

thoughts & prayers

*for those lost
and for my mother*

*My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
In Corners - till a Day
The Owner passed - identified -
And carried Me away -*

*... Though I than He - may longer live
He longer must - than I -
For I have but the power to kill,
Without - the power to die -
—Emily Dickinson*

*What a wonder is a gun
What a versatile invention
—Stephen Sondheim*

*Savage, why you always rappin' 'bout guns for?
'Cause, bitch, I fell in love with the gun smoke
— 21 Savage*

1.

Gunsmoke fills the lungs
of my generation. We choke
on the acrid
taste of it. It burns

our eyes. Our ears
are accustomed to the ringing
song of bullets loosed
to find us, to claim a promised

land in flesh, a home
in the body's slow leak
into unbecoming. There is no
malice in the dull hollow

of a barrel, the lifeless precision
of machinery made for
ending things—only obedience
to whatever hot hand grasps it.

And every day, I am
searching for new ways
to let go, to make myself
a white flag.

2.

Snow poured steadily past the classroom window, a white whirl beyond bricks and pages, beyond the rustlings of E Period English. It was a Friday, the week almost over, winter break and a white Christmas within sight, and we were waiting, bristling for it, the burst into a wintry escape, when it happened: our group work disturbed by Mrs. Ryan-Gidman's voice cracking through the class with the news—

elementary school—one hour away—shooter—dead—
 and I had never heard of Newtown, never knew it was so close. I gripped the cream-tawny desk with a copy of *The Odyssey* atop it, stared out the window, imagined flakes filling the holes in those children and melting into a bloody slush, speckling the bodies, every one of them some version of my little brother. It still makes no sense to me:

how a man no older than Telemachus—no older than I am now, all these years later—could dream himself the king of a twisted Ithaca, lost to war and the sea for twenty years, at the mercy of every monster; how he could enter that school and imagine he was coming home, reclaiming his country, see bullets as arrows, the gun as a bow only he could string, and the skulls of children as axe heads, before leaving us all to scrub blood from the walls.

3.

Christmas Eve, and the forest is full of falling
snow. My family and I move through the trees, breath steaming
the air before us, our boots crushing down on the path the way
time crushes down on our backs, history the imprint
left behind. My hands curl in my pockets like rabbits
in a burrow. I close my eyes, listen to the crackle
of the snow as it gathers on the ground. My dad stops
in front of me, and for a moment I think it's to call out
with the *pshhhpshhhpshhh* he uses to attract birds, but instead
he pulls out his phone, checking something on it.
I stop beside him. *I think it might still be hunting season,*
he tells me, and every muscle in me tenses,
even though we are as bright and visibly human
as blood on snow, even though Dad tells me
it's only for bow and arrow hunting. As we
set off again, I eye every tree like an animal,
twitching with the feeling of death hiding, just out
of sight, waiting to step out and shoot.

4.

I don't know where you think you are, buddy, but this is the Land of the Gun. If there's one thing you can find in this God-forsaken country, it's a gun.

The Wild West may have vanished, leaving the land colonized, the buffalo near-extinct, but there's still plenty of danger in these dusty streets. A gun

protects you from that. We breed weapons here, make love to them, conceive the next great violence. Try hard enough, and you can make anything into a gun:

A banana. A pair of closed scissors. A hockey stick, hoisted up like a rifle. We are just playing pretend. The sound of a car backfiring, easily mistaken. Gun

the engine of this country and see how far it takes you. Fireworks at night become bombs bursting in air. You just need a little imagination. Your own hand is a gun

—bring your first two fingers together, cock back the thumb. The transformation is not so difficult. Nothing could be more natural, the body becoming a gun,

fully loaded with language, our best ammunition. Take a shot. They are shooting a film, always the same film, a Western. A boy is a gun. A girl is a gun.

When you were young, you collected sticks that curved in just the right way, fit your fingers about the base of each one as it took the shape of a gun.

Now they hide in your closet, your shame, scraps of wood you imagined into weapons. And have you really changed, Owen? Have you ever stopped playing with guns?

5.

I kept it in my pocket like a secret,
 took it out only when I was safely alone
 in the corridor between the coops,
 evergreen paint peeling off the walls
 like the drops of sweat on my skin

as I pulled it out—a pink plastic water gun
 tipped in orange, shaped like the Walther PPK
 I had seen Daniel Craig cradle in *Skyfall*,
 as close to 007 as I was ever going to get.
 The only thing wrong with it was the color: pink

as my sunburned skin, no, pinker. Pink
 like a princess, like the dripping inside
 of a watermelon. Pink like a girl, not a boy
 taught that violence is the only way
 you become a man. Hot pink, hotter

than the sun that day at summer camp, when
 the counselors brought out packs of water
 guns and we made a tiny, wet war with them
 in the grass. And when no one was looking
 I tucked this one away. I held it now

in the half-shadow, July sunlight creeping along
 the stone floor, the Coca-Cola refrigerator
 packed with ice the only witness to my crime.
 Later, I rode home, my body slick with pool water,
 the thought of the new weapon in my backpack

warming me. Now it sits on my desk, cracked
 from years of secret use, watching me,
 a reminder that everything you steal
 haunts you eventually, a reminder
 of how much a real gun can steal.

6.

I think about the word *gun*.
About how it sits *snug*
in the mouth, hides inside

that word, how the *tongue*
curls back before releasing
the *guh* of air, and falling

into a *-n* that nestles
in the top teeth, over
as soon as it has *begun*. I say

the word *gun*, hear the moan
in the middle, try not to enjoy
its power, the weight

one syllable can hold, like a rock
weathered down by waves
that keep pounding, pounding,

eroding this language down
to a smooth violence, something
that can be *sung*. I hear *guns*

in that word too, hear
them hiding everywhere,
sitting deep in the throat

and waiting, cocked and
ready to fire through lips
ready to end everything.

7.

It all started with the guns,

is how the man at my Uncle Al and Aunt Mary's
twenty-fifth wedding anniversary began
the first speech of the night, and I was suffocating
in a collared shirt, mostly very uninterested
in being there—that is, until I heard,

It was the guns that brought them together.

Before that night I didn't know my aunt and uncle
collected them, didn't know that back when
he was in high school, right after the family moved
to Connecticut, Al participated in Revolutionary War
reenactments, donning stiff woolen uniforms, pouring
gunpowder down the long sweet tunnel of a musket barrel,
hoisting it, and letting the explosion ring out, bulletless,
across the field—the stage for this theater of history,
men and boys imagining themselves into the war zone
that birthed this nation, performing the violent labor,
the labor of violence, the freedom only a gun can give you.

