

# NEWSWORTHY

*poems*



**DEBORAH  
D.E.E.P.  
MOUTON**

Newsworthy

Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton

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## PRAISE FOR *NEWSWORTHY*

*Newsworthy* has solved an important and difficult equation: How does one not shy away from the direct glare of these horrors and not despair? Mouton has written a collection in which the most harrowing stories interlace with the always boundless imagination of children and the music such imagination conjures. It is this imagination—even as it runs into sour realities—that frames a black resilience born of our ability to absorb, integrate, make new, redefine, and be redefined by all which meets us. She dances powerfully and smoothly while looking us in the eye, and in that work has achieved something wonderful, rare, and as old as Blackness itself. This is the collection you need if you want to be gifted new ways with which to meet and successfully tackle old demons. We owe Deborah Mouton a great debt.”

—Roger Bonair Agard, performance artist and author of  
*Bury My Clothes*

*Newsworthy* is an honest title. This is a timely, important collection written by a powerful and urgent voice. Mouton gives us a treasure trove pregnant with polyrhythmic gems about loss, pain, death, injustice, memory, and the problems at the core of American heartbreak. Recommended? No; this is required reading.”

—Gabino Iglesias, *PANK* magazine

“Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton’s *Newsworthy* is a startlingly timely collection of poems that explores the murders of Black Americans. Despite Death’s ever-presence in these poems, her verse is alive, syntactically and rhythmically.”

—Porsha Olayiwola, poet and activist

“Unflinchingly heartfelt—a daring, essential work.”

—Tim Seibles, author of *Fast Animal*

# NEWSWORTHY

Poems

Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton



BLOOMSDAY

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*To Mother, Father, and Joshua for teaching me how to fight back*

*To all the families still waiting for justice*



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**NEWSWORTHY**



## The Time We Learned to Report

Summer stoop, South Central, L.A. Two children playing News. Josh kneels behind a makeshift cardboard desk. His nine-year-old legs finding it awkward to bend into childhood. Within reach, a yellow Playskool tape recorder. Inside, a cassette labeled “Summertime Jams” (MC Hammer, Ace of Base), recording tabs taped up. Cued for erasing and re-recording. Josh broadcasts: *Breaking news. Today a house, built by my own two hands, went up in a ball of flames. Inside, a brave G.I. Joe tried to save Babysitter Barbie, but it was too late. Tearjerker. Now let’s go to Amandla in the field. Amandla?* His sister, five, pushes flower barrettes from her forehead. Spoon microphone clings to her chin. *Today the jump rope record was broken. Again. Twenty times and counting. I did it! I’m the be—*. Josh interrupts, says not news. Too naive. Can’t see what’s important. Table shutters under silent weight. Amandla stomps out. Whispers: *I’m gonna tell.*

Now live from the field  
Cutouts spilling from cupped hands  
Watch the story light

## First Time Around the Block

64 miles

1

2

3

4 | 5

Feet syncopate

hopscotch

under ripe street lights

Sun crawls down the

backside of the mountain

We sand our hands

in four squares

on rubber balls

We bounce Sally Walker

and a cool drink of Kool-aid

powder in sugared Ziploc

till all parts of our mouths

stained cherry rebel

defiant

6

7

8

9 | 10

Streets so alive in L.A.

don't nobody want the night

to come just want the day

forever run like a highway

turn ourselves invisible  
when Momma calls

*Don't take that ball*

*all angry*

*The day done left*

*you boy*

That streetlight not hot yet  
ignore the glow  
for the sting  
of Pop Rocks in our cheeks  
and Big League tiring our chew

10 | 9

8

7

6

This time  
when momma calls  
seems more ambulance  
in her throat  
more flashing light  
in her eyes more  
than just a halogen  
flickering bulb on concrete  
She says our names  
like they are blood moons  
in a clear sky

that no one wants to see  
Like a routine turned  
into red mouth outcry  
A frenzy of our shadowy feet  
cockroaching from the asphalt  
towards our mothers'  
arms unaware

5 | 4

3

2

run

The unknowing left that night  
We watch their feet  
turn Rodney soccer ball  
Police: no longer the place to run  
when lost  
Police: run longer  
or be a lost place  
colored lips  
gushing a bloody drink  
more thirsty for the darkness  
than the sun  
and we  
a chalk-outlined number  
needing to be  
stomped

