sleeper hold  
While your better selves  
watch from the bleachers.  
I make you both gym & crow  
here. As the crow  
You undergo a beautiful  
catharsis trapped one night  
In the shadows of the gym.  
As the gym, the feel of crow-  
Shit dropping to your floors is  
not unlike the stars  
Falling from the pep rally  
posters on your walls.

I make you a box of darkness  
with a bird in its heart.

Voltas of acoustics, instinct &  
metaphor. It is not enough  
To love you. It is not enough  
to want you destroyed.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

I pour a pinch of serious  
poison for you

James Earl Ray Dylann Roof

I pour a punch of piss

For you George Zimmerman

John Wilkes Booth

Robert Chambliss Thomas

Edwin Blanton Jr



Bobby Frank Cherry Herman  
Frank Cash your name  
Is a gate opening upon  
another gate I pour a punch  
Of perils I pour a bunch of  
punches all over you  
I pour unmerciful panic into  
your river I damn you  
With the opposite of prayer  
Byron De La Beckwith  
Roy Bryant J. W. Milam  
Edgar Ray Killen Assassins  
Love trumps power or blood  
to trump power

Beauty trumps power or  
blood to trump power

Justice trumps power or  
blood to trump power

The names alive are like the  
names in the graves

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

You don't seem to want it,  
but you wanted it.

You don't seem to want it,  
but you won't admit it.

You don't seem to want  
admittance.

You don't seem to want  
admission.

You don't seem to want it,  
but you haunt it.

You don't seem too haunted,  
but you haunted.

You don't seem to get it, but  
you got it.

You don't seem to care, but  
you care.

You don't seem to buy it, but  
you sell it.

You don't seem to want it,  
but you wanted it.

You don't seem to prey, but  
you prey,

You don't seem to pray but  
you full of prayers,

You don't seem to want it,  
but you wanted it.

You don't seem too haunted,  
but you haunted.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Aryans, Betty Crocker,  
Bettye LaVette,  
Blowfish, briar bushes,  
Bubbas, Buckras,  
Archie Bunkers, bullhorns,  
bullwhips, bullets,  
All cancers kill me, car  
crashes, cavemen, chakras,

Crackers, discord,  
dissonance, doves, Elvis,  
Ghosts, the grim reaper  
herself, a heart attack  
While making love, hangmen,  
Hillbillies exist,  
Lillies, Martha Stewarts,  
Mayflower maniacs,  
Money grubbers, Gwen  
Brooks' "The Mother,"  
(My mother's bipolar as  
bacon), pancakes kill me,  
Phonies, dead roaches, big  
roaches & smaller

Roaches, the sheepish,  
snakes, all seven seas,  
Snow avalanches, swansongs,  
sciatica, Killer  
Wasps, yee-haws, you, now  
& then, disease.



# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Even the most kindhearted  
white woman,  
Dragging herself through  
traffic with her nails  
On the wheel & her head in a  
chamber of black  
Modern American music may  
begin, almost

Carelessly, to breathe *n*-  
words. Yes, even the most  
Bespectacled hallucination  
cruising the lanes  
Of America may find her  
tongue curls inward,  
Entangling her windpipe, her  
vents, toes & pedals  
When she drives alone. Even  
the most made up  
Layers of persona in a two- or  
four-door vehicle  
Sealed in a fountain of bass &  
black boys

Chanting *n*-words may begin  
to chant inwardly  
Softly before she can catch  
herself. Of course,  
After that, what is inward, is  
absorbed.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Seven of the ten things I love  
in the face  
Of James Baldwin concern  
the spiritual  
Elasticity of his expressions.  
The sashay  
Between left & right  
eyebrow, for example.

The crease between his eyes  
like a tuning  
Fork or furrow, like a  
riverbed branching  
Into tributaries like lines of  
rapturous sentences  
Searching for a period. The  
dimple in his chin  
Narrows & expands like a  
pupil. Most of all,  
I love all of his eyes. And  
those wrinkles  
The feel & color of wet  
driftwood in the mud

Around those eyes. Mud is  
made of  
Simple rain & earth, the same  
baptismal  
Spills & hills of dirt James  
Baldwin is made of.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

The earth of my nigga eyes  
are assassinated.

The deep well of my nigga  
throat is assassinated.

The tender bells of my nigga  
testicles are gone.

You assassinate the sound of  
our bullshit & blissfulness.

The bones managing the  
body's business are cloaked  
Until you assassinate my  
nigga flesh. The skin is  
replaced

By a cloak of fire. Sometimes  
it is river or rainwater  
That cloaks the bones.

Sometimes we lie on the  
roadside

In bushels of knotted roots,  
flowers & thorns until our  
body



Is found. You assassinate the  
smell of my breath, which is  
like

Smoke, milk, twilight itself.

You assassinate my tongue

Which is like the head of a  
turtle wearing my skull for a  
shell.

You assassinate my lovely  
legs & the muscular hook of  
my cock.

Still, I speak for the dead.

You will never assassinate  
my ghosts.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

I'm not sure how to hold my  
face when I dance:  
In an expression of  
determination or euphoria?  
And how should I look at my  
partner: in her eyes  
Or at her body? Should I  
mirror the rhythm of her hips,

Or should I take the lead? I  
hear Jimi Hendrix  
Was also unsure in dance  
despite being beautiful  
And especially attuned. Most  
black people know this  
About him. He understood  
the rhythm of a delta  
Farmer on guitar in a juke  
joint circa 1933, as well  
As the rhythm of your  
standard bohemian on guitar  
In a New York apartment  
amid daydreams of jumping

Through windows, ballads of  
footwork, Monk orchestras,  
Miles with strings. Whatever.  
I'm just saying,  
I don't know how to hold  
myself when I dance. Do  
you?



# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

We suppose Ms. Dickinson is  
like the abandoned  
Lover of Orpheus & too, that  
she loved to masturbate  
Whispering lonely dark blue  
lullabies to Death.  
Because Galway Kinnell  
writes of Saint Francis

Whose touch made a sow  
ecstatic, consider  
How it would be to make  
every creature shudder  
In orgasm. If you got one of  
your paws on a black-  
Bird, you'd see the blackbird  
shift & shatter like  
A vessel of ink. If you  
brushed the ear of a stranger,  
Her jaw & eyes & fingers  
would clench on a dark  
Blue feeling. If, like the bear  
in a deep image poem,

You got a paw on a fish in a  
river, you would feel  
The fish convulse like the  
flesh flooded with blood  
And the dark blue crush of  
touching yourself to Death.



# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Probably, ghosts are allergic  
to us. Our uproarious  
Breathing & ruckus. Our  
eruptions, our disregard  
For dust. Small worlds  
unwhirl in the corners of our  
homes

After death. Our warriors,  
weirdos, antiheroes, our sirs,  
Sires, our sighers,  
sidewinders & whiners,  
winos,

And wonders become dust. I  
know a few of the dead.

I remember my sister's last  
hoorah. I remember

The horror of her head on a  
pillow. For a long time

The numbers were balanced.

The number alive equal

To the number in graves.  
After a very long time  
The bones become dust again  
& the dust  
After a long time becomes  
dirt & the dirt becomes soil  
And the soil becomes grain  
again. This bitter earth is a  
song  
Clogging the mouth before it  
is swallowed or spat out.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Maxine Waters, being of fire,  
being of sword  
Shaped like a silver tongue.  
Cauldron, siren,  
Black as tarnation, black as  
the consciousness  
Of a black president's wife,  
black as his black tie

Tuxedo beside his black wife  
in room after room  
Of whiteness. My  
grandmother's name had  
water  
In it too, Water maker. I have  
wept listening  
To Aretha Franklin sing  
Precious Lord. I have placed  
My thumb on the tongue of a  
black woman  
With an unbreakable voice. I  
love your mouth,

Flood gate, storm door, you  
are black as the gap

In Baldwin's teeth, you are  
black as a Baldwin speech.

I love how your blackness  
leaves them in the dark.

I love how even your sound-  
bite leaves a mark.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

For her last birthday I found  
in a used New Jersey  
Toy store, a six inch Amiri  
Baraka action figure  
With three different outfits:  
an elaborately colored  
Dashiki with afro pick; a  
black linen Leninist getup,

And a sports coat with elbow  
patches & wool Kangol.

Accessories include an ink  
pen & his father's pistol.

If you dip him in bathwater,  
he will leak

The names of his abandoned  
children. Pull a string,

He sings "Preface to a

Twenty Volume Suicide  
Note"

Sweeter than the sweetest alto  
to ever sing



In the Boys Choir of Harlem.  
The store clerk tried  
Selling me the actual twenty  
volume note LeRoi Jones  
Wrote the night before  
Baraka put a bullet in him.  
I would've bought it. But I  
had no room in my suitcase.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

A brother versed in  
ideological & material  
swagger  
Seeks dime ass trill bitch  
starved enough to hang  
Doo-ragged in smoke she can  
smell & therefore inhale

And therefore feel. Must ride  
shotgun pouring fountains  
Of bass upon the landscape.  
Must be fat assed, fearless,  
And God-fearing, an  
ancestral insurgent, clean  
As new money, a  
cryptographer, a storyteller,  
A glossy sleeve. There will  
be a jewelry of wooing.  
There will be stacks of folded  
longing. Amid twilight  
Verbiage in parking lots  
smelling of live wire, liquor

Hot air & fire: accompany a  
brother. Shout outs to vixens  
And bitches out there  
twerking for fucks in Bluff  
Estates,  
Washington Park, Star Light,  
Shop Road, Joe Frazier,  
Harlem Street: this is daddy's  
boy. Who want it?

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

But there never was a black  
male hysteria:

As if you weren't the spouse  
of Toni Morrison,

Forced by love to watch her  
flower, as well as

Literally expand. The locks of  
her hair prevented

Your skin from ever touching  
her skin. You never  
Smelled the nape of her neck,  
though you glimpsed  
It when her head cocked to  
illuminate paper. As if  
Everything was a tool or  
weapon. Often you offered  
Your measure, but she  
preferred her own song.  
As if to make your blackness  
more strange,  
More elaborate, more  
characteristic, fine-tuned

And refined. Soaphead  
Church, Empire State, Guitar,  
Gideon, Son. The hysteria of  
being multiplied & divided  
In your lover's mind until you  
go out of your mind.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Our sermon today concerns  
the dialectic  
Blessings in transgression &  
transcendence.  
We're on the middle floor  
where the darkness  
We bury is equal to the  
lightness we intend.



We stand in the valley & go  
to our knees  
On the mountain. One rope  
pulls a body down  
And into earth, the other pulls  
up & after stars.  
To be divided is to be  
multiplied. Let us  
Ponder how it is that you & I  
have remained  
Alive. Mississippi & all the  
seas bound to sky by rain,  
The root & reach of all the  
trees. When the wound

Is deep, the healing is heroic.  
Suffering and  
Ascendance require the same  
work. Our sermon  
Today sets the beauty of sin  
against the purity of dirt.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Something in the metaphor of  
the bow

Which is never close enough  
to see the arrow

Hit its mark. I remain a  
mystery to my father.

My father remains a mystery  
to me.

Christianity is a religion built  
around a father  
Who does not rescue his son.  
It is the story  
Of a son whose father is a  
ghost. No one  
Mentions Jesus' sister.  
Nothing is written  
About her. She had no  
children, she was in her  
Forties the first time she  
turned water into wine.  
A late bloomer, she began a  
small wine business

And traveled all over the  
world selling the wine.

Her name was the name of  
the wine.