My parents never took me to the family reunions where rifles
were fired off the front porch of Al and Mary's house
in Concord, the hills echoing with the blasts, the trees quivering
as my cousins learned the satisfaction of a successful shot,
the warmth it leaves in the arms. The only time I remember
going to Al and Mary's, it was around Christmas, and
Jim Carey's Grinch was hideous and vivid on the TV.
I don't remember any guns, or arguing. I didn't know
about the Gun Owners of New Hampshire, or Al being
on the board of the NRA, or what the need for community
does to people, the divide stretching between my mom
and her Brit husband, and her all-American, gun-toting,
God-fearing big brother. All I knew back then was that

Uncle Al scared me, the size of him, the way
he loomed above you like a cliff face, lifted you up
in hugs as hard as steel, how his idea of affection was
a *puh! puh!* of fists softly scraping the stomach
in a way that made me want to scream. But his smile
could crack a cloud. He'd ruffle my hair, call me
Owen Peter Buns, and I'd try to not be terrified
of the way his love crashed over you all at once, like a wave.

Not like Aunt Mary, ruddy and beaming, who hugs
just as hard as Al, and tawks twice as loud
with her thick Worcester accent. She isn't afraid to slap him
when he's being a big idiot, kissing her too fiercely
in public, calling her *you beautiful Polish woman* or
Auntie Buns-o-Joy, or saying *I love you* over and over
and over. And I wonder now what it means to love
amidst the hoarding of an unrealized violence, sitting
in the closet with a dozen unchristened barrels, muzzles
unbaptized to the blast, magazines throbbing and full.
I wonder what it means to live in a house full of guns
and no children, to place those guns into the hands
of children—your nieces and nephews—and
teach them to shoot. I wonder what to do

when I overhear my older cousins laughing with Al
at the family Christmas gathering, telling him they need
to come back up to visit him in *the wilds of New Hampshire*,
the part of the country that still knows it's American;
when I hear Tyler say, *I know, ever since Newtown,*
Connecticut has just gone absolutely crazy about guns,
you can't get anything anymore and Al nods. *I know,*
I know. What do I do when the people I call family
—the people I have been trained to love—see
the deaths of children as an inconvenience to them?

8.

“Mommy, I’m OK, but all my friends are dead.”

—unnamed six-year-old girl who played dead to survive the Sandy Hook shooting

“Push me to the edge
All my friends are dead”

—Lil Uzi Vert

In this one, I imagine I am the mother

I’ll never forget what she said
As I held her on that cold day.
She told me, *All my friends are dead.*

When I think of all those who bled
As she escaped down the hallway...
I’ll never forget what she said.

Five years pass. We still live in dread.
On the car radio today,
I heard it: *All my friends are dead.*

The line got stuck inside my head.
I cannot make it go away.
I’ll never forget what she said.

The old life and the tears I’ve shed...
A children’s book’s pages decay,
One titled, *All My Friends Are Dead.*

Give us this day our daily bread.
Before I go to bed, I pray.
But I’ll never forget what she said.
She told me, *All my friends are dead.*

9.

I ran into Eli Whitney today on my way to work—he was sitting on a bench in the Public Garden, watching the pond freeze. He looked like a balding goose, his hair not sitting quite right on his head, his face strange to look at, like the bones in it were assembled wrong.

You look awful, I told him, but he didn't seem to hear me. He was shivering inside a long black coat and fiddling with two small pieces of metal, one in each hand. He kept scraping their edges together, as if trying to make fire. *Won't fit*, he kept murmuring. *They have to fit somehow*.

I probably should have left him there—I was going to be late for my shift. But he looked so pitiful that I had to sit down next to him. *What are you doing here?* I asked. *You're a little far from New Haven*.

Trying to get home, he said, not looking at me.

I thought Connecticut was your home now. Thought you were happy there, I said.

Were you? he said, a touch of irritation in his voice. I didn't know how to respond. I had only just gotten back from Connecticut a week ago.

I had to come back to the city for work, I finally got out. *And school. I have to learn, to make money*.

That's just what I said, when I was your age, he said. *My stepmother didn't want me to go to Yale, so I plowed fields, taught schoolchildren. Saved up every penny. I thought I would become a lawyer. And look at me now. We all have to come back home, eventually. You can't escape where you're from*.

But you're still not there, I said. *Worcester County's an hour's drive from here*.

The Greyhound would only take me as far as Boston. Don't suppose you have a car, do you?

No.

Horse and carriage?

You think I'm walking to work for fun?

We fell silent. There were a million things I could have asked him. I could have asked, *How does it feel to be an SAT question?*

or

What is it like for people to only think 'cotton gin' or 'interchangeable parts' when they think about you?

or

Did you know that you were opening Pandora's box?

or

Did you know you were shooting adrenaline into slavery's veins?

or

Did you know they would call Connecticut the arsenal of democracy?

or

Do you know how many people die in New Haven every day now?

But instead I just pointed to the two bits of metal in his hands. *What are you doing?*

Trying to make them fit, he mumbled. They have to fit somehow. Need a new weapon. Need to be ready for the war.

The war is over, I told him.

He turned and looked at me for the first time. His eyes were wet and milky, like the moon.

Oh no, he said. No. It never ended.

10.

after Emerson's Concord Hymn

“I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound.”

—George Washington

I know this town so very well
Where this country was conceived
In violence. The British fell,
And look at all that we've achieved

Since then. Now corpses flood the streets,
And schools and concerts and churches
And clubs and homes. The past repeats.
We birth a killer—he researches

The best ways to give birth to death,
Then cocks back, carries out his plan,
Secures his legacy. The breath
Stops. What is more American

Than clinging to what poisons us,
Remembering the pointless glory
Of war, but not the blood and pus
and gore that poured from history?

Who fired first—the mystery
That haunts me—who's to blame?
Which side of my ancestry?
In the end, it is all the same.

Both American and British,
I lose the battle either way.
My inheritance is anguish.
How much are we willing to pay

For our freedom? A killing spree
Is just the daily sacrifice.
America demands a fee,
And human life remains the price.

I was kept far from firearms.
Instead, I learned to use a sword,
And still I come back to the farms
And roundabouts of Concord—

Past the fences white as teeth
And the prison with its wire,
The river that runs on beneath
The bridge where someone chose to fire—

To visit old family friends
Who live here, despite the spirits
That wander the fields and the bends
In roads. And their song—I hear it.

For though those men whose fingers curled
About the triggers are long dead,
I hear the shots heard round the world.
They keep on echoing in my head.

The stage is set, curtain unfurled.
Beneath the action of this play,
We hear the shots heard round the world.
They keep on firing to this day.

11.