## Bird

1,616 miles

I didn't understand the  
phrase a *chicken with its*  
*head cut off* until you

They called you Byrd  
envied your strut  
'round town 'nuff to wrangle it

into a pickup bed  
a ride to coop,  
'nother name for slaughter

To behead a bird  
should be a most  
humane execution

Wrung your neck  
against a blind culvert  
you molted over three miles  
before they realized  
you weren't even alive  
just a headless shell  
of plumage strewn over  
skidmark asphalt  
exhaust de-feathering your limbs



When they dropped you  
in the mouth of the  
cemetery  
I began to crave  
monster  
—a delicacy for the druggable

## Eleven Questions for Political Asylum

2,771 miles

1. Hadn't you heard  
you were not an island  
Boy?
2. You were a wetback  
in a sea full of dollars?
3. Why did you smell  
so saltwater fresh  
so Côte d'Ivoire released?
4. Didn't you know how to lose  
your accent faster?
5. Didn't you know how a lone  
immigrant aches?

*Should've called  
yourself transplant  
instead, called yourself  
a first generation free*

6. Heard "Liberté, égalité, fraternité"?
7. Did you know they stole  
that too?

*Should've said you were just  
borrowing      your brown  
Said you were just stretching  
                         the truth  
Said you were tired  
of holding it all in  
                                 your pockets  
Sometimes the truth  
is mistaken  
                                 for a gun*

8. Hadn't you fallen  
asleep yet?

9. Dreamt in American?

10. Awoken a swat vest Black  
average New York nigger  
a landing pad  
for nineteen muzzle flashes  
a hardworking bullseye?

11. Didn't your momma  
ever teach you how  
dangerous  
reaching  
can be?





## **The Time We Were Aliases**

Josh, 15, ventures out. An adolescent need for speed. He forgoes dressing: white flag of a T-shirt and boxer shorts. He's not planning on stopping anywhere. Officers pull him over on the 91, between Compton and his home. Say he was driving twenty over the limit. Say he was swerving, but don't test his breath. They record his name as an alias for a fugitive of a similar name (different face, address, age, but similar name) wanted for grand theft auto. Josh, visibly shaken, denies any affiliation. Still booked. He is now Suspect. He calls his mother, but it's the middle of the night. It rings unanswered in the dark.

We are silhouettes  
Bodies morphed into shadows  
Lost to the spotlight

## Bell and Requiem

2,789 miles

Tomorrow's Bells won't sound in glee  
no bouquets tossed in midday air  
no need to boast of bended knee  
no pinned organza veiling hair

Her father's gift she will remain  
no need to change a name for dance  
the roses will not be in vain  
but find themselves in mourning's stance

For his Nicole, no bride to be  
won't hold his body hostage long  
mascara turned to filigree  
wrap his murder in unjust song

For every forget of his name  
my dear, force-feed them all of his refrain

## Freak Show Station

435 miles

Hurry hurry!  
Step right up  
It's the most exciting  
show in town *I don't wanna watch*

Oscar Grant's death  
was recorded from  
multiple angles  
by various BART  
passengers

Keep your arms and  
legs clear of the cage  
Make sure not to step  
outside of the train

*I don't wanna watch*

All are shaky

Sights, sounds  
wild things  
await you

*What did you do  
wrong?*

in Blair Witch clarity  
Some have no sound  
Some are a raging  
cacophony of gasps  
and guns

Please ladies and  
gentlemen  
No flash photography  
We don't want  
to alarm the  
bloodthirsty beasts  
on the platform

*Somebody say  
something*

Camera phones  
ready?

*Why are we filming  
this?*



Most sites that host  
his handcuffed  
heaven-send are  
profitable

This next segment  
may startle young  
viewers  
Are you ready to see  
the greatest trick of  
all?