I don't recall the name of the  
wine.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

An old woman looks at the  
rows of clothes  
She will never wear again.  
Beneath the clothes  
Are high & low high heels,  
office & casual flats,  
Sandals, & sneakers covered  
in dust while above

The rows of clothes is a shelf  
of tropic, exotic,  
Cryptic, elegiac, futuristic  
Sunday hats amassed  
Over many decades shopping  
wherever a woman  
Buys such hats. The feathers  
stand like flags  
In an overpopulated bird  
country where almost  
Every export is covered or  
stuffed with feathers;  
Where birds to survive  
disguise themselves as hats.

The old woman with a mess  
of feathers in her care  
Is as lovely as she was long  
ago when she was known  
To wear, every night, a  
different feather behind her  
ear.



**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Maybe I was too hard on  
Derek Walcott.

In preschool while I lay on a  
nylon cot

In a church basement staring  
at God knows

What, I was not asleep when  
the old deacon

Snuck downstairs to let the  
two sisters  
Watching over us lay hands  
against his advances.  
His crown was haloed in  
gray, but eyebrows  
And eyelashes swirled black  
as calligraphy  
Around his gaze. “Cut it out,”  
I’d hear the girl  
With plump, plum lips say.  
He wore a silver  
Bracelet, he spoke with a  
radiant sway,

Everywhere he was known to  
pray a prayer  
So blood-filled & persuasive  
some listeners  
Were said to fever, kneel,  
beg, break, levitate.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

On some level, I'm always  
full of Girl Scout cookies  
In the land of a failed  
landlord with a people of  
color  
Complex. On some level  
every action is an affirmation

Of personality. In the near  
empty subway car  
I watched a brother dance on  
the ceiling, spin  
On the subway pole like a  
stripper, twirl like an inverted  
Ballerina on the parallel bars.  
I had no money  
To give him. I was going to  
the party as Will Smith  
In the first half of the  
*Hancock* movie: aloof, gifted,  
Fucked up. I saw the shadows  
of planes gallop

Over buildings. I saw five  
white girls side by side  
On a park bench, almost  
synchronized taking selfies  
Of themselves taking selfies  
together in the land  
Of a failed landlord with a  
people of color complex.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

America, you just wanted  
change is all, a return  
To the kind of awe  
experienced after beholding a  
reign  
Of gold. A leader whose  
metallic narcissism is a  
reflection

Of your own. You share a  
fantasy with Trinidad  
James, who said, “Gold all in  
my chain, gold all in my ring,  
Gold all in my watch” & if  
you know what I’m talking  
About, your gold is the  
yellow of “Lemonade” by  
Gucci

Mane: “Yellow rims, yellow  
big booty, yellow bones,  
Yellow Lambs, yellow MP’s,  
yellow watch.” Like no



Culture before us, we relate  
the way the descendants  
Of the raped relate to the  
descendants of their rapists.  
May your restlessness come  
at last to rest, constituents  
Of Midas. I wish you the  
opposite of what Neruda said  
Of lemons. May all the gold  
you touch burn, rot & rust.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

You know how when the  
light you splatter spreads  
Across her back like wings  
tattooed elaborately one  
evening

In an ink-shop beside a river,  
how with the raw blood

Settling again into the meat  
you are you slump backwards  
Half thinking it is more  
falling than slumping, more  
heartbreak

Than release & how maybe  
it's the wings that are real  
Or that will become real  
when you are dust, Money,  
When you have slipped again  
into the black husk

That is not a black husk at  
all? That's the feeling

Of her name in my mouth. It  
is like reaching a town  
Bruised by headlights after  
too long in the darkness,  
Like the feeling of one  
question flush against  
another,  
The feeling of wings clasping  
the back of the body,  
The feeling of wings clapping  
wind along the spine.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

If you have never felt what is  
fluid

In a woman run warm along  
your thighs

And testicles, Mister Trumpet  
if you do not know

The first man was in fact a  
woman whose clit

Grew so swollen with longing  
it hung like a finger  
Pointing toward the lover  
stirring her meadows  
Mister Trumpet what the fuck  
do you know  
You are lonely because you  
could never unhitch  
Your mother's terrifying  
radiant woe  
I mean my mother here she  
the crazy bitch in me  
She the way I weep she the  
way I break she manly

Trumpet I can't speak for you  
but men like me  
Who have never made love to  
a man will always be  
Somewhere in the folds of  
our longing ashamed of it





# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Rilke ends his sonnet  
“Archaic Torso of Apollo”  
saying  
“You must change your life.”  
James Wright ends “Lying  
In a Hammock at William  
Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island,

Minnesota” saying “I have  
wasted my life.” Ruth Stone  
ends

“A Moment” saying “You do  
not want to repeat my life.”

A minute seed with a giant  
soul kicking inside it at the  
end

And beginning of life. After  
the opening scene where  
A car bomb destroys the  
black detective’s family, there  
are

Several scenes of our hero at  
the edge of life. A shootout  
In an African American Folk  
Museum, a shootout  
In the middle of an interstate  
rest stop parking lot,  
A barn shootout endangering  
the farm life. I live a life  
That burns a hole through  
life, that leaves a scar for life,  
That makes me weep for  
another life. Define life.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Goddamn, so this is what it  
means to have a leader  
You despise, the racists said  
when the president  
Was black and I'll be damned  
if I ain't saying it too.  
Is this a mandate for  
whiteness, virility,

sovereignty,  
Stupidity, an idiot's threats &  
gangsta narcissisms threading  
Every shabby sentence his  
trumpet constructs? You  
Are not allowed to say shit  
about Mexicans when you  
Ain't actually got any  
Mexican friends—I bet  
you've never  
Been invited to a family  
dinner. You ain't allowed to  
deride

Women when you've never  
wept in front of a woman  
That wasn't your mother.  
America's struggle with itself  
Has always had people like  
me at the heart of it. You  
can't  
Grasp your own hustle, your  
blackness, you can't grasp  
Your own pussy, your black  
pussy dies for touch.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Probably all our encounters  
are existential  
Jambalaya. Which is to say,  
can a nigga survive?  
Would you rather have  
happiness or freedom,  
Pain or boredom? Would you  
rather hitch

Your rotten rope to a wagon  
or hitch your rotten  
Wagon to a leash? After  
blackness was invented  
People began seeing ghosts.  
When my father  
Told me I was one of God's  
chosen ones,  
He was only half bullshitting.  
Probably each twilight  
Is as different as a father is  
from his son.  
Something happens  
everywhere in this country



Every day. Someone is  
praying, someone is prey.  
Probably blindness has a  
chewed heart

In its belly, or a gate opening  
upon another gate.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

I'm full of more water than a  
forest

And the adrenaline of a  
spooked horse.