“I’m not afraid of getting shot,
The noise just makes me want to cry.”
—Jill McDonough

you know how in the intro to “Energy” you hear that (*chu-chunk*) & then the spray of bullets hammering inside your ears filling them up & how in the music video Drake comes toward the camera with 1 fist raised above his face the other stretched out like he’s firing at the viewer

or how when you put on “Ether” you hear (*gunshot gunshot gunshot gunshot gunshot brbrbrbrrr gunshot gunshot gunshot*) the first 4 seconds consumed with firing before the beat drops & you hear a deep voice say *Fuck Jay-Z* & you know Nas is boutta kill this shit

or how the first thing you hear in “Bustin’ At ‘Em” is the tuning of the instruments the guns cocking & firing & preparing to be played & then you hear *Shoot first ask questions last / That’s how these so-called gangstas last / Waka Flocka Flame* & then the high hats rattle their way up your spine & the beat explodes into your ear vibrating all over it so that you can’t tell what’s drum & what’s gun as he sings *Bow Bow Bow Bow / Bitch I’m bustin’ at ‘em!*

or how when the beat for “Thug Luv” starts on the seventh count of the beat right after Pac says *Where my guns at?* or possibly *Where my thugs at?* you hear that (*click click*) of the gun cocking & then it fires twice on the eighth count & how it does that for the whole song

or how on the chorus of “Paper Planes” MIA sings *All I wanna do is (gunshot gunshot gunshot gunshot) & a (click ka-ching) & take your money* how she lets the weapon speak for her

or how Royce speaks for the weapon on “Gun Harmonizing” *brrahbrahbrahbrah-ing & gahgahgah-ing* all over the beat 8 years before Big Shaq ever imagined he could be a meme & that’s the whole hook that’s how he sings his truth by making his mouth into a gun

or how you hear a gun cock right before Joey’s verse starts on “Survival Tactics” & then you wait a full minute a full 24 bars & then the beat cuts & as soon as Joey says *throw the clip in* it cocks again just to remind you it’s there then waits deliciously patient as Joey spits to the dead air until he says *Just another man who defeated by survival / That’s your biggest rival* or possibly *rifle* you can’t tell over the sound of the gun firing you can’t tell if the next line is *in your whole life* or *end your whole life* you can’t tell who has survived

or how when Em sings *1 shot 2 shots 3 shots 4 shots all I hear is gunshots* & then you can’t tell if the next line is *this is where the fun stops* or *this is where the fun starts* how shots fire every time he says *shots*

& you know how when he played Bonnaroo & did “Kill You” right after his last *Bitch I’m a kill you!* there was a blast so loud it had the crowd screaming crying running in all directions

or how at the 3:24 point of “Who Shot Ya” you can hear Biggie cocking back forcing someone’s mouth around the barrel of his gun & then he says *Didn’t I tell you not to fuck with me?! Huh? Look at*

you now! Huh? Can't talk with a gun in your mouth & you can hear the victim pleading hear his lips moaning around the metal as he sobs don't kill me don't kill me right before 6 shots ring out (BANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANG) & then the drum kicks in & the beat comes back Puff saying As we proceed / To give you what you need Biggie saying Who shot ya?

& you think about what Pac must have thought hearing that song less than 3 months after being shot 5 times in that lobby with Biggie upstairs & how could he have known it was recorded a year prior how could he have not seen it as a violent act & how could anyone have known that in just over 2 years both of them would be killed 6 months apart both hit by 4 bullets in the passenger seat of a car the air cut from their lungs the music cut from their bodies & we still don't know who shot them still won't admit what really killed them

& you know how in the pre-chorus of "A Tale of 2 Citiez" you hear that *(click-click)* & then Cole says *Run it* & then it's *Hands in the air / Now / Hands in the air / Run it* & when he performed it at TD Garden you were all the way at the top so when you took your eyes off the stage & looked around you could see every fucking hand in the place up in the air bathed in bloody light drenched red & your hands were too both of them held all the way up high as if to say *This is my song* as if to say *Don't shoot* as if to say *This is keeping me alive*

12.

for Ariana DeBose

“What if this bullet becomes my legacy?”

—Lin-Manuel Miranda

I ran into you after the show, and wish
I could have asked: How did you do it

every night? Clutch the air with the buds
of your fingers, and carry the imagined

space a bullet takes up? How did you bear
the weight, deliver this deadly scrap of air

not once, but three times across the great
rotating gyre of the stage, guide its burning

into the warm destiny awaiting it? Tell me
the secret. How do you embody the end

and survive? How do you go home and sleep
each night knowing that for a few suspended

seconds, whatever you touched would crumple
and slump into death, that in that moment,

you were the American Dream?

13.

with excerpts taken from the Columbine Report

In this one, I imagine I am there

The light fills my eyes,
and all that lies beyond
is darkness, the scene
set yet again, and I seated,

still. Silence. A hundred
held breaths. Then
the echo of steps, scuff
of boot soles across

the floor, click and spray
of cruel syllables from
just beyond the edges
of my sight. I never

really see the slaughter,
and that's the worst part,
how evil my imagination
is as I listen, hear the tremble

in my friends, their cry,
whimper, sob, scream, clatter
of body to the ground. And now
they approach, and I hear

*Who is under the table?
Identify yourself!*

My turn. I rise, look him
dead in the face, his sunken
eyes, long chin, twisted
mouth, wild hair bursting

from a backwards ball
cap like strangling
vines. And I have been here
before. Say what I always say.

It's me, John.

John Savage?

Yes.

Hi.

Hi, Dylan. What are you doing?

Oh, killing people.

Are you going to kill me?

No, dude. Just run.

Just get out of here.

And then he is gone
again. And I face the light
for the thousandth time.
Tell it my shame:

*I remember if he said, "yes"
I would have said, "Then make
it quick. Just put a bullet
in my head and get it over with."*

But he let me go.

And then, at last, it is over.

The lights rise—we break
out of character, return to the feel
of our bodies, try to tuck
the sense of danger backstage

with the prop guns, tell ourselves
this is all imaginary, the taste
of metal and death still lingering
in our mouths, this rehearsal

and repetition of trauma, this retelling
of destruction etched into us, but
we are safe, safe, no one dead
or wounded, I am no John Savage,

Dylan Klebold is not Dylan Klebold,
just my roommate, Simeon, who I will
lie in the opposite bed from tonight

as we try to sleep. And the next night

we perform the play to a room full
of people, and then again the night
after that, and they all flinch
with recognition, but tell themselves

we are just actors, that it is just
a play, and when we finally
bow and they applaud, we forget
that familiar tickle, we unlearn

these horrors in a way
the real victims never can,
tell ourselves it wasn't real,
even though we know it was.

14.

I wasn't expecting to see Simeon North on the banks of the Esplanade last night, but at the same time, I suppose I wasn't that surprised when I did. He had some sort of telescope and was looking out over the black, rippling skin of the Charles to the lights on the opposite bank, in Cambridge. They shivered and pulsed in the dark like a mirage.

