


I am the Almighty (and these are the Light Chasers)

(Two Part Testimony in A Major/D flat)

For Miles

Papa (A major -forte-steady tempo)

 The magician's key | is controlling the line | of vision | See | the breath is always there | but when it's pushed | just right | down the horn's bronze tunnel | --Voodoo |

White Bulbs flicker in anticipation | to feed | on this good-good-indigo burn | this *soul* | See | In Detroit | we riff Ruffin-esque | until | we dissolve down to a | Temptation-Strut |

And this **thunder** | clapping | between my fore finger and thumb | this | **pop** | batons the down-beat to drop | like the *crack* connecting | leather lash and flesh |

It startles the spot man | into sitting | straight | That was Ruffin's problem: | he jiggled | every time | he couldn't feel | the light | Though | credit where its due | Ruff sounded good beggin' |

Ruff | didn't set | the rhythms | he didn't compose himself | the way | I do | The curse of authentic genius | is the duty to pluck | shadow niggas up | to gig | in the good light

See | when you bring | the strut | the gravel in the solo | the turn | the magic | the this-and the that | then begging is just food | for their imagination |

And the spot man | is only a vessel | And I am never caged by his beam | If I leave | this stage | There is no show | Who do you think directs the light? |

See | The Bulbs are busy back slappin' | on spearing Moby Dick | They fail to realize | the nigga's swimming | away-- with the ship | Line of vision is a delicate balance | I call it the Monk's blend |

Ning (D flat - pianissimo)

In dark
I'd wait for the Boogeyman.

Papa

Sooooo
what.

So
what

When night hissed moonshine over our quilts,
he'd unwrap his boogie. Man.


Ning

I was eleven.

Suh-Hooo
what?

I'd tuck oyster shuckers beneath pillows
waiting to slice this Boogie Man!

Papa (*Crescendo -A Major – mezzo forte*)

 The law is jazz | They'll make you believe | you aren't entitled | to your solo | The judge sits on his perch | his gavel a drum stick | pounding the order | I turn my back | three quarters | and start wailing | twist the lament until the he knows | I'm ready to get on the record |

I blast my testimony | until it echoes through marble hallways | Brothas hear that horn | know they're going home | --to black bottomed paradise valleys | Guilt is of no use | One truth conquers the | other |

This horn's alchemy | commands the drummer to strike | Thunder-thump | if the prosecutor wants to jive | to tip-tin | to cauterize | restless juries | dares the guest sopranos | to ooze slippery | hymns |

Ning (*D flat – mezzo-pianissimo*)

My mother cries. Her tunnels still echo the melody of a cocksure boogie-man.

Papa

Soooooooo
what.

She denounced her father who feared Black shadows—"those hooded Moors boogie, man.

Soooooooo
what.

Blow: the onyx blues, crystallized on their lips. Run from his encore! Boogie-man!"

Soooooo
what.

Nanay's tongue was rich, like ruby juice dripping from a bruised hibiscus. Liquor for the heart-sore boogey man.

And *Boogie Tao* don't translate. *Nanay* two-stepped behind the brass of his conquistador boogie,

Man! His footsteps, smothered her alto, choked the *diwa* from her marrow. She swung to split this hardcore boogey!

Soooo
What!

Man--her breath is a decrescendo. She's learned to curve into the quiet. Her hushed *no* implores, *boogeyman*...

Sooo
what...


I don't have to look. I know. Nanay's eyes are closed too tight. A zombie chanting *IGNORE BOOGEYMAN*.

She wills me to absorb Papa as a rite of passage. But I'm a teller. My lips are your savior, Boogeyman.

So

What?

Papa (A Major – mezzo forte)

 Thin the roux | use chicken stock | It swallows smoother | That's the craft to polishing | midnight | till it gleams | until it wins | —judges | They got to see it | in everything | —the *this* and the *that* | Bring their wives for dinner | See | the mahogany | floors gleaming | See the French doors' polish | mimic an aged cognac's shine |

I can feel their unease | winding up on the drive | down the white-flown avenues | *There's the house* | where I collected my *Cracker Jack* prizes | They point | noting the Tudor next door | is sooted over |

My wife presides over the rising soufflé | takes their coats | They are bare | Primed to take me in | They've kneeled | clasped hands for me | begged | for this barbarian | buttoned back | by starched cotton | the memory of | the boll's pluck | still moans | in the fault lines of my palms |

I pull out the ladies' chairs | push them | up under crisp lace | Then I sit slowly | so they can gaze | across the minted lamb | catch the strands of the noose's braid | unwinding in my eyes |

Ning (Aside - Modulate – E flat – mezzo-pianissimo)

I must have been *your* mama in another life... you talk like it's my duty to wipe up your ego's aftermath.

