



**PSALMS  
FOR  
MOTHER  
EMANUEL**

ELEGY FROM PITTSBURGH TO CHARLESTON

## FOREWORD

*All things work together for good to them that love God,  
to them who are the called according to his purpose.*

— ROMANS 8:28

It requires a lot of faith to practice Romans 8:28. On June 17, 2015, a gunman walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church and opened fire on women, men and children concluding a Bible Study while their eyes were closed, “watching God.” The nine people killed were armed with Bibles and the Holy Spirit. My childhood friend and ministerial colleague, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, was killed. Our text message stream is still in my cellphone; I will not erase it. Waltrinia Middleton, a college friend, and her aunt, Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, were killed. These personal relationships made the tragedy sink in even more.

On July 10, 2015, the Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina State House. Many in my state and across the nation began having more serious conversations about race. I tremble thinking what it cost us to get there.

Emanuel A.M.E. Church is one of the most historic African-American churches in the nation. And Charleston is dubbed the “Holy City” for the plethora of churches that make up its landscape. Every corner of Charleston reminds us of past prejudices, recent hates and an optimistic future. There is a beauty in the city that is majestic. The nation saw it in the outpouring of love after June 17.

The Book of Psalms was the hymnbook of ancient Israel. The Book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible was written by several authors; the most noteworthy were David and Solomon. David wrote mostly when in danger, on the run, after he sinned and when his heart was shattered. David wrote when he was worshipping and praising G-d or when he was seeking comfort from YHWH.

The Emanuel Massacre broke my heart and the hearts of many people. The Pittsburgh community felt the depth of this tragedy and offered these psalms, laments, poems for us. In times like these we need various forms of comfort that will spark introspection and help us come together as a human family to be better than we were yesterday.

REV. CAREY A. GRADY | *Reid Chapel AME Church, Columbia, S.C.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Pittsburgh Foundation commissioned *Psalms for Mother Emanuel: Elegy from Pittsburgh to Charleston* to help spur our collective reflection on the meaning of the nine lives lost in the Charleston Massacre and the persistence of racial animus in our national life.

The 10 commissioned artists share works that evoke community, the significance and burden of place, and the injustice that institutional racism has scripted for African American lives. But these artists also summon hope in the face of trial and suffering, the blue sky above the blues in our throats. Collectively they provide a clarion call for the region and the nation to grapple with the requirements of a future truly free of racism.

We hope they provide a spark for continued reflection, dialogue and action.

Sincerely,

TAMEKA CAGE CONLEY | *contributing co-editor*

YONA C. HARVEY | *contributing co-editor*

GERMAINE WILLIAMS | *senior program officer for arts and culture*



## AND WHAT DID WATCHING BIRDS SING WHEN YOU GATHERED

Ghosts of ancestors line Charleston's shore  
hair coiling to dreadlocked fists

strong as steel they'd break  
their backs to make up north one day

or sweetgrass weaved so tight  
no water could escape

Behind them seagulls soar and dip black banded  
beaks as if to warn of coming loss

mothers, uncles,  
pastors, cousins, sisters.

What, then, of your bell tower birds  
at the moment of massacre beneath them—

did they rush the steeple, dark  
feather teardrops down white

stucco, or abide in dwelling  
witness to

sunrise years of laughing lace,  
pearls and spit-shined shoes

gleaming foreheads wet with glory  
boys bound for Sunday

School, bowties starched and blue  
outspread arms tilt this way and that

ready for ascent?

*In the day of trouble*

*He will keep me*

*safe in His dwelling*

And what did watching birds sing when you gathered  
again, gathered

hands outside the church  
backs to black and yellow caution

tape cautioning too late?  
Surely this: Beware prayers of earth's meek heirs

in the cross  
hairs of cowards' aim they rise

strong and sonorous as ancient conch  
calling forbears on shore bound

for suffering, so much  
suffering

survival bequeathed by blood  
and the scandal of forgiving vast

as ocean white-tipped  
and free.

## THE DOORS OF MOTHER EMANUEL ARE OPEN

When the preacher says, the doors of the church are open, he does not mean to tell you what you already know: you can walk into any open door you please.

—

No.

—

He telling you about your soul. And eternal. Life.

You can't make it without God.