He was wrapped in a black cloak, half-lit by the white breath of a streetlamp. But I still recognized him immediately—that snowy hair, square head, and stooped back. He leaned on his cane as he stared out at the water.

Thinking of building another factory? I asked, and he turned, startled, his eyes squinting up at me, one lid drooping more than the other.

And what business is it of yours? he barked.

Why are you here? I asked him. *I thought you were a Connecticut man.*

Oh, I am, he said. *Always will be. You can't run from home, can't escape where you were born, where you were raised.* I shivered when he said that. *Still... I like Boston. This is where it all started, this great country of ours.*

Sure, I said. *It only takes one massacre.*

It took more than just that! he snapped at me. *It took a whole war. Sacrifice. I was nine when it started. Sixteen when I tried to enlist. To fight.*

And they didn't let you? I asked. He didn't respond. Just looked off down the bank, the curve of trees black and bleeding into the bridge at the other end.

So you tried to help another way, I suggested, but still he didn't answer. He suddenly looked very lost, like a child.

The surface of the water rippled with a million tiny explosions of air.

It's not going to work here, you know, I said. *Boston isn't Berlin, or Middletown. The Charles isn't like the Coginchaug.*

The what? he said, mouth twisting in confusion.

Of course you don't know the proper name, I said. *You act like you care about history, but what do you know about the people who came before you, before this country, before all of this was stolen?*

Nothing is stolen, he said. *Just reused.*

Like you "reused" Whitney's ideas for your pistols?

They weren't his ideas, he snapped, and I could see I had touched a nerve. He didn't invent interchangeability, he just advocated for it. And he caught up late to me and Hall when it came to actually doing it. He's no great original thinker. You want an invention? Try the milling machine! The first entirely new machine invented on this continent. I did that! Me! Not Eli fucking Whitney...

I saw him the other day, you know, I said.

Goody for you, he sneered, and he turned back to the water, muttering, Bastard's not even from Connecticut...

Silence fell between us. I didn't know what to say, so I just repeated myself: *It's not going to work here.*

What do you know? he shot back. You think it's so black and white, that it's so easy to judge me. But you don't know what it's like to fear for your life. To know someone could take it away at any minute. If the world were perfect, maybe...

He trailed off, then shook his head. *But it isn't. We all have to keep weapons in our closets.*

I couldn't argue with him. So I just stood there, watching him on the bank, with the river pulsing behind him. The wrinkles in his face. Those old, old eyes.

15.

I remember the day my Uncle Al arrived without warning in his behemoth of a truck, and strode up our dusty gravel driveway and over the yellow grass of our yard to meet us at the front door, carrying the best present I'd ever get from him.

He said he'd found them in some junk store, these slips of steel buried in leather, two sibling weapons straight out of a movie, one to sit on the left hip, swinging, the other strapped across the back of the belt he brought to me.

I took them, slid them from their holsters, felt their weight in my fifteen-year-old hands. I'd be lying if I said I didn't find them beautiful, the way they glistened in the afternoon sun, their tips raw with unbloodied possibility.

I tried them out on my lawn, hands wrapped around the grooved handles, my index finger curled over the lip of the hilts, locking the rapier and dagger into my palm, my clumsy grip, the blades soaring out from me, columns of bright silver flame, singing to the day.

I figured, if he's gonna be a proper swordfighter, he's gotta have a proper sword, my uncle said, his eyes shining like the blades as I swung them about. I'd been fencing for four years at that point, and finally, some real weapons. And my mother stood on the front step, her eyes

full of fear. Even then I could see it. Even then I knew I was betraying her. Every time she asked me to tip the blades, to snip their sharpness off into a dull safety, I refused, unwilling to neuter them, to spoil their purity. It seemed wrong.

And years later, at family reunions, at my cousins' weddings, or at the annual Christmas gatherings, Uncle Al always asks if I still have that rapier and dagger, if I've let my mom tip them yet, and I don't tell him about how they sit safely in their sheaths against my bookshelf.

I don't tell him about the scars on my left arm, or the times I fed those tips into the grooves of my skin,

sinking them in just to prove to myself that I could. I tell him no. *Good*, he says, grinning at me like we've won a secret victory. *Good. Keep it that way.*

16.

For a long time, all I wanted
for Christmas or my birthday was
a Nerf gun. Safer than a Red
Ryder Carbine Action 200
-shot Range Model air rifle, so
my parents couldn't even say,

You'll shoot your eye out, to explain
why they didn't want me gripping
a false weapon. All we had was
the Super Soaker we bought Dad
to scare cats away from the bird
feeders, which he hardly used. I

would run through the yard with it in
my young arms, the black tank sloshing
with water. It never felt right
to me—it wasn't real enough,
the plastic trigger stuck in place
so you couldn't even squeeze it,

the pump action shuddering in
my hand, water sputtering forth,
a disappointment. Not like Nerf
guns, which the boys my age would hoist
through the air like an armful of
triumph. Touching one always sent

a thrill through my skin. It's easy
to grow infatuated with
what you never learn the feel of.
Every time we went to Concord
for the weekend, to stay at Ben's
house, or Evan and Joel's, these three

older boys we wanted to be,
my brother Adam and I would
follow them down to their basements
where the arsenals were kept, far
from the conversation of our
parents upstairs. They would fall out

into our greedy hands, orange
foam bullets the size of fingers

stuffed into plastic chambers, clips
that clicked up into our weapon
of choice. It was the days of Nerf
N-Strike, and there were so many

options: the Maverick REV-6,
its six-shot chamber, spinning like
a carnival wheel; or the Vulcan
EBF-25, machine
gun clatter bursting forth from it.
But my favorite was always

the Recon CS-6—that thick,
chunky pistol with the grey spine,
the long barrel and laser sight
I could add to it. I loved the
assembly and disassembly,
the way each part locked in place to

fit my fantasy. My second
favorite was the Nite Finder
EX-3—Ben’s was modified
with a rubber band, so when you
cocked back and fired, the whole gun
rattled, sang with a crack almost

like a real shot. You got stung when
you got shot with the Nite Finder,
and one time Ben hit Adam right
between the eyes, and he went down,
clutching his face, started crying.
Ben and I got real scared then, tried

to comfort him, to shut him up.
It takes so little for a game
to stop being a game, for cries
of glee echoing off the walls
to turn to pain. And even then,
excitement lingers in your mouth.