Papa

Suh-Hoooo

What!

Papa (A Major-mezzo forte)

 Egos ignite marquees | That whiff of storm and tempest | rolls the niggas | in | We don't come to see | the meek | We don't stand outside | to watch magnolia trees set still | We never humdrum at the edge | of an unrippled lake |

Pockets shake | for the twist and crack of FIRE | And it's got to be crisp | Got to be | *CRISP* |

If the coat check girl | is going to get her | extra piece | the scotch has got to scorch | like napalm | crystallize jagged | down the tube of the throat |

Brothas are pushing *this--* | pulling *that* --all week | for the bread to make | the be-headed shrimp | jump up off the plate | and bite his tongue *back* |

Shadows| have GOT |to FEEL |every wound's echo |arced across your horn's bell |Got to drink| the reflection of your ache|—swish it then spit | cloudy|| yellow | into emptied highballs | so *their* fingers | can stay numb | enough to pick | that broom back up|—pop | that polish cloth | to the Bulb's impatient toe *tap| toe tap* |

Got to see it blooming | across your face | lips coiled | brows crouched in wait | for the downbeat |to hesitate| Got to see your head bob |swivel sideways | until the bounce closes you | into the mind's black space | your open hands push | newly birthed notes | free-falling | alit like autumn leaves | rising September sticky up | *UP* and *blow* the reckoning |

The famine | unlocks the wail from its cage| blowing--eyes shut| when the throb of the melody | gets too deep | Arch into| the squall |Drive the high| note until it slaps | the beat | back | around the | other way |

Until the piano's | got to trill |strings shuddering to slow the dissonance | vibrating soothed so we can wind | up and burn again|

My dear | docile don't sell tickets | Brothas | come to see the fists' grip | choke the stand up | out the bass | until its thrum lingers |

Ning (*D flat—mezzo-pianissimo*)


A spark singed my fingertips, then flickered, deciding whether to live in the breeze. I was sure it would fade into a ghost. But, it burned, orange, blue at its core. I was eleven, at home while he was stomping the clubs. I didn't want to drop that flame or purse my lips to blow it out with a *whoosh*.

I held it out. The fire leapt up the side of the sheers, *flickering brilliant, gingered scarlet*, mimicking the shimmer of a setting sun.

Other curtains begged for their own flames. It divided itself and spread, racing left and right, hissing combustion, burning like lines of sugar cane at harvest.

Motherfucker, if I'd had one more match--


Papa (*A Major-mezzo forte*)

 See| James Brown would fine a |shadow |Hundred dollars each missed note| each sour riff | He'd lock his eyes | on a brotha's shoes | If he couldn't locate his | blue/black light | in that onyx polish | set the bass down | and palm him a fifty | *Hooo...*Bootsy was wild |muh-fuckah| When JB plucked| him and Catfish from the pond | he thought his bass raised | enough radiance| to call the set | Took Bootsy a solid month to learn | who was *call* | and who was *response* |

Ning

--Nigga, I'd have burned the whole house to get you.


Papa (*Crescendo - A Major-forte*)

 Brown was tougher than Ruff | Ruff slipped the light man| a five| for his own spotlight | Was exiled |for announcing the gospel | I am David Ruffin| and these are the Temptations | There it is | He told it | And he was done | Temps didn't want to hear | that we all don't get equal billing |

Ning

He'd pull me onto his lap!

Papa (A Major-mezzo forte)

 Broken Ophelia | muttering | to an audience of orchids | posies | two lips deceiving | her own mind | Perched her on my knee | to read | The Bard | Every evening | I was a proud missionary | counteracting her night |

popped thunder | to guide the pentameter | conducted the night train | that wove myths | pulling forth the melody | of her laugh | interlaced her fingers | through mine | and | two-stepped her | from a tangle of onyx nightmares ...