But I'm a Time Lord. My  
armor is flesh

And spirit. I carry a flag  
bearing a different

Nation on each side. I carry  
money bearing  
The face of my assassins. I'm  
good company  
And pretty fun for a little  
while. A whirlwind,  
I tend to repeat my mistakes.  
I'm a camera  
With no cameraman, my own  
personal  
Assistant & assassin. The  
truth is easy to see  
When it's before you, but it's  
deceptive

Otherwise. I am selfish. I am  
a religion.

You are a religion. Together  
we are a religion.

My love is oppressive. I'm a  
Time Lord.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

But there never was a black  
male hysteria:

As if you weren't the lover of  
Langston Hughes,

Forced to hold what you  
knew of his measure

Secret until it drove you mad  
enough to cruise

The dive bars reciting the  
poems he wrote  
About you but never  
published or spoke:  
Lines covered in bruises &  
stars, almost  
Unhinged lyrics. The man  
was high yellow  
In public, afraid of himself,  
pretending his music  
Was material when in fact, it  
was the opposite:  
Like a breath that comes so  
quickly you know

You're breathing ether: either  
atmospheric

And anonymous as the air  
against a window,

Or indefinite & mute as a  
curtain of wind.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Because he cannot distinguish  
a blackbird

From a crow or raven, it's all  
the more

Brazen when the autocrat  
kisses a cat.

Because he's a kettle of oil  
about to boil,



It's all the more touching  
when the despot  
Pets a pet. *The skin breaks so  
easily*, he says,  
But he cries it softly. Because  
he's someone  
Who can't distinguish a horse  
from a zebra  
Without the stripes, he can't  
describe himself  
Without looking in a mirror.  
Baller. Bawler.  
Dentures. Makeup. He's  
almost too flakey

To be the villain. Because  
he's someone  
Who cannot distinguish meat  
from malarkey.  
Anything close to his mouth  
gets bitten.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Sometimes the father almost  
sees looking  
At the son, how handsome  
he'd be if half  
His own face was made of the  
woman he loved.  
He almost sees in his boy's  
face, an openness

Like a wound before it scars,  
who he was

Long before his name was  
lost, the trail

To his future on earth long  
before he arrived.

To be dead & alive at the  
same time.

A son finds his father  
handsome because

The son can almost see how  
he might

Become superb as the scar  
above a wound.

And because the son can see  
who he was  
Long before he had a name,  
the trace of  
His future on earth long  
before he arrived.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

It feels sadder when a black  
person says Nigga  
Because it sounds like  
Nigger. It feels sadder  
When a brother or sister says  
Nigga because  
It sounds like Nigger. I have  
never heard either

Word in the mouth of my  
mother or father.

Once I had a lover who said  
neither word

Out loud. I used neither word  
for years.

It feels sadder to hear a nigga  
say Nigga when

It sounds like Nigger.

Nothing saddens me more  
Than Nigger, one whose  
master has no Lord.

No word leaves me more  
graced by shame.

You will always be my nigga,  
I say to the mirror  
Because it is a dark water the  
temperature  
Of a blade, the yellow flower  
stalking a dream.



# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

The subject is allowed up to  
twenty years  
After leaving the home of his  
or her parents  
To reconcile all but the  
darkest of infractions.  
The deeper the wound the  
more heroic

The healing. As the story of  
Aeneas is *The Aeneid*  
And the story of Odysseus,  
*The Odyssey*, the name  
Of the subject is as  
mysterious as the journey.  
The subject must speak as if  
he or she is witness  
To a story no one who has  
lived in the entire  
Tangled future & history of  
the world has told.  
What if it were possible to  
make a noise so lovely

People would pay to hear it  
continuously for a century  
Or so. Unbelievably, Miles  
Davis & John Coltrane  
Standing within inches of  
each other didn't explode.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

The song must be cultural,  
confessional, clear

But not obvious. It must be  
full of compassion

And crows bowing in a  
vulture's shadow.

The song must have six sides  
to it & a clamor

Of voltas. The song must turn  
on the compass  
Of language like a tangle of  
wire endowed  
With feeling. The notes must  
tear & tear,  
There must be a love for the  
minute & minute,  
There must be a record of  
witness & daydream.  
Where the heart is torn or  
feathered & tarred,  
Where death is undone, time  
diminished,

The song must hold its own  
storm & drum,  
And shed a noise so lovely it  
is sung at sunset  
Weddings, baptisms &  
beheadings henceforth.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

A remix of “Pony” by  
Ginuwine plays  
While half a dozen beautiful  
black men  
Strut onstage wearing  
translucent black  
Housecoats then pause with  
their backs

To us before a slow twerking  
as half a dozen

Beautiful black women walk  
onstage in sharp

Alabaster tuxedos and  
surgical masks

But we can see the weeping  
inside them.

A white audience member, it  
may be a man

Or woman of any age, is  
invited up to crow

In the middle of a circle the  
dancers make.



I have sent tickets of this  
show to my white friend  
Who is determined to write  
about black people  
And to my black friends  
determined to police him.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

The umpteenth thump on the  
rump of a badunkadunk  
Stumps us. The lunk, the  
chump, the hunk of plunder.  
The umpteenth horny, honky  
stump speech pumps  
A funky rumble over air. The  
umpteenth slump

In our humming democracy, a  
bumble bureaucracy

With teeny tiny wings too  
small for its ruffled,  
Dumpling of a body.