*Get off of him!*  
*He didn't do anything*  
*What are they doing?*

on YouTube after  
six-figure views

Watch a life  
disappear before  
your very eyes

Watch as subway  
platform becomes  
one-shot-stop  
Watch a man soften  
into a pile of forgotten  
Please cover your ears  
for the pop

*Leave him alone!*  
*He's already down*  
*Why are their guns*  
*drawn?*  
*Stop!*

Oscar Grant's death  
has been enjoyed  
over five million  
times

Don't worry viewers  
He will be fine  
just sleeping off the  
life

*The first time*  
*I watched*  
*a man die*

Don't mind the  
trainers  
Sometimes excessive

force is the only way

Don't forget to  
give them a good  
review

I didn't share it

Remember these are  
just being broken in

Viral videos  
I won't unsee

After all our infamy  
depends on you



## The Time We Went Over the Edge

Monday morning. Amandla is called to the school office. First thought: another surprise trip to Magic Mountain. Would the Viper push danger into her lungs again? When Josh told her someone died on it, she had laughed it off. Her mother quivers her signature, wipes tears, grabs Amandla's hand. Says she has packed her bag, but this doesn't feel like a vacation. Josh is in jail. Amandla snickers. Her usual role. *Mom, stop playing*. But Mom is locked in. No tears. Crying means believing. G-force pinning them along every curve of the 91. Each broken law its own death drop. Loop de loop. At the prison, her mother's pace burns grooves into the floor. Hours waiting in snaky lines. More hours begging them to run his prints. To clear his name. Premature verdict. Maximum security. Twin Towers Correctional. General population. No getting off. Her boy is not built for this.

Blurred hulks in twilight  
Tracks swell toward endless downfall  
Flagpoles pierce the heart

## Sanford Sweet

2,487 miles

I remember the iced tea  
we used to brew  
on my mother's back  
porch just outside her garden

How it steeped  
against the ground  
till deep-seated

How the sticky sweet  
Alabama honey  
stuck to our  
everywhere

I wonder how hard  
they had to scrub  
to get the Trayvon off

Was it calm,  
George,  
calling it in?

Dream of Paradise  
under an Arizona rainbow  
sepia-ignorant bliss?

Whisper under breath  
if we stack flowers at every site  
this world can be Eden

again

I stand here  
in the wilderness of kitchen  
the linoleum tiles  
a dry bubbling beneath  
my bare feet

Our nursery  
is quiet tonight  
for all the right reasons  
The eerie of crib mobile  
plays soundtrack  
to a muted television

Over a casket of  
fruit spoiling before bite  
under crescendo of kettle  
in the most shameful  
whisper say  
*I'm so glad we had  
a girl*

## Summoning

1,996 miles

I got up early this morning, wore my woman today  
Got up so early this morning, wore all my woman today  
Though this sable seeped through, I thought I'd be safe

I held my baby's hand close, thought we'd be here for years  
I, I, I, I held my baby's hand real close, thought we'd be here for years  
But even standing this close, don't keep you free from fear

Thought he reached for his cell phone, don't know why he'd shoot  
Saw him reach for his cell phone, God, why he'd shoot  
Just being a mighty tree, is asking to tear out your roots

I ain't no gentlewoman, that's the honest truth  
Now I wasn't a gentle woman, may be the honest truth  
Hey, Hey, didn't make me bulletproof

(Don't know what I got to be who I got to be  
God I will not be your next  
of kin to #sayyourname)







## The Time We Learned the Rules

Back of the courtroom. Mother and Amandla unwelcome flies on the wall. Their sweaty palms. The creaking threat of being held in contempt. The judge calls his name. Orange and filthy, a broken oriole weighed down by chains. After seven days, did not know how to lift his head. Amandla, just a chick herself, replaying every rumble on the back porch. The adults holding court. Every whisper that said he had always been rebellious, now this? The judge raises his gavel. A moment released. No contest. Amandla expects Mother to take flight to him. Swoop beneath his falling body and give him rescue. But the door is open. She is gone. Whistles for Amandla to come. That's not how freedom works. You should know the rules by now.

//

Their parents take Josh and Amandla to a restaurant. Josh had barely eaten, not bathed in a week. Local authorities enter. Sit near the entrance of the establishment. Josh not done. At the sight of the four uniformed patrolmen, Suspect sits up straight. Goes silent. Slows to chew each bite like a leather bit. Looks at his baby sister, Amandla, and swallows.

Slow motion whiplash  
Hands held under the table  
We can't clean our plates

## Gas Station Libretto

2,367 miles

Jordan R. Davis—Teenage Passenger, Alto

Michael Dunn—Software Developer and Driver, Bass

Chorus of Three—Onlookers, Altos and Sopranos

Handgun—Veteran Instrument, Baritone

A gas station in Jacksonville, Florida; the day after  
Thanksgiving.

