


LUTHER HUGHES


Dearest

Ben Keita, Seattle, WA, 2017

He was missing, and nobody said to look for his light.
It wasn't asked, but *suicide* was mentioned.
Lynched, first.

It's morning now. From my window, I'm watching
a teenage boy toss a basketball into the air
while sitting under a dead tree. I can't stop wondering
about the boy from the article, the tree he belongs to.
I want the dead tree outside my window to be maple.
Sweet and strong like a child's name.

It hasn't been enough time since I thought of him
as something past tense.

How does it feel to be both memory and, like a moon
hanging in the afternoon sky, here?

It is *hanging*, right? Not *hung*?

I mentioned morning. I haven't forgotten.
Quickly, I can lose myself if I'm not too careful,
but notice how the sky swells into a white flag
when we're not looking? How the birds molt black
with weary? The tree is anxious, thinking it will have the boy,
but the boy leaves, and the tree retreats.

The choice to give up can be difficult. I know.
I once watched a cockroach swim in a sink full of water
and then with some glimmer of promise, stop
as if the choice was so simple.

Someone once called *that* cruelty. Someone once saw
his face and said, *This creature isn't meant to live.*



I have thought myself a creature worthy of Death,
 alone and listening to the city slice the night.
I am worthy, I tell myself. I touch my face
for a brief moment and the city is upon me
begging me to live.

On worthiness, there is the breath I take.
There is the dead tree surrounded by living things:
 the whisper of lavender; the swallow trotting
on the sidewalk; the grass becoming a small, ignorant field;
the group of children running to the playground.

But the dead have no place to run. To my window, I come
 to meditate on the trees. Which one is strongest?
Which one can carry a boy, brag when he becomes a museum?
Maple? Douglas fir? Black cottonwood?

In Seattle, the wind is tender. At times, foul.
It lifts me up against the closest tree
 and the tree, like a bell, rings.