Humpty-Dumpy. Frumpy  
Suit. The umpteenth honk of  
hollow thunder.

The umpteenth *Believe me*.

The umpteenth grumpy,  
Jumpy retort. Chump change,  
casino game, tuxedo,  
Teeth bleach, stump speech.  
Junk science. Junk bond.

Junk country, stump speech.  
The umpteenth boast  
Stumps our toe. The  
umpteenth falsehood stumps  
Our elbows & eyeballs, our  
Nos, Whoahs, wows, woes.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Drive like fifteen miles along  
a national parkway  
Where the confederate statues  
have been painted  
White so often they will  
probably look like ghosts  
Or men covered in sheets at  
the speed you pass them.

Join the bottleneck at the  
mouth of the tunnel running  
Beneath fathoms of the river.  
You may recall a bomb  
Was set off there some years  
ago: Caution tape,  
A rise in cargo takes, a till of  
bodies bobbed at the piers.  
How much have black people  
been paid for naming  
Emmett Till in poems? How  
much is owed? Never mind.  
Never fear, the tunnel under  
the uproarious river

Around our lives has been  
repaired. When you exit,  
Take the second right toward  
the oldest part of town,  
You will find me bearing a  
sign on one of the corners  
there.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

After you turn off Shop Road  
where the flag leans  
Forward like an old goose  
contemplating her next step,  
Ride for another half hour or  
so beyond Bluff Estates,  
Star Light & Harlem Street to  
find inside



What is Betty Joe's Fish &  
Chicken Shack by day,  
A mobilized after hours juke  
joint full of the kinds  
Of dancers & drinkers, loners  
& lovers who have  
Probably never listened to a  
poem or banjo at length.  
In this we may be alike,  
Assassin, you & me: we  
believe  
We want what's best for  
humanity. I'll probably  
survive

Dancing with the kinds of  
people who must find refuge  
Among the sweat & rancor of  
a Fish & Chicken Shack  
But Assassin, they'll  
probably murder you. Do you  
ask,  
Why you should die for me if  
I will not die for you? I do.



# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

This one goes out to  
DeMascas Jackson,  
Who named his beloved pit  
bull “DeMarcus”  
Because he wanted a twin &  
named each part  
Of his body, “nigga”: his ten  
dirty danglers,

His fifteen-year-old bully  
elbows & regions  
Of his mouth running  
between lunch & bells.  
“I bit that nigga,” he said  
once of his bitten lip  
Over cafeteria hair in a salad  
of withered lettuce  
And shaved carrots. When I  
called him “DeMarcus”  
In the heat of a game, “That’s  
my nigga,” he said  
Before shoving me into the  
same fence I’d stand at

An hour later holding my  
father's crippled pistol,  
With no bullets & no wooden  
handgrip, so I held  
A little frame of metal in my  
fist when I pointed it.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Because a law was passed  
that said there was no worth  
To adjectives, companies  
began stringing superlatives  
Before unchanged products  
manufactured by men  
Who know how to make  
money, but nothing else.

After a law was passed that  
said there was no worth  
To adjectives, the afflicted  
became addicted to property.  
Because they passed a law  
that said there was no worth  
To adjectives, all the news  
was as bilateral as a headline  
In the sand. A racehorse  
became a horse, a horse race  
Became a race. The race was  
made of various adverbs  
And adversaries. The  
relationship between future



And pasture was lost.  
Because a law was passed,  
There was no worth to  
adjectives, there was no word  
For the part of the pasture  
between departure & the past.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

But there never was a black  
male hysteria  
Breaking & entering wearing  
glee & sadness  
And the light grazing my  
teeth with my lighter  
To the night with the flame  
like a blade cutting

Me slack along the corridors  
with doors of offices  
Orifices vomiting tears & fire  
with my two tongues  
Loose & shooing under a  
high top of language  
In a layer of mischief so  
traumatized trauma  
Delighted me beneath the  
tremendous  
Stupendous horrendous  
undiscovered stars  
Burning where I didn't know  
how to live

My friends were all the  
wounded people

The black girls who held their  
own hands

Even the white boys who  
grew into assassins

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Any day now you will have  
the ability to feed the name  
Of anyone into an engine &  
your long lost half brother  
As well as whoever else  
possesses a version of his  
name

Will appear before your face  
in bits of pixels & data  
Displaying his monikers (like  
Gitmo for trapping, Bang  
Bang for banging, Dopamine  
for dope or brains),  
The country he would most  
like to visit (Heaven),  
His nine & middle finger  
pointing towards the arms  
Of the last trill trees of Bluff  
Estates & the arms  
Of the slim fly girls the color  
of trees cut down & shaped

Into something a nail  
penetrates. I admit, right now:  
Technology is insufficient,  
but you will find them  
Flashing grins & money in  
the photos they took  
Before they were ghosts  
when you click [here](#)  
tomorrow.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

This word can be the  
difference between knowing  
And thinking. It's the name  
people of color call  
Themselves on weekends &  
the name colorful  
People call their enemies &  
friends. It used to be



The word for the absence of  
inheritance. Before that  
It was the word for the feel of  
burlap. When Lincoln  
Witnessed a slave auction in  
his boyhood, it was  
The first word to enter his  
mind. Before it evoked  
A kind of bewildering  
mothering, it evoked Job's  
Afro silvering with suffering.  
It is the difference  
Between cursive, tantrum,  
assault & pepper spray.

It is the title of that absurd  
three-act play  
Where the actors say nothing  
but “Who can say”  
And who can say “Who can  
say” for two hours straight.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Why someone would crowd  
into a church is beyond me.  
I would remodel Alabama.  
Why there is a science  
For God is beyond me the  
way the word *wallop*  
Is beyond me. And when my  
id is arrested, I am usually

Thinking of the tragi-comic  
implications of the word  
*Mall* & eyeballing midriffs.

Why youth seems to be  
My only requisite for beauty  
now is beyond me.

The interiors of the words  
*botox* & *toy box* are beyond  
me too.

History is beyond me. I will  
need a black suit & umbrella  
now.