(Handgun appears on stage dressed as an innocent bystander.  
Begins the *Azione Teatrale* in falsetto.)

HANDGUN

Ladies and gentlemen!

Our actors are deep

in the turmoil of travel

when we find them

at the station

both have run empty

in need of refill

but not the same kind

Listen! Hark the bass

the incoming Durango

the roaring rap machine

plows into the scene

a vessel for the undoing

Then enter  
from the west  
the sputter of sedan  
the silent carrier

Alas, my belly is beginning to  
hunger and so it shall be full  
once again

Mark this  
the entrance of grief  
the breath leaving  
the journey has begun  
heed its unraveling

(The thud and pulse of a loud car radio announces the entrance of the players. Jordan, accompanied by three onlookers, bounce in merriment on the wheels of a Dodge Durango looking to score cigarettes and gum for the ride. Michael enters accompanied by his swooning lover. They pull into the station to refresh themselves with white wine and chips. It's 7:25 P.M. under a half moon. Bass rattles both cars.)

HANDGUN

It begins! It begins!

(Michael approaches the Durango, swinging its passenger door open. A bloom of red marches across his face. His hands a fury of motion.)

CHORUS

(Piano decrescendo)

Calm down

It's only music

It's only music

Calm down

(Michael leans closer to the passenger. A sharp gesture aimed at the sound system, then a jabbed finger at his own trembling car.)

HANDGUN

And then the rise

What shall he say?

JORDAN

Who are you?

We don't have to turn down anything

(Slow piano crescendo; string section joins in diminished chords. Michael, now burgundy mad, flails his arms, waves his finger to condescend.)

JORDAN

What are you talking about?

(Michael rubs his skin as if in justification and mouths the words *your kind* between staccato-horned expletives.)

JORDAN

Man, move around with that shit  
Who do you think you're talking to?

(Piano crescendo, drums)

CHORUS

Stand down but  
Stand your ground  
Jordan, don't give up now

(Michael attempts to reach into the car, pushed back by chorus.)

JORDAN

Or else what?

(Michael calms, the red settles. His hands unball from fists. He becomes a pursed smile.)

JORDAN

I don't care who you are  
I gotta right to play what I want

HANDGUN

(Laughing)

Come for me now  
Let me show you  
How a brute is awakened  
How a line can't be uncrossed

a bell unrung  
How to quiet a boy  
without saying a word  
Come now  
for me

(Laughter of Handgun continues. Michael retreats out of sight.  
Tension, a pulsing passenger.)

#### CHORUS

Stand your ground  
Stand your ground  
Jordan, don't give in

#### JORDAN

(In whistle register)

I won'—

(Ten shots, a rapid-fire kick bass, split the ear. Michael's shadow  
backs away slowly.)

END

## Filter

1,789 miles

Before the airplane's wheels  
kissed the tarmac goodbye  
the story had changed twice:

Black son brother boy  
~~walking~~ running fleeing  
down the street with a friend associate accomplice  
when the police agitated profiled routinely stopped them  
in the nearby neighborhood of Ferguson, Missouri  
The officer assumed was notified  
of the young man's teenager's thug's involvement  
in a convenience store theft of \$2 tobacco, cigarillos, cigars  
Witnesses say that the youth surrendered to,  
~~protected himself from~~ assaulted  
the officer provoking him to fire multiple shots  
into the boy's unarmed still threatening body

I sat with my cheek pressed  
against the cold  
double-paned window  
checking if I could still  
feel all of the  
~~the living~~ the dying



I looked down below  
hoping I could catch a glimpse  
of the city ablaze  
his name incensed on  
our ~~angry~~ weary skin

His body lay there  
all through my flight  
a street spectacle  
The neighbors pleaded  
just to cover him in ~~decency~~ shame  
His mother sobbing  
as he puddled into  
another stained pothole

## Open Season

1,789 miles

I have felt  
the weather changing  
falling leaves  
painting the sidewalks  
As a transplanted Texan  
this hoof-printed fall  
reminds me  
hunting season has opened early

Every good hunter knows  
you need  
a good dog and a good gun  
Get as close to your target as possible  
make sure they can't see you clearly  
this can be tricky  
hunting through thicket

Don't bother  
sitting on top of an open hill  
watching the surrounding pastures  
and brushy banks  
You're better inside the ~~hood~~ woods  
So that if a ~~boy~~ buck  
approaches  
you can move back  
stalk through cover