Ning

He descended with Macbeth!

Papa (aside)

(My dear, no one believes | broken Ophelias | Find yourself committed | if you insist | on babbling crazy) |

(A Major-with flourish)

 ... conjured tones | for a trio of witches | hummed their harmonies | tenor-alto-soprano simultaneously | cackled warnings about | cocky boys | rhyming for couplets | and caldrons bubbling | bitches' brews |

Told her she sprouts from me | poplar trees | Branches don't break | no matter how hard | we swing

Ning


He'd pull me on his lap, a ventriloquist unlocking his dummy to give me a present, grinning, "Don't forget where you got this from."

Papa

a present each night

He gave me Jesus bronzed in obscenity, twisted naked across intersections of gold.

Papa (A Major)

 Jesus' problem: | Thump his strings | he'd hum miracles | When he was ladling wine | he should have been testifying about | the devil | given The Magdalenes tambourines | told them to lift their robes | and slap | his rhythm | against their thighs | Pound the joyful word and wail | about the angel | that fell | from utopia | God's lap | since she was fixated | with her own reflection |

Ning (E Minor - Forte)

He crushed me into his lap until I learned my role: hand puppet, made in the Philippines. I assumed my perch

gingerly, clinched stiff against the sand-paper thumb rubbing my collar bone, the aged molasses hot on his breath; stiff to stop my head from settling into the familiar groove beneath his chin; clinched behind unhinged legs, clinched stiff to stop the tunnel of conquistador fingers fumbling for a dummy hole.

Together, we watched my shadow bob on the wall. Breathed in unison, the maestro and his colonized instrument rocking; my pores, brass valves shutting closed beneath his breath.

I was a little girl. I could not understand the ache when my yowl froze beneath your encroaching bayonet.

Papa

SOOOOOO

What?

Ning (*E Minor - Forte*)

He pounded my role: nigger marionette, limp against the lift and pull of string, mouth open and grotesque under a strained smile.

Yes, Papa.

Is that my own wooden hand shoving the 'No' into my chest?

The ventriloquist prompts, "Do you love your Papa?"

Yes Papa. Yes, Papa!

Head bobbing *No. No.*

"Yes Papa!"

Learn the rhythm of the swing from a twisted wooden branch. Truth mouthed breathlessly from a spread of painted lips,

(I will tell.)


Feet shuck and shuffle seeking the sanctuary of the trunk.

"Yes Papa." (I will tell.)

"Yes Papa." (I will tell.)

Soooooooooh! What?

Papa (*Crescendo – Mezzo Forte*)

 You have to be | twice as good | to do the same job |
You have to play | the game better | than them |
faster | than them


Ning (*Modulate – C Minor - Forte*)

Once your feet have left the ground, compose yourself.
You don't beg. What for? Fold the loom of the little

girl's terror into the corners of her diaphragm. Sit astride his lap, like the conquered queens we know, Sacagawea, Nandi. We don't cry. Don't beg. Silence the throb and wait.

Memorize the fingers twisting newly-budded nipples; the clutch of grip between ribs and waist; the gravity pulling rub and bounce; the hesitation before the melody modulates; the breath before the rhythm's shift; the shudder when his stubbled cheek scrapes our own. Hum this cadence. You were conceived to it.

Papa (A Major) (in rilievo)

 And don't let anyone | tell you *no* |
My grandfather refused to sharecrop | walked up |
from Alabama |
walked | One torn leather boot before the other |
thudding the winding concrete |

...My grand dad in his | overalls, boots | leather
flapping | third grade education empty | hands that
fit pipes together | until he earned enough to have
his spit shine: | uniform of a nigger | that don't
know "*no*" |

Ning (Aside - E Minor-Incantation)

Shape your father
his father and
back and back.
His ancestors-
a glorious furnace
of metal.

Swivel his spirit
this hunter of
virgins,
guarding shame.

Swivel! Sell his
sorrow. Scream
without care
for liking or matter
argue and annoy
shaping metal--

Until he speaks,
prays, has the eyes
of a warrior
understanding the
blessing you
have slapped
across his face.