The carpet along the aisles  
will be so thick, our shoes

Will never touch the floor.  
Limousines tinted with  
flowers

Will be parked in front of the  
church. Ma will say “Good  
God,  
Good God,” dipping money  
in her eyes. But why  
Give God your money? Why  
give good money to Death?

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

From now on I will do my  
laundry early Sunday  
Mornings when all the young  
tenants are hung-  
Over or worn out, all the old  
people in church,  
And the elementary parents  
parked at playgrounds

With their children inside the  
“Play At Your Own  
Risk” sign on the fence. I  
tried to tell the woman  
Who sent me songs, it's  
departure that makes  
company  
Hard to master. I tried to tell  
her I'm a muser, a miser  
With time. I love poems more  
than money & pussy.  
From now on I will eat  
brunch alone. I believe

Eurydice is actually the poet,  
not Orpheus. Her muse  
Has his back to her with his  
ear bent to his own heart.  
As if what you learn making  
love to yourself matters  
More than what you learn  
when loving someone else.



**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Otherwise home is the mess  
laid bare,  
The less made air, the  
addressless there  
Less clear, where the wax in  
my left ear makes  
Half of what's said unsaid, on  
the air the mute

Newshounds ponder the  
tweets of a bullhorn,  
A rat in the cabinet beside the  
liquor. Anger  
Is a form of heartbreak, yes it  
is. If you can  
Give the world half of what  
Nina Simone gave it,  
You will have lived an  
exceptional life. All you  
Have to say is, tomorrow  
you'll try to be better.  
Like a mother lovingly  
calling her son, a son

Of a bitch. My lover never  
believed I held a gun  
In my mouth. So I talk to  
myself like a witness.  
I'd mutter *whatever*,  
*whatever* forever otherwise.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

I thought we might as well  
sing the fables of sea  
To fill our mouths before  
sailing out to whale.

I thought we might sing as  
well of the feeling  
Of sea moving about the  
whale like a coat.

The color of water is always  
the temperature  
Of a mirror. I thought we  
might drown  
Our reflections in a swaying  
like our songs  
Of mother wit & mother woe,  
our toasts  
With the water a deep dark  
blue, an almost  
Indigo we paled from the well  
before sail.  
Whale-road is a kenning for  
sea. Time-machine

Is a kenning for the mind.  
Alive is a kenning  
For the electrified. I thought  
we might sing  
Of the wire wound round the  
wound of feeling.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

I'd played *silence* but later  
realized my word  
Of the year was *quiet*.  
Especially the chasm  
Of quiet in *cataclysm*, one of  
those scrabble words  
Played but once or twice in a  
life. Maybe scrabble

Is a portmanteau of *scream* &  
*babble* or *scrap*

And *bramble*. Sometimes it is  
best to sting,

Sometimes it's better to  
scramble away. *Sometimes*

Is a good answer to any  
existential question.

Moving through the tangle of  
bramble on your way

To scrap with Death at the  
pier, remember to sing

A battle song. The one I've  
prepared goes this way:



*Come & meet me in the  
water, swim the twilight by &  
by.*

*Come meet me in the water,  
swim the mirror of the skies*

*Come & meet me in the water  
by & by. I sing it every day.*

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Suppose you could speak  
nothing but money  
And acrimony. Suppose all  
the sunflowers  
Van Gogh destroyed, all the  
stones in Virginia's  
Pockets & all the stones  
Georgia painted as vaginas

Were simply a matter of  
making something greater  
Than money. Prince taught us  
a real man has  
A beautiful woman in him.  
Suppose we cannot  
Forget what happened in  
Money. Suppose  
You're someone who  
celebrates Thomas  
Jefferson's  
Birthday. Suppose he was  
someone whose love

For a black woman was  
blinded by blackness,  
Hers & his, yours & mine. I  
ain't mad at you,  
Assassin. It's not the bad  
people who are brave  
I fear, it's the good people  
who are afraid.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

One of the most amazing  
things about me is  
I know how to cut my own  
hair. I learned to do it  
After my father moved away.  
So I've done it  
For years, traced the shape of  
my thinking

With a motor blade to rewrite  
the hairline

A punctuated sentence, a  
handful of verbiage,

I could offer a poem for each  
clipped hair

And the mole behind my ear  
& the line I fear

Above my nape, the rope  
burn there, the wish

To snip the jugular is simple  
fear, I wish to remain

Here where you will love me  
simply because

Of what I say: one of the  
most amazing things  
About me is: I know how to  
cut my own hair.  
I learned to do it after my  
father moved away.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

My mother says I am  
beautiful inside  
And out. But my lover never  
believed it.

My lover never believed I  
held her name  
In my mouth. My mother  
calls me her silver



Bullet. Her mercy pill, the  
metal along her spine.

I am my mother's bewildered  
shadow.

My lover's bewildering  
shadow is mine.

I have wept listening to a  
terrible bewildering

Music break over & through  
& break down

A black woman's voice. I talk  
to myself

Like her sister. Assassin, you  
are a mystery

To me, I say to my reflection  
sometimes.

You are beautiful because of  
your sadness, but

You would be more beautiful  
without your fear.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

A brother versed in spiritual  
calisthenics  
And cowboy quiet seeks  
funny, lonesome,  
Speculative or eye-glassed  
lass. Shopaholics  
Welcomed. Also Prince  
fanatics, museum

Cashiers, & pragmatists  
conversant (lipstick  
Or no lipstick) with a hipness  
substantial  
Enough to contract around a  
muscle as well  
As expand around a child.  
Fear of boredom is ideal.  
Fear of dereliction is okay.  
Love for the willy-nilly  
And Willie Nelson,  
welcomed. Crushes,  
depressions,

And unsightly hesitations are  
okay. Must freely  
Expend humor & grace.  
Amid long Sundays,  
Long drives, long movies, &  
school conferences,  
Occasional acts of disregard  
or guardedness are okay.