A few years later, our parents
gave each of us a Secret Strike
AS-1—wimpy, pathetic,
not made to resemble a real
gun, and maybe that was the point.
They only came with two bullets,

one more than the number fired
into Tamir Rice by a cop
for playing with a toy gun.
And Adam wanted more. So they
caved, gave him the Alpha Trooper
CS-18, with the long neck

and the cylindrical clip that
contained eighteen bullets, one more
than the number of people who
died in the Parkland shooting. And
I knew better than to ask for
my own, but my insides burned with

jealousy. And sometimes I would
sneak into Adam's room and just
stand there, holding the CS-18,
wishing it were mine. Funny, how
for a long time, all I wanted
was a weapon to call my own,

How I still have dreams about
the Recon CS-6. How
we used to play in that basement
all afternoon, and I knew it
was wrong, and still I squeezed triggers
like my life depended on it.

How I went down there at night when
no one else was around just to
hold the Nite Finder in the dark.
Funny, how I've still never held
a real gun. How playing with guns
never got me killed.

17.

for Emma Gonzalez

4 minutes and 26 seconds
is a long time to spend in silence.
Devastatingly long.
Most cannot bear it.
But sometimes, silence is the only speech we can give
to a world that keeps stealing our voices.

18.

with lyrics from “Mr. Policeman” from Kidsongs

“Does Gun Control include the police?”
—Chance the Rapper

and the only times I’ve ever seen a gun, a real gun I mean,
it was on the hip of a cop, strapped into the holster like
a great black fish and I can’t pretend I’ve never
imagined snatching one, wrapping my hands
around the butt and lifting it clean of its
owner, not even to use, just to know
what it feels like, to know that
weight, feel the cool black
scales beneath my skin

and I remember, on an old VHS tape, I watched a group of children
skip through the gates of the Rio Hondo Police Academy, *Only
the Strong Survive* written in the wire above them, I remember
black and tan uniforms lined up, men standing at attention,
their bodies narrow and straight as rods of iron,
I remember rows of men in grey sweatsuits
doing jumping jacks, sweat glistening
on their faces as the children
strolled down the line
and sang

*Mr. Policeman
Making everything alright
Always around to protect and serve
Watching out for us day and night*

and my Uncle Rob was a cop, my mom’s sister’s husband, he served
in the military police right out of college and then spent the rest
of his life on the regular force, and he’s never looked anything
like the men in that video, he has a belly round and wide
as Sisyphus’s boulder, a voice gravelly as the struggle
uphill, he’s the kind of cop, according to my mom,
who will pull you over if you speed, but let you
off if you explain the situation to him, who
loves training retreats where they learn to
deescalate a situation, because for him
it’s not about the thrill some cops get
slamming you to the hood of the car,
and he spent years being passed

up for promotion, the boulder
 rolling back down the hill
 every time he called out
 fellow officers for that
 kind of behavior

Mr. Policeman

and his son, who shares his name, went into the Army, served
 overseas in Afghanistan and has probably killed people, or
 at least watched people die, and his mother, my aunt,
 she didn't want him to go, but once he did there was
 nothing bad you could say about the Army to her,
 and this year, at the family Christmas gathering,
 I heard her talking about how hard it is to get
 a gun these days, how ridiculous it is, how
 when she and my mother and the other six
 were growing up you could walk into
 a store and buy a rifle at seventeen

Making everything alright

and I remember the kids swaying on the hood of a cop car
 as they sang in the video, and at the 2015 BET Awards,
 Kendrick Lamar got on top of a cop car to perform
 "Alright," rapping *And we hate po-po / Wanna*
kill us dead in the streets fo' sho and I've
 listened to that song more times
 than I can say, even though
 I've never known that
 kind of danger

Always has a job to do

and now Uncle Rob is retired, more or less, except
 for the fact that he works as a security guard
 at a local high school, and I wonder
 if he has to carry a gun for that

and there was a security guard who dreamed about being a cop,
 did you hear about him, his name was Jemel Roberson, he
 was working extra shifts to have enough money for his
 nine-month-old son, Tristan's first Christmas, when he
 found himself at Manny's Blue Room in Chicago and
 a man started shooting, hitting five people, and no
 one was killed until Jemel pinned him down, until
 two police officers arrived at the bar and saw

a black man pinning a white man down
 and you know the rest of the story, and
 it took them two months to release the
 name of the cop who pulled the trigger
 and what's in a name, really, when
 every name is just waiting for
 a gravestone to scar, when
 every body is just skin
 waiting to be seen
 and shot at

and I look in the mirror sometimes, and I see
 terrorist, see white skin and blue eyes, see
 the men who marched in Charlottesville,
 and the man who murdered a church
 of black people in Charleston, I see
 why Killer Mike would want
 to keep his guns, to stay safe
 from people like me, and I
 ask myself why the
 police don't see
 me as the threat

*From all of us kids
 To all of you guys*

and I wonder what Tristan's first Christmas was like
 with his father gone. I spent mine with my family,
 spotted Uncle Rob at the big family gathering,
 barely said hello, and I know it's not his fault,
 know he wasn't that kind of cop, know it
 doesn't actually matter what kind of cop
 he was, or whether there is such a thing
 as a good cops or bad cops, it redeems
 no one, it does not bring back Jemel,
 or Trayvon Martin, or Mike Brown,
 or Eric Garner or any of the many
 murdered

*Thank you
 For being you*

and still, whenever I see a gun on a cop's hip,
 I can hardly fight the desire to snatch it
 off them, but then what will I do,
 will I turn it on someone,
 will I turn it on myself,

or will I take it and
toss it into the sea?

19.

When I ran into Sammy Colt, he was standing in the graveyard at the edge of the Common. His beard was full and thick like my father's, but dark—not a spurt of orange flame, but rather the ashes that remain after. That, or powder before the explosion, itching to ignite.

The wind rustled blackened leaves left over from fall, plastered to the dirt and pushing through the cracked snow. I approached him cautiously—I didn't want to startle him. But it was hard to take the edge out of my voice when I spoke. *Admiring your handiwork?*

Not really, he replied curtly. *Most of these were before my time.*

Aren't they lucky.

There's no need to be so aggressive, he said.

There's no need for you to be here. Don't you have enough gravesites to visit back in Hartford?

As if you would know, he said. *I gave my life to that city. Everything.*

And isn't it doing so well now because of it, I said, each syllable tipped with sarcasm. He ignored me.

Remember when you read at the State Capitol? I was in the crowd, watching. You probably didn't even notice me, but I was there. I heard that poem—what was it called? "State of the Union"? You criticize this country, boy, but what have you ever done for it?

You don't care about this country, I shot back, *you care about being rich. You were happy to sell guns to both sides during the Civil War, to make a killing off it—*

His hand shot to his pocket. I saw the pistol emerging and instinctively put my hands up.

But he didn't aim it at me—just held it up and shook it in my face. It rattled, ancient and empty.