—

Your body took place. In. Your body heavy with what it knew. Your body new in this holy place. Your body and your piece. Your body and its heat. Your body hears open songs of worship, high as doves, and the beating of your heart. Your body is. A broken song, singing. Your body is not. Hallelujah. Not sacrifice. Your body scrape. Your body hollow. Your body ground. Unholy. Your body ain't nothing new. Your body hooded. And holed. Your body foreign. And white.

And welcome.

—

Christ whooped the merchants from the temple. His body ran with sweat like it would soon run with blood. Can you beat it? The sinners' skins set ablaze by God? But when the devil in the sanctuary, and you do not know, how do you defend yourself?

—

But somebody felt it. In the bone. Something bout that boy didn't. Look right. Didn't. Feel right. Didn't go inside, though the doors opened. And stayed open. Somebody shook their head. Closed their mouth. Shook their head. Lifted their hands. Shook their head and lowered. Their head. Sucked their teeth. Felt spit. Felt water around the heart. Heavy, heavy, heavy as blood. Lifted their soul. Saw light. Said, Behold, Lord, thy servant. They feared the Lord, a flaming, holy fear. And treated that boy with love.

—

When the door opened, the bodies laid down/The bodies were laid down/  
When the door opened/The door opened as doors are made/To open/And  
all the bodies laid down

—

Jesus said, No one can take my life from me. Power. I have the authority to lay it down, to take it up again. Power.

—

All nine. Jesus. Sang. Jesus. When called. Jesus. They came. Jesus. Said yes. Jesus. And yes. Jesus. When he came. Jesus. And took. Jesus. Wasn't nothing. Jesus. To take. Jesus. They was already. Jesus. Laid down. Jesus. Already. Jesus. Surrendered. Jesus. Already. Jesus. Yours. Jesus. Already. Jesus. With you.

—

Selah.

## LUKE 19:40

*to Felicia Sanders*

love is insane.

grief

a wild thing the polite don't  
know. the rocks testify

relentlessly in their place.

the basement unravels  
the bedrooms are empty  
the people still smile and  
the days still

turn.

mother of bone and memory,

we are what god makes us

and we are  
unmade

grief

broken moonlight  
slice an empty bedroom  
winding like the wind in a graveyard  
waking the dead

mama, i don't know

why the sun shines  
like nothing ain't  
ever happen

before

love

is insane

a rolling rock

an open mouth with a name

concealed

copper under the bitten

tongue

waiting to wail

at dusk's end.

a wild thing—

what god makes us—

## THREE SORROWS

## I.

After the deaths of the black men, women, and children,  
I wanted to sing the song I'd heard once about a man killing

A poor old horse in a tanners yard except I wanted to make  
The horse a small black bird and the man a white child,

And I wanted to sing it to you. After I tried to imagine myself,  
Like you, Jesus, dead for a little while and singing to the stone

Of forgiveness, after I sang with fear or some adjacent feeling  
Of the small black bird beneath the stone the small white boy

Slammed down in the field beyond his house, my voice cracked.  
I hummed *black lives matter* because I was afraid to sing it

Out loud. Does it matter whether it is a poor old horse  
Or a blackbird? Inside each man is a boy whose father was too kind

Or cruel or absent; inside each boy is a mother with a song  
She did not sing often enough to him. I remember singing *Who cares*

*What was inside him* after a white boy in the north turned his gun  
On a roomful of children and then upon himself. Who cares

Whether madness, grief, stupidity, fear, or some adjacent feeling  
Comes before violence. I wanted to know what you think matters,

Lord. After trying to talk about it, I want to sing as you used to sing  
For a little while: *My mother's lonely. My father is a quiet man.*

## II.

In the hall of my grandmother's house  
Stood an old upright piano.  
Wherever I touched the keys sound

Sang and sprang out.  
I never called anyone *nigger*,  
I never stood at the edge

Of a choir afraid to sing out.  
Behind my white face I wear the mask  
Of a black woman's face. I am lonely enough

To murder. I am lonely enough to hate  
Everything in my face. After  
A black bird is stoned in a field,

The black bird lies next to the stone  
Like a lover with her arms thrown open,  
With her small mouth opened,

And out of which springs a song  
A boy cannot decipher.  
Inside the Mother Emanuel African

Methodist Episcopal Church  
Nine beautiful niggers pray in the pews  
Like birds. And I say, Jesus Fucking Christ

To myself and my gun is heavier  
Than the weight of a life.