**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

Glad someone shot deserved  
to be shot finally,  
George Wallace. After you  
send your basket of balms  
And berries for the girls the  
bomb buried in Birmingham,  
After you add your palms to  
the psalms & palm covered

Caskets of the girls the bomb  
buried in Birmingham,  
I'll muster a pinch of prayer  
for you. You are the blind  
Protagonist of a story that  
begins, "In my previous life  
My work involved returning  
runaway slaves to slavery,"  
And ends with the image of a  
black nurse pushing  
Your old ass in a wheelchair.  
Can you guess what black  
Folk passing empty cotton  
fields feel, George Wallace?



I damn you with the opposite  
of that feeling. I keep  
thinking

I'm confessing for the first  
time, the reason I fear you,  
And you keep asking why  
I'm telling this old story  
again.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

You have a gun but to use the  
bullet

You decide your wife, having  
snuggled it

Under her tongue, should  
then smuggle it

Into your pie hole but she  
swallows it.

You have a gun but to use the  
poison

You have your son dip a rose  
in venom

So strong the smell alone will  
kill someone,

But the first to die smelling it  
is your son.

You have a gun but to use the  
dagger

You decide your daughter  
should dangle

It beneath her dress. She  
refuses to endanger

Her self-respect. You need to  
find goons,  
Wranglers, wire, gin,  
ingenuity, cotton gins,  
You need the constitution.  
You have a gun.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

When I am nowhere near a  
ledge or knife covered  
In a corridor of fever colored  
carpet or catching rain  
Bead upon the morning  
headlights hungering some  
crash

To crack & blacken me  
before a train full of women  
With nose rings & thigh  
boots, the curved ass of a  
mother

With her toddler & the rain  
still following the hills  
And shoulders of parts of  
Maryland & New Jersey,  
And the oncoming trains  
passing inches from head-on  
Headlong into Newark where  
I almost escaped this path,

Before remembering the thrill  
coloring even today's  
Melancholy delay asleep,  
awake, the wild haired  
woman

Smiling on the stairs before  
fading, a song in the ear  
Like the broken phone booth  
I passed in the Village  
Beside a puddle of what  
could have been crushed  
tomatoes

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

I cut myself on some glass in  
the water.

I was out driving around the  
stars.

I was chopping wood out  
back.

I was at the abattoir grabbing  
a snack.



I was grabbing my phone in the truck.

I was smoking below the boat deck.

I was practicing electric guitar.

I was listening to aspiring laughter.

I was on the toilet with a magazine.

I was home awaiting a limousine.

I was bargaining with the mortician.

I was laying a great  
foundation.

I was practicing trumpet  
while drowning.

I was grinding my hooves to  
nails.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

When MLK was shot his  
blood changed to change  
Wherever it hit the floor. Like  
the others,  
Jackson & Abernathy  
gathered a few of the coins  
For themselves. A few sank  
into the pockets

Of the detectives & forensic  
scientists, reporters.

A maid sold the penny she  
found for a pretty penny  
On the black market. It is in a  
display case beside

The bullets Du Bois kept in  
the gun under his bed.

Bird got so high on horn, he  
disappeared. X grew

Large as a three hundred year  
old tree colonizing

The landscape. In the game of  
“chicken” two drivers

Speed towards each other &  
if the one who is chicken  
Does not swerve, both drivers  
may die in the crash.

This country is mine as much  
as an orphan's house is his.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Later the white boy we once  
beat like a drum  
Died after crashing his  
Camaro around a bend  
Off Shop Road. He was an  
asshole. Ask the baby  
Black boys he bullied at  
Robert E. Lee Middle School

Where the Robert E. Lee  
statue was painted white  
So often over the years it  
looked like someone  
Covered in a sheet of glue. I  
would not have liked  
To attend a middle school  
named after Emmett Till  
Or for that matter, any  
murdered black person.  
When I was the age of  
Emmett Till, I reckoned  
MLK was an old man at the  
age he was killed.

I am old enough now to know  
the drum, though beaten,  
Is not an instrument of  
violence. Nor is a banjo  
Or whistle. I'm sorry I missed  
the white boy's funeral.



# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

It was discovered the best  
way to combat

Sadness was to make your  
sadness a door.

Or make it an envelope of  
wireless chatter

Or wires pulled from the  
radio tape recorder

Your mother bought you for  
Christmas in 1984.

If you think a hammer is the  
only way to hammer

A nail, you ain't thought of  
the nail correctly.

My problem was I'd decided  
to make myself

A poem. It made me sweat in  
private selfishly.

It made me bleed, bleep &  
weep for health.

As a poem I could show my  
children the man

I dreamed I was, my mother  
& fathers, my half  
Brothers, the lovers I lost.  
Just morning, as a poem,  
I asked myself if I was going  
to weep today.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

But there never was a black  
male hysteria:  
As if being called *Nigger*  
never makes you  
Disappear. As if the fear of  
other people  
Never makes you levitate. As  
if the nuzzle

Of a bullet can't poke a hole  
in your breath.

As if you cannot drink from  
the river

When into the river you  
disappear & water

Floods the hole in your  
breath. You make shit,

You piss, you calculate  
mistakes, you can turn

Stone into metal, you are able  
to breathe wind. Air

Touches your skin like  
medicine & you disappear.

It's crazy. It's as if you are  
not being hunted

By hysteria. It's as if your  
death is never death.

You appear, you appear to  
disappear, you disappear.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

In a parallel world where all  
Dr. Who's  
Are black, I'm the doctor  
who knows no god  
Is more powerful than Time.  
In a parallel world  
Where all the doctors who are  
black see cops

Box black boys in cop cars &  
caskets, I'm

The doctor who blacks out  
whenever he sees

A police box. In a parallel  
world where doctors

Who box cops in caskets cry  
doing their jobs,

I disappear inside a skull  
that's larger on the inside.

Question: if, in a parallel  
world where every Dr.