You see this? he roared at me. *This was my grandfather's! He fought against the British, to free us, to create this country, and you accuse me of tearing it apart? I had a vision! The impossible gun! The greatest equalizer this country has ever known, something to keep us free, and I did it! Half this land wouldn't be ours if it wasn't for me—*

I know all about what you did, I told him. *I saw your work before you saw mine. Came to Hartford on a school trip when I was in sixth grade, saw your collection. I remember the lights burned golden yellow and the revolvers gleamed under the glass. I remember the boys in my grade gathering around, pushing each other and laughing loudly and trying to hide how hungry they all were, looking at those pistols. And I was no better, pubescent and horny for power, for the feel of it in my palm. But I didn't push like the others. I just gazed at each one, memorized the intricacy of them, the workmanship, the delicious antiquity, and the name Colt, Colt, and I didn't know whether to be proud of it, or scared. Mostly I just wanted to break through the glass, to touch what you made.*

Silence stretched between us, for a very long while. Then he said, *And what did you learn from that? What have you learned since then?*

And I didn't know what to say.

20.

When a glass shatters in a sink it can be hard to find all the pieces. No matter how many times you run water through this valley of shards, the broken always finds a way to stick, to escape your sight before being buried in the soft bed of a finger. Sometimes, you have to bleed to see what has cut you open, what sharp particles sparkle in the sponge's flesh. Think about the pieces of a glass, how they do not exist before the breaking, before the whole splinters upon impact with the hard. There are infinite ways to break, so much of what makes us up rich with the possibility of coming apart. What I'm trying to say is I broke a glass in the sink today, and not so far away from here, a bullet broke through the skin of the innocent, shattering something apart. And you cannot fix a glass once it is broken, you cannot put it back together—it no longer exists. All you can do is try to clean up what remains: the jagged pieces, razor-sharp and dangerous to touch, weapons birthed by the breaking. I take care to not cut myself on them, but I am still finding bright spots of sharpness in my hands every time I return to wash them, to scrub the dishes, to cleanse myself of this guilt—only to come up bloodier than before.

21.

The forests yawn and whisper secrets to the fields,
unplowed and aching along Route 32, as the sky
squeezes out the last of its dusklight and I sit
in the passenger seat while my mother drives us home.

The news this week has been full of the Taliban
and she tells me she cannot understand
how there are still places in the world where
heads are cut from bodies, how someone can do that
and hold up a camera to capture it.

And so I, brilliant fourteen-year-old that I am,
decide to explain it to her: how, to them, their violence
is not an atrocity, but just a different kind of righteousness,
that morality is only a question of perspective,

and to the Taliban, removing heads from bodies
in the name of a God makes perfect sense,
in the same way, I explain, feeling very clever
for having worked this out, to the twenty-year-old who,
an hour's drive from here, drilled holes into the bodies

of children, shooting up his old school made perfect sense,
how to *him*, it was the right thing to do, especially given
how much he suffered at that school, he was bullied,
he was just taking revenge, can you really blame him,

and I don't realize I've made a terrible mistake
until my mother has pulled the car over to the side
of the road and started drilling holes into me
with her voice. I can barely see her face, the darkness
complete outside the car and in it, but her tongue

still cuts red in this dim, slicing me apart.
And I am used to feeling fear when she gets like this,
but for maybe the first time, I can see
how frightened *she* is—and it freezes my blood.

There is still so much I don't know. I don't know
that my mother once carried a handgun in the barren
Alaskan wasteland, knows well the weight
and force of a firearm, that it came naturally to her,
that she has killed more animals than anyone

in her family combined, more than her oldest brother,
who she watched go from collecting GI Joe action figures
to automatic weapons. I don't know that she grew up
having knives thrown at her by her own mother,

all the ways she has tasted the edge of violence,
this American sickness she has tried, all my life,
to protect me from, only to live to see the day
when first graders fall like stalks of corn, scythed
into a winter field, and her own son tries to justify it to her.

I only know she is terrified. Realize that when
she heard the news about Newtown, she thought
of me and my brother—who shares the killer's name,
who turned eleven five days after twenty children

turned to dust, who gets to live another year
while they lie in the ground. Knew we weren't safe,
and never have been. That it could have been us,
and still could be. Felt herself go cold, as I do now,
knowing I can never find the words to tell her I'm sorry.

22.

I am so tired of feeling powerless.
 Of this empty, useless grief. Of telling myself
 I write for a greater good, when it is really just to
 help me sleep at night—as if I deserve it. I could pray
 to whatever God I'm told to, and still, somewhere,
 another sanctuary is being punctured by the dull dark
 metal of ending. Another body is falling, a period of iron
 and fire drilled into the page of a back, white hot
 and merciless as the Old Testament. Another set
 of absences blooms into being, bare spaces ripped
 into the air like flowers torn from the ground,
 to be tossed onto a grave. I try to write a poem
 for each victim, for every one lost. But I know,
 in the end, I am really just writing poems for myself
 —eulogies to the graveyard of my throat when I say
 the names. Ghosts swarm me, nameless and whispering,
 reminding me of how I could be in their place, of how
 many more will disappear into this white space
 between poems, their deaths more recognized than
 their lives, the death toll of words growing.

And I know I am a hypocrite.
 Know I am as much the enemy as any shooter,
 my complacency the most brilliant killer of all,
 a sweet toxin, a disease. The other night, MJ told me
 about a friend who recently had a gun pulled on her
 by her ex-boyfriend. And when MJ found out,
 she didn't feel anything. I nodded. Like her,
 I am less scared of violence than the idea that
 I do not care enough. I could have gone
 to a march today, but I stayed home, writing
 this—masking it as resistance even though I know
 my poetry won't save anyone, or bring anyone back.
 That these are just thoughts and prayers, sent out
 into the space where lives used to be and dissipating
 into nothing with them. That anything I say
 will be swallowed up into the next assassination
 of language, the next slaughter that brings me
 to my knees, empty, voiceless,
 before I pick myself up
 and, like a monster, move on.

23.

My little brother tells me he thinks about weapons
pretty much all the time

as we walk through the preserve together
on Christmas Day. We both carry sticks
—his long and pointed, like a spear,
mine curved and jagged, bark clinging
to the bottom six inches, which I have
imagined into a hilt for this, my sword.
I lean on it as we march along, me in front,
him behind me, so I don't see him

when he tells me he thinks about weapons
pretty much all the time. *All the time?*
I ask him. *Yeah, pretty much*, he replies,
adding, with forged nonchalance, *It's pretty bad.*

I do not respond. *But I'm just weird
like that*, he says. *Not really*, I reply.
No, like, seriously, I'm telling you,
I'm not normal, he insists. I still
can't see him. *And I'm telling you
it's more normal than you might think*, I say.