When I was young I found a black

Bird with a broken wing in a field.  
And as I stoned the bird I imagined  
I was stoning a face until I was splattered

With awe. And when I got home  
From the field and went to my room,  
I sang out a song of inevitable sorrow.

When I looked in the mirror  
I saw the eyes in a black woman's face,  
Her skin aglow in the distance.

Murder is filled with sorrow. I don't know  
Who cares. I don't care who knows  
I am lonely. I am lonely. I am lonely.



### III.

Say hello to the little boy  
Whose poor head is filled with noise  
For I'm the bird he's fixed to kill  
For singing this song in the field

*Blue blackbirds, Blue blackbirds  
Hear what is done to the singing birds*

His hands around my wondrous wings  
Plucked feathers my mother once stroked  
I held the song within my throat  
I sang after my body broke

*Black bluebird, Black bluebird  
Hear what is done to a singing bird*

And now to make my music still  
He took a stone up from the field  
I sang to the stone like a lover though  
For none could crush my trembling throat

*Poor small boy, poor small boy  
Hear what you did to a singing bird*

His blows beat down upon my song  
But the song remained when I was gone  
When the boy walked home  
To a lonely room I heard the tune he hummed

SHEILA CARTER-JONES

## GUIDED BY STARDUST. AGAIN.

*We all have the same name.*

*There's nowhere else to go.*

*Some of us will still have to die here.*

My old man Uncle Charlie Boy said that.  
But I didn't want to believe that.  
Until all nine did. Die. Again.

*Made me a believer. Again.*

They went marching. Waving the good  
book of justice. Changing me to light.  
Anyone to light willing to pray.

*God willing.*

Some call them a group of six and three.  
I call each ordinary name in a litany of sound  
rolling off my grieving tongue.

*Gentle soldiers.*

Hear my cry out for the life of Miss Susie.  
Memory of sweet collard greens locked  
in my history of mothers and taste buds.

Say, hear me give breath to Reverend Daniel.  
Pure Purple Heart courage. Fought evil  
with love and won a victory for all of us.

Listen to me sing praises to Miss Ethel Lee.  
Loved love. Loved blood-rhythms pushing  
us a step closer. Closer to glory.

*How sweet the sound.*

Keep an ear on how Miss Myra never stopped  
holding stars in her eyes. Reached and grabbed  
one right from the sky the day she walked away.  
Ordained.

A.K. PAYNE

## MIDNIGHT, HEALING

in the holy city, man who will not be named  
kills nine with a pistol in a black church.

they do not tell you that one bullet pierced jesus.  
hole where his eye once was, red paint like blood on cheeks jesus,  
shattered skull like fifty years ago in Birmingham.

you find this yourself.

in the holy city, the confederate flag is stuffed  
into the back of your throat. you stand,  
nakedconfusedgagging,  
in the church with your hands raised to this jesus. white and bloody  
and blind, jesus

you discover communion, made hard to swallow for all the cotton.

in the holy city, they tell you the confederate flag  
sings a song for the soil,  
but really it sings a song for your death,  
impetus for tortured dance on carolina dirt,  
forced grin extending to cheeks.

this dance escapes you. and here you are all convulsion.

in the dark, in the church, in the holy city,  
you still struggle to breathe, spitting up the confederacy  
before this blind jesus who scratches deep  
into the insides of your palms with suthernpride.

in the holy city, at dawn,  
thousands of steeples on the horizon.  
your body curved like a sickle,  
knees pressed into the carpet of this church.

the sun smears herself onto the eyes of jesus,  
her own mud and saliva. your embattled palms become morning offerings,  
like your own communion, prayer for survival.

the flag still hangs from your throat,  
limp and weakened, drowned out  
with fresh crimson blood and broken bread.

KELLI STEVENS KANE

## DONATIONS

*for Polly Sheppard, Felicia Sanders, and her granddaughter*

in the basement of  
Mother Emanuel, next to those boxes  
for *Emanuel Nine*

for you, the three survivors  
are packages from Pittsburgh  
filled with

words you want to hear  
from friends who don't  
know what to say

around the clock  
relief from  
nightmares

sanity  
safety  
strength

and front row seats in  
our memories, our  
history, our hearts

forevermore

of twelve  
let the world speak  
not nine

1.

