

Azia Armstead

Birthday Poem

“You may rejoice, I must mourn”

—Frederick Douglass

We wait for the show to begin in an open field on a blazing summer night. Fireworks are most lucent in the blackness of a sky with no sun which makes me think of blackness as a metaphor, how colors shine brightest when contrasted against it. Burning hues explode above our heads then sizzle to nothingness, beautiful and short-lived as a life with an untimely end. A series of thunderous booms jolt the chest, almost hard enough to break the body into a ghost. There’s a violence to this magic. It leaves a smoke that doesn’t clear until we do. They celebrate their fathers, their nation and its wildness and I don’t know what I have to do with any of it, except I know the short distance between joy and defeat and that nothing you love ever belongs to you. Sometimes, I wish I had been born on some other day. In the sweltering summer of ‘96, my mother welcomes me, her unamerican girl, which makes me think of the irony in such a birth. Black baby’s cry drowned by an anthem. America is a strange land in which I have no name, a country with which I share a birthday despite the immeasurable distance between us.

Note: This poem borrows language from Frederick Douglass’ speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

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