Silence. I want to scream into it, to confess
myself to him, but how do I tell him the truth:
that our whole lives, I've been making
every object I picked up into a weapon?
That this whole country is a weapon, an idea
of violence that keeps killing us? Maybe
I don't need to say it. Maybe he already knows

from all the years we've spent playing video
games in which the only way you exist is
by battling, and the only way you win is
someone else dying. All the years he spent
punching and kicking and clawing at me,
clinging to my legs and not letting go,
back when fighting me was the only way
he knew he could get my attention,
the only way he could be sure I cared about him.

And how can I ever make it up to him—
not caring enough, not being kinder to him

when I had the chance? I still have the gun
he made for me in middle school
from a block of wood in Tech Ed, crude
carving of the weapon he knew I wanted,
kept in the pocket of my leather jacket
after all these years, his dedication to me
scarred into the sides: *To Owen, From Adam.*
How can I tell him what it means to me?

He passes by me on the trail, strides ahead,
and now I can see him as we head for home,
as he slings his stick into the river. His back
stays to me, so he does not see me clutch my stick
more tightly, raising it to kiss the air, brandishing
an imaginary blade, silently slicing at the space
around me just as I was trained to do, killing
every demon I see crawling out of the trees,
trying desperately to defend him, to keep him safe.

24.

In this one, I imagine Uncle Al teaches me to shoot

And I am not ready
 for the weight. Knew
 I wouldn't be, knew I couldn't
 prepare for how heavy
 my hands would feel holding it,
 all the energy in me focused
 into my fingers, the rest of me
 numb. I try not to tremble. Try
 to be a man for him, to not seem
 scared. And he walks me through
 each step carefully, checking
 my stance, telling me to make it
 wider, this isn't like when
 you're fencing, don't touch
 the trigger yet, wait, slip
 the magazine into the belly
 of the beast, or is it the spine,
 doesn't matter, don't make this
 into a metaphor, this is not
 imaginary anymore. Breathe.
 Steady. Now, take off
 the safety, safely. He wants me
 to be safe. He does not want me
 to hurt myself, or anyone else.
 I think I know so much, and still
 I have avoided this, the final test. To see
 the world through his sight. Line up
 the sight with the target, don't think
 about anyone standing there, don't
 conjure up corpses, or contemplate
 all you could do with this power,
 if you had the nerve, focus
 on what is real. Your hands.
 The gun. The target. The air
 between it all. *You got your finger
 on the trigger, kid.* Lean forward,
 breathe. Slow, steady
 squeeze.

But I am not ready
 for the trigger, it is not
 like plastic or the air

I curled within the curve
of other objects, it is not
so easy, there's going to be
resistance. My hand will jerk
too much when I fire, I know it,
the sound will echo
through me, and I will never
know how to repeat it, to speak
what it whispers to me, because
the truth is, it's not saying
anything, so what difference
does it make, just do it, let
the adrenaline take you, step over
the edge, *all you have to do is
move your little finger.*

And when it recoils, will I recoil too,
in fear? When it fires, do I fire,
will I be lit at last, fuse flaming
like the tip of a cigarette,
disappearing into itself, will I
understand, will I be able to
stop, or will it seduce me too,
will I run away, or will it be
love at first sight, will I just
keep firing, I mean
burning, burning until
there is nothing left?

25.

You can't control death
by being able to deal it out.

In the end, you're no safer
from a gun with a gun

tucked in your hand. Eventually,
it will just eat you, the same way

fire consumes everything it touches, greedy
flames spreading, gobbling at whatever

they can reach, transfiguring it into
more flames, this burning a kind

of procreation, an inheritance.
I think about the first person

who discovered fire. They must have burned
themselves, like a child on a stove.

I try to remember the first time
I was burned, or the first time

I saw a gun, and knew it for what
it was—Prometheus's gift and Cain's curse

brought together in this metal
body, beautiful explosion

waiting to happen. And yes,
I am infatuated with the glow

and grow of hot violence.
Yes, I am scared of the dark.

Candles fill my apartment with warm
gold light, make the shadows in corners

seem more beautiful, somehow, dance
on the wall in a way that lets me

sleep. But I blow them out
before unconsciousness takes me.

Keep water nearby, just in case
I make a mistake, and knock

that yellow hunger over into the destruction
of everything I love. You can't fight fire

by tossing another flicked lighter onto
the blaze. You can't douse a country

in kerosene and expect
it won't burn. And yes,

I have longed to take the night
and burn through it. But I know

that will not save me. All fires
burn out, eventually. So,

with everything around me
turning to black, folding into the jaws

of this inferno, what else can I do
but embrace the dark? I sort

amongst the ashes, salvage
the charcoal, and try to draw with it.

26.

One day, I swear,
I will be good.

I will snap the tip of my sword off, castrate myself
of violence, take a knife to every sharp part
of me, then gnaw the blade to a dullness.
I promise. I will melt all the bullets the world
can cough up into a hot oozing and pour it
back into the earth. I will short-circuit
every screen that teaches us violence, re-wire
my fists so they never want to strike out again,
take my temper to the chopping block
and be its executioner. Even if it kills me,
I will collect every scrap of wood I've saved
and twisted into something resembling power
and make a bonfire of my childhood, let
the smoke soak into my pores and wear the smell
for the rest of my days, like mourning clothes,
make myself a walking funeral shroud, make
love without hurting, make peace with
my demons, feed my fantasies into the great
wood-chipper of history, slice every piece
of hypocrite out of me until there is no me left

and then, maybe,
I will forgive myself,

even as someone else
decides to fire.

NOTES

Nothing is created in a vacuum, and I drew on a great deal of material for this sequence. Two resources in particular proved invaluable: the anthology *Bullets into Bells: Poets & Citizen Respond to Gun Violence*, edited by Brian Clements, Alexandra Teague, and Dean Rader; and *A History of Gun Violence*, a special issue of *Lapham's Quarterly*. I highly recommend both. I also did a good amount of research and background reading through the Internet.

The opening epigraphs of this sequence are drawn from “764 (My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun)” by Emily Dickinson, “The Gun Song” from *Assassins* by Stephen Sondheim, and “gun smoke” by Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph (21 Savage), Ahmar Bailey, Frederikus van Workum, and Nicholas Luscombe.

“2” references Books 21 and 22 of *The Odyssey* by Homer—particularly the competition of the ax heads and the subsequent slaying of the suitors.

“4” is a ghazal, and contains light references to Francis Scott Key’s poem, “Defence of Fort M’Henry” (later set to music written by John Stafford Smith and adapted into the U.S. National Anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner”) and “A Boy is a Gun” by Tyler Okonma (Tyler the Creator), Bobby Dukes, Bobby Massey, and Lester Allen McKenzie. The phrase “A girl is a gun” has been used in a variety of pop culture contexts—I first encountered it through an Instagram phenomenon introduced to me by a friend and fellow writer.