Fuck your no |

No coloreds |

No Mexicans | *Filipinos or Dogs* |
Whites only is my favorite | The *No* is implied |

Ning (C Major-abstract tempo)
(*Sforzando*)

I sharpened my knives to find the trickster. Found you in the ruins of a boarded-up Detroit theater. The arc of beams is broken, mimicking a cracked rib cage. The foundation is too proud to moan a lament.

In the back dressing room, the maestro sits alone. He's twisted so many Bulbs into his mirror, his eyes can't register a reflection. He coos to himself stories of the marquees he gilded. Patters of plaster crumble behind him. The libertine is a leper, brass chipping from the tarnished horn deteriorating in his lap.

Maestro, allow me to form the words for you:

Ning, you deserve a papa who whipped into a fury of lightning and knuckles, blood and bared teeth. I would have, if it had been someone else.

Still, you unlock your chest, and beat the muscle until it allows you to love eyes that offer you nothing.

Father, be careful. I am everything I see in you.

I brew roots in palms cupped to shape a caldron. Bring this translucent elixir to my lips. Sip the obsidian steeped in my shadow. Absorb the fortitude to pick the twists from our knotted cords, to unscrew the bulbs' blinding halo. I've filtered the light until I unearthed the mirror to find your eyes, the echo of your slow, wide grin.

Perhaps, I was your mother. I know this little boy, trembling under the weight of your ego.

Little boy, stand against the thunder gathering in your pulse and know that you are lucky. There are those who never steal themselves back.

I am like you. We don't understand no. Tonight, you are going to hear me, the way my tunnels and veins still echo you. Your bass rattles my ribs. "So what?...So what?" I've tried carving it out. To get free, your melody has to come with me.

So, face northward and start walking in the rhythm of your breath. At dawn, we will kneel with our shadows. Bow with the depth of your gratitude. They guarded us while we slept.

I am done kissing the sleep from your eyes. Open them.
You are a magician. Papa, there are tsunamis that you cannot unwind. But we don't run.

We know: the magician's duty is to wake those who have fallen into zombied sleep. Papa, our shadows are not slaves, but captives of a dissolvable fear.

Together, we will caution them. *Liberation is not easy.* Listen, as I incant the new order:

(D-major incantation)

Rain: rinse chalk residues from this cracked cement,
erode these crooked outlines of niggas hopped on scotch

Bubbles of little girl laughter will crescendo,
drowning the low lust gravelling grown tenors,

Men: your hands will fold between shoulder blades
instead of feathering
down

Your mouths will teach us to whisper psalms
into our clasped palms with you
with you

Kneeling, you will witness
us baptize ourselves magicians
angels of absolution
offering ourselves stillness

liberation from those who
have found new habits for their hands

Exit


Papa (morendo)

My Dear, I feel so...
sorry for you.

Soooo...
what?

Sooooo
What...

Papa

 The curse of brilliance is knowing | the answers to your philosophies hide | in the webbed space beneath your tongue |

Sleepwalkers chase lies that slip down easy | we welcome the lull |

(diminuendo)

These memories are salt dissolving |


I walked through the door | Yes, she was there | on her knees | at her mother's feet | Blue weaving into green across her bare arms |

She surveyed her sleeping mother's face | Her eyes calculated me | I saw her count how many steps | to the nearest door | How to gracefully navigate my drunk musk | without calling it to my attention |

She was so awake | saw me and flickered dim | a sacrifice | She was the color of pineapple husk | a more sophisticated me |

If there is any guilt | it was wanting | to wrap my hands around | all the possibilities | that were supposed to be mine |

(Modulate - D minor - calmando)

 That was Othello's problem | He wanted to drown in Desdemona's light | His didn't | set the rhythms |

He does not compose himself | the way I do |

At worst | I stole a moment to gift her instrument | a melody to yowl electric | Without the indigo burn | we are purposeless | a mundane elevator ditty |

She is crackling lightning | a symphony pacing a voodoo downbeat |

She is from me | poplar trees that do not snap | no matter how hard we swing |

That was the Moor's mistake— | he wanted to hold light | and didn't think far enough | down the page | to create a daughter