“What does it mean to see a black church burn?”

*Bear’s Breech, Blue Star*

and, furthermore, I buried my sister

hushed, white *Roses*

and, furthermore, I buried my lover

and, anyway, he never said, “forgive”

June-yanked *Yarrow*

*Barrenwort creeps*

Mary, don’t you weep, oh, Mary

2.

and, furthermore, we buried our mother

*Bugbane, Bee Balm*

“What does it mean to see a black church burn?”

up Calhoun Street,

up Ravenel Bridge

And who among us speaks for us all, not

me, too simple,

too, soon to say

just what I feel when black churches

3.

burn, the door closing, burn, and furthermore,

*Black-eyed Susan*

And, furthermore, we buried our father

June-snatched *Yarrow*

*Hens & Chickens, Rosettes* between rock

the hell that crept through our door of ages

Jerusalem

*Sage, Lavender*

*Cotton, Coreopsis* corners

4.

And, furthermore, I buried my grandson

*Bearded Iris*

What does it mean when our black blood turns? *Lamb’s*

*Ear, Texas Sage*

*False Red Yucca*, swat moths away, sinners

and sin. Must we always invite them in?

*False Indigo*

*Gayfeather, Thrift*

Must we always invite them in?

5.

And, furthermore, I buried my anguish

*Coronation*

Gold in my palms after rain, and further-

more, *Violet*

What does it mean when we memorize Psalms

Or “stand in the way that sinners take,” or

*Umbrella Sedge*

*Joe-Pye Weed*

Or, sparrow over sycamore

6.

*Forget-me-not*, Father, *Forget-me-not*

Mother, Forget

me not, Saints. For You created my in-

most being, You

knit me together in my mother’s womb

And, furthermore, I buried my husband

*Bamboo, Goutweed*

*Evening Primrose*

Mother don’t you weep, Mother, don’t

7.

Moan and *Plantain Lily*, widen your shawl

*Solomon's Seal*

before you tighten it, Come by here, Lord

Come by here, Lord

What does it mean when our suffering returns?

twofold, threefold, fourfold, ten—and if they

turn, let us shout

let us shout, Saints

What shall we shout when our suffering

8.

returns? If they can burn a cross, they can—

*Lady's Mantle*

burn a church. If they can burn a church, they

can burn *Coral*

*Bells*. If they can burn *Coral Bells*, they can—

one bullet, two bullet, ten bullet, more

hushed white roses

*Baby's Breath*, *Prick-*

*ly Pear*. I lack nothing.

9.

Blood on a church pew like *Snow in Summer*

*Dutch Iris*, *Dead*

*Nettle*, *Baby's Breath*

*Delphinium*

*Queen*. I lack nothing. I shall not want. I

shall not want. I shall not want. I shall not—

shovel winter

Snow. No blood on pews,

nor floors, nor stairs at summer's door.

CAMERON BARNETT

## IF A BAG OF SILVER COINS AND A BAG OF BULLETS SOUND THE SAME

then take my ears, I do not need them

America can look

a muzzle in the face and not see

its own hand behind the barrel

then take my eyes I do not want them

and if prayers no longer suffice then take

my lips and undo my tongue from its moorings.

Lord, take each part of me back

until You don't recognize my image

What is the opposite of a kiss

anyway? There will be no lice or locusts

no boils or bloodied rivers to tread

no frogs or fire or firstborns doomed Leave me

my palms and know if I put them up to the sky

I am asking to be filled

not with lead

but with Your love

A bible group hummed some holy hymnal

before the evening ran red A gun hummed

nine death notes and I watched You catch

each one. What is the opposite of mercy?