“5” references the 2012 James Bond film *Skyfall* (the release of which coincided with the 50th-anniversary of the Bond film series), directed by Sam Mendes.

“7” references the 2000 live action film adaptation of Dr. Seuss’s *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, directed by Ron Howard.

“8” is a villanelle inspired by the words of an unnamed six-year-old girl who played dead to survive the Sandy Hook shooting, and was the only member of her first-grade class to survive. In this poem, I imagine myself as the mother of that girl (knowing little to nothing, I have to admit, about the actual mother). The epigraph is from “XO TOUR Llif3” by Symere Woods (Lil Uzi Vert), Bryan Simmons, and John Lucas, which is referenced in the poem. The poem also references the children’s book *All My Friends Are Dead* by Avery Monsen and Jory John, and contains a line from the Lord’s Prayer (specifically Matthew 6:11).

“9,” “14,” and “19” each deal with a significant figure in the history of the American firearms industry—which, for much of its early history, was focused in Connecticut, the state I grew up in. Eli Whitney, Simeon North, and Samuel Colt all played critical roles in engineering the mass production of guns in Connecticut, and all have fascinating histories that I drew from.

“10” is modeled formally off of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem “Concord Hymn” (originally titled “Hymn: Sung at the Completion of the Concord Monument, April 19, 1836”), written to commemorate the Battles of Lexington and Concord, which started the Revolutionary War. It is from the first stanza of this poem that we get the phrase “The shot heard round the world”—

which I, in turn, play on in the last stanzas of my poem. The epigraph is from a letter written by George Washington to his brother, John A. Washington, on May 31, 1754, about his experience in the first battle of the French & Indian War.

“11” contains references to and lines (italicized) drawn from: “Energy” by Aubrey Graham (Drake), Matthew O'Brien, Marcus Jones II, Matthew Samuels (Boi-1da), Richard Dorfmeister, Markus Kienzi, and Phillip Thomas, and its music video, directed by Fleur & Manu; “Ether” by Nasir Jones (Nas) and Rondell Turner (Ron Brownz); “Bustin’ At ‘Em” by Juaquin James Malphurs (Waka Flocka Flame); “Thug Luv” by Bone Thugs-n-Harmony (Bryon Anthony McCane II [Bizzy Bone], Anthony Henderson [Krayzie Bone], Steven Howse [Layzie Bone], Stanley Howse [Flesh-n-Bone], Charles Scruggs [Wish Bone]), Tupac Shakur (2Pac), and Tom Middleton (DJ U-Neek); “Paper Planes” by Maya Arulpragasam (M.I.A.), Wesley Pentz (Diplo), Topper Headon, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon, and Joe Strummer; “Gun Harmonizing” by Ryan Daniel Montgomery (Royce da 5’9”); “Survival Tactics” by Jo-Vaughn Virginie Scott (Joey Bada\$\$) and Courtney Everal “Jamal” Dewar Jr. (Capital STEEZ); “One Shot 2 Shots” by Marshall Mathers (Eminem), Luis Resto, Ondre Moore, Von Carlisle, Denaun Porter, and Rufus Johnson; “Kill You” by Marshall Mathers (Eminem), Andre Young (Dr. Dre), and Melvin Breedon (Mel-Man), and the performance of it at the 2018 Bonaroo Music Festival, which drew criticism for its use of gunshot sound effects; “Who Shot Ya” by Christopher Wallace (The Notorious B.I.G.), Nasheed Myrick, and Sean Combs (Puff Daddy); and “A Tale of 2 Citiez” by Jermaine Cole (J. Cole) and Anderson Hernandez (Vinylz). The epigraph is from Jill McDonough’s poem, “Afraid,” which I first discovered in *Bullets into Bells* (see above). The poem also contains reference to Big Shaq—a fictional rapper portrayed by Michael Dapaah, whose humorous imitation of gunfire during his freestyle on Charlie Sloth’s BBC Radio 1xtra show “Fire in the Booth” spawned a number of Internet memes—and the murders of Biggie and 2Pac.

“12” is addressed to Ariana DeBose, an ensemble member of the original Off-Broadway and Broadway casts of *Hamilton: An American Musical*. In the three duels depicted in the musical, DeBose would simulate and embody the flight of a bullet across the stage, earning her the nickname “Baby Bullet.” The epigraph is from “The World Was Wide Enough” from *Hamilton: An American Musical* by Lin-Manuel Miranda.

“13” includes excerpts from the Columbine Report that were used in the script of the play *columbinus* by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli. I acted in a student production of *columbinus* during the spring semester of my freshman year at Emerson College, and at one point—during the sequence of the play that recreates the Columbine Massacre—took on the identity of John Savage, one of the survivors. In this poem, I imagine myself back into that role.

“16” contains a reference to the 1983 film *A Christmas Story*, directed by Bob Clark.

“17” quotes and directly references to the song “Mr. Policeman” by Michael Lloyd and its music video, from the 1986 *Kidsongs* home video *What I Want to Be!*, as well as “Alright” by Kendrick Duckworth (Kendrick Lamar), Pharrell Williams, and Mark Spears, and the performance of that song at the 2015 BET Awards. The epigraph is a tweet made by Chancellor Bennett (Chance the Rapper) on March 24, 2018. There is also a light reference to *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, and to the rapper Killer Mike (Michael Render), who participated in an interview on NRATV in the lead-up to the March for Our Lives, advocating for gun ownership.

“19” is inspired by Emma Gonzalez’s speech at the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C. on March 24, 2018. She spent a minute and 34 seconds speaking before going silent for 4 minutes and 26 seconds, adding up to 6 minutes and 20 seconds total—the amount of time it took for 17 students to be gunned down at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. (It was shortly after that tragedy that I started writing the poems that would eventually make up this sequence.)

“22” contains the phrase “thoughts and prayers,” which is also the title of this sequence, and is itself a kind of cultural reference. The phrase is often traced back to the response to the Columbine Massacre, and has typically been used by politicians and other public officials in the wake of large-scale tragic events, such as mass shootings. It has become a subject of heavy contention and criticism in the gun violence debate and, for many, a symbol of the failure and unwillingness of many of our politicians and fellow citizens to take action on this issue. In this poem, I reframe the phrase, applying the phrase to poetry itself. Does poetry represent a meaningful response to gun violence? Or is it just another form of inaction?

“24” contains lines (*italicized*) drawn from “Stick to Your Guns” by George Watsky and Kush Mody, featuring Julia Nunes, and “The Gun Song” from *Assassins* by Stephen Sondheim, respectively.

“25” would not exist without Robert Hass’s poem, “Dancing,” also discovered in *Bullets into Bells* (see above).