Who was black, you were the  
complex Time Lord,



When & where would you  
explore? My answer is,  
A brother has to know how to  
time travel & doctor  
Himself when a knee or shoe  
stalls against his neck.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Over-aged, over grave,  
overlooked brother  
Seeks adjoining variable  
female structure  
Covered in chocolate,  
cinnamon, molasses,  
Freckled, sandy or sunset  
colored flesh

Expressively motored by a  
blend of intellectual  
Fat & muscle while several  
complex & simple  
Emotional frequencies pulse  
along her veins.

Must be a careful &  
moderately self-indulgent  
Cinematographer, modestly  
self-conscious, reasonably  
Self-important, spiritually  
self-educated, marginally  
Self-destructive. Must be  
willing to raise orchids

Or kids in a land of assassins;  
willing to wield a fluid  
Expression in the war her  
lover wages against himself,  
And a silver tongue in the  
war we wage against death.

**AMERICAN SONNET FOR  
MY PAST AND FUTURE  
ASSASSIN**

I only intend to send word to  
my future

Self perpetuation is a war  
against Time

Travel is essentially the aim  
of any religion

Is blindness the color one  
sees under water

Breath can be overshadowed  
in darkness

The benefits of blackness can  
seem radical

Black people in America are  
rarely compulsive

Hi-fivers believe joy is a  
matter of touching others

Is forbidden the only word  
God doesn't know

You have to heal yourself to  
truly be heroic

You have to think once a day  
of killing your self

Awareness requires a touch  
of blindness & self  
Importance is the only word  
God knows  
To be free is to live because  
only the dead are slaves

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

In the saddest part of the  
story the brother says  
To the muse of his heartache,  
Don't you ever  
Come near my grave. The  
saddest scene is where  
The daughter's ghost says to  
the mother, Don't



Come near my grave. The  
frail speckled shell says  
To the shy yolk it meant to  
protect, but only held  
Captive, Don't you ever come  
near my grave.

The saddest part of the opera  
is where Frida says it  
To Diego. The saddest  
moment is where the gifted  
Says it to the gift giver & the  
moment where  
The present says it to  
yesterday: you have to love

me

Better. The moment where  
the prisoner says it

To the future & the pastor.

The saddest part is where

The dirt says it to the seeds in  
the flowers above the grave.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

I remember my sister's last  
hoorah.

She joined all the black  
people I'm tired of losing,  
All the dead from parts of  
Florida, Ferguson,  
Brooklyn, Charleston,  
Cleveland, Chicago,

Baltimore, wherever the  
names alive are  
Like the names in graves. I  
am someone  
With a good memory & better  
imagination.  
Can we really be friends if we  
don't believe  
In the same things, Assassin?  
Probably,  
Ghosts are allergic to us.  
Because we are dust,  
Don't you & I share a loss,  
don't we belong

Together, Brother, Sweetness,  
Sweetness,  
Sweetness? Poor, ragged  
Heart, blind, savage  
Heart, I've almost grown  
tired of talking to you.

# AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

When I am close enough, I  
am reminded  
Of the mythic orchid called  
Lorca's Breath.  
Named by Salvador Dalí a  
decade after the poet  
Was killed, the flower is said  
to sprout petals

The shade of a swollen moon  
but once or twice  
Before it dies. Also lost was  
the painting  
Dalí painted of Lorca's  
writing hand: a long  
Almost animal shadow  
crawling over land shaped  
Like a man with the body of a  
woman. A cuff  
Of celestial texture. A button  
of ruby. The orchid's  
Mouth is the shade of pussy,  
its leaves hang

As if listening to a lover  
whisper with her back  
To you. Rumor that this  
flower first appeared  
Near wherever Lorca is  
buried, I know to be untrue.



# Sonnet Index





The black poet would love to  
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But there never was a black  
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This one goes out to  
DeMascas Jackson  
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that said there was no worth  
But there never was a black  
male hysteria  
Any day now you will have  
the ability to feed the name

This word can be the  
difference between knowing  
Why someone would crowd  
into a church is beyond me  
From now on I will do my  
laundry early Sunday  
Otherwise home is the mess  
laid bare  
I thought we might as well  
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When MLK was shot his  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude for the support of the following journals: *The American Poetry Review*, *Baffler*, *Boston Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Indiana Review* (Ink Lit), *Kenyon Review*, *Literary Hub* (<http://lithub.com/tag/poems/>), *New England Review*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Poem-a-Day* (April

25, 2017,

[www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/ame-sonnet-my-past-and-future-assassin](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/ame-sonnet-my-past-and-future-assassin)), *Poetry*, *A Poetry Congeries*, and *Tin House*.

My gratitude for the support of the following institutions: the University of Pittsburgh, New York University, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

I can't begin to account for all the love and friendship that made these poems possible. I made you a book of poems. A special career-enabling thank-you to Paul Slovak.

Many years ago the poet Anthony Butts told me he was writing a book called *Male Hysteria*. I loved the title and its many possibilities. Alas, the book never came to be. Maybe I'm not even remembering the title correctly. Still think of you, Brother.

These poems owe tremendous gratitude to the great Wanda Coleman (1946–2013). When asked in an interview with Paul E. Nelson how she'd give an assignment for writing an American Sonnet she said:

First I would explain my process. Then I would invite my students to try it, overlaying their specific 1) issues (what the sonnet is about) 2) rhythms (places and devices often have them) 3) tones (shadings of attitude) 4) musical taste/preference (rock, classical, blues, etc.)—how to develop the minimal language to simultaneously encapsulate and signal each.

When asked for a definition she called the poems jazz sonnets “with certain properties— progression, improvisation, mimicry, etc.” and concluded, “I decided to have fun—to blow my soul.” American Sonnets Interview with Wanda Coleman—Global Voices Radio, Paul E. Nelson.

[www.globalvoicesradio.org/Americ](http://www.globalvoicesradio.org/Americ)



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**TERRANCE HAYES** is the author of *Lighthouse*, winner of the 2010 National Book Award and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His other books are *Wind in a Box*, *Hip Logic*, and

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