Delusions of white power higher than Sinai

Lord, leave me something to ache

for those souls delivered

too soon What is there to do but cover

your neighbor as you would have them

cover you? What more will You take

of me? I am sick up to my neck

but if You leave my arms

I will climb flagpoles

while the people say *goodbye Rhodesia*

*goodbye Klan goodbye red mantle and star-shackled blue bars*

If America is some promised land

let me be the ocean's highest tide Mother

will not drown The people cry

*Emanuel!*

so You must be here They are not afraid

to be Your lighthouse of hope In the name

of Thy Son let me fill the church to the steeple

and I will wash sin and spilled blood alike

And if water is rebirth Lord make my flood holy

## COMMISSIONED ARTISTS

TAMEKA CAGE CONLEY | *co-contributing editor*

A native of Louisiana, she received her bachelor's in English at Dillard University in New Orleans and her doctoral degree in English at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. A 2012 nominee for the Pushcart Prize for Poetry, has been published in *Huizache: The Magazine of Latino Literature*, *Fledgling Rag*, *Chapter & Verse* and *Callaloo*.

YONA HARVEY | *co-contributing editor*

Yona Harvey is the author of the poetry collection, *Hemming the Water*, winner of the Kate Tufts Discovery Award from Claremont Graduate University. Her work has been anthologized in many publications including *A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry* and *The Force of What's Possible: Accessibility and the Avant-Garde*.

CAMERON BARNETT

Cameron Barnett is a poet from the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. He earned bachelor's degrees in English writing and Spanish from Duquesne University. In 2014 he took first place in The University of Pittsburgh's Academy of American Poets Graduate Poetry Award contest.

LIBERTY FERDA

Liberty Ferda writes on race and adoption for The Lost Daughters website and has work featured in various regional publications, including *Carnegie Mellon Today Magazine*, *Pitt Magazine* and *RemakeLearning.com*.

VANESSA GERMAN

Vanessa German is an award-winning multidisciplinary artist based in the Homewood community of Pittsburgh. The third of five children, Vanessa was born in Wisconsin and raised in Los Angeles.

TERRANCE HAYES

Terrance Hayes is the author of *How to Be Drawn* (Penguin 2015) and *Lighthouse* (Penguin 2010), winner of the 2010 National Book Award and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His other books are *Wind In a Box* (Penguin 2006), *Hip Logic* (Penguin 2002) and *Muscular Music* (Tia Chucha Press, 1999).

SHEILA CARTER JONES

Sheila Carter-Jones charts in images and music the lived experiences of a small-town girl brought up in a house across from the boney dump of Republic Steel Coal Mines outside of Pittsburgh. She has been published in *Pennsylvania Review* and *Pittsburgh Quarterly*.

KELLI STEVENS KANE

Kelli Stevens Kane is a poet, playwright, oral historian and performer. She performs nationally, including appearances at the Cornelia Street Cafe and Bowery Poetry Club in New York City, and The New Hazlett Theater and Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.

JOY KMT

Joy KMT is self-taught & queer & black & femme & hood & poet & mother & lover. She works from the possibility of the personal to be collectively transformational. Her poetry has appeared in *Check The Rhyme: An Anthology of Female Emcees and Poets* and *Amistad: Howard's Literary Journal*.

ALEXIS PAYNE

The national nonprofit Alliance for Young Artists and Writers picked Alexis Payne as one of its 16 Portfolio Gold Medal Award winners in its annual contest. She currently attends Yale University.

The Pittsburgh Foundation commissioned *Psalms for Mother Emanuel* to commemorate the first anniversary of the June 17, 2015 shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Ten artists created works in response to the massacre. The limited edition of 1,000 includes 100 handmade chapbooks by Pittsburgh artists. Special thanks to Bob Beckman of Artist Image Resource, who advised the project and offered space for bookmaking; Jasdeep Khaira of Encyclopedia Destructica, who oversaw the artist bookmaking process and production; and Rick Landesberg, Amanda Holl, and the team at Landesberg Design, which provided inspiration and design expertise in creating the chapbook.



Established in 1945, The Pittsburgh Foundation is one of the nation's oldest community foundations and is the 13th largest of more than 750 community foundations across the United States.

As a community foundation, our resources comprise endowment funds established by individuals, businesses and organizations with a passion for charitable giving and a deep commitment to the Pittsburgh community. The Foundation currently has more than 2,000 individual donor funds and, together with its supporting organizations, assets of more than \$1.14 billion. Grantmaking benefits a broad spectrum of community life within Pittsburgh and beyond.

The Foundation has strengthened its focus on community and the positive impact it strives to achieve through its grantmaking, the engagement of its donors in critical regional issues and its activities around convening and leadership in collaboration with funding and civic partners.

MAXWELL KING | *president and CEO*

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