(scan the forest  
through a scope)

Dark fur  
oversized antlers  
the ones whose pelt sags  
just below their waist  
have the most tender innards

This one looked injured  
dipped when he walked  
already took a shot at 'em  
looked under 35

That's good

Get 'em too old  
they may have learned  
how to run  
how to stay quiet  
invisible

(walk like a bandana  
is weighing down  
your back pocket)

Wanna guaranteed kill  
use the envy of money  
purchase a call  
make it sound like a mother's voice  
screaming out

Jesus!

or the ringing of Sean's wedding bells  
My favorite sounds like a pretty girl  
whispering "I love you"  
anything that sounds familiar  
or offers false hope

Once you got 'em in your crosshairs  
Aim right under the hoodie  
Stand your ground  
Invite a friend  
Tell 'em we don't shoot to eat

We will be legends  
like Steve Irwin vs. Crocodile

(Don't be quick be quiet

you saw this coming)



## The Time We Were Thugs

Half a country away at college, Amandla receives a call from back home. Mother. Says she and Father are okay. They are okay. Says they were stopped tonight. On the back road behind the church after service. After Father gave the benediction. A blessing to hold for the week. Christmas play rehearsal went well. Everyone was memorized. They are okay. Mother says she swears, though Mother never swears. The officers saw the car. The cocaine-white Lincoln on whitewalls. Heavy in the back from the weight of a boy. One with a cap who lived close. They offered him a ride home. The fog thick in those parts. They drove slowly with no rush to be anywhere. Father now a senior citizen and Mother with the top of the hill in sight. Police thought they were a gang. From the rear window. Dreads. Afro. Baseball cap cocked over do-rag like the local bangers. Too calm to be trusted. After following them for blocks, the lights flashed on when they crossed into unincorporated Perris. Both doors swung open simultaneously. Guns drawn. Mother and Father's hands were all you could see. Blinded by flashlights. Doors rocking on their hinges. A livid breath held until the truth rose its head. Father said he was a member of Cops and Clergy. Father said he was the chaplain for the fire department. They ask him for his I.D. Then they are a stuttering apology. A warning that a taillight can be a death sentence. Mother says they are okay. They, buckled in tighter amidst the thinning air and woodgrain, sang "We Shall Overcome" to a wrenching silence. The boy made it home to his grandmother. Amandla clinches the phone tighter. She has studied for this test before.

Saying I'm okay  
Over and over again  
Only way to breathe

**Tetras**

791 miles

We watched  
your rise

to infamy, neon  
through our cracks

our seams  
pulled loose

Your swell has taught us  
to school against blue

Trailing blood  
we sunburst into captivity

Your cloaked batons  
fashioned for our surrendered

already marked  
hearts

You, Ferguson  
the executioner's battleground



You,  
the urban trench

Our gunpowder skin  
makes the world

see flickers of us  
Makes the world see us firework

monochromatic red,  
You, sunken Independence Day.

## Wolf Cry

1,623 miles

Before bedtime  
my father's father would grab us  
by the feet  
tickle until  
the laughter would stream from us

My father's rendition was to trap us  
between his legs arrest our lungs  
in the suspension of howl double us over  
on the floor until we swore the wind wasn't in us

There was a father on the corner  
when the CDs dropped  
a snigger caught sneaking bread piece  
no foul cry  
no stop in sight

Until the cops  
remembered theirs  
brought the night early  
held him until he cried  
until his feet found no ground

Collapsed, deflated, a father  
in fable, his oxen-blue  
face

and we watched  
and we watched

I cried  
a sea of black  
youth, that would never grow  
into fathers  
of anything

## **Kel-Tec PF-9**

Anywhere

A rare piece of American history  
released online for auction by the United Gun Group

The pistol procured by a former police officer, a bargain for any  
connoisseur of American heartbreak

The firearm icon carries the case number from the battle of Trayvon  
in permanent marker

While it is fairly young in age, it has seen its share of bloodshed  
This item has already piqued the interest of many  
police departments' training programs

Funds will be used to aid in the representation  
of police officers appealing their wrongful death suits

Opening bid \$100,000

Will appreciate  
in value  
with use



## The Time We Came Close

There. Just past the suburbs they are building. May Ranch. On the street just paved. But not yet painted. They will say she didn't stay in her lane. That she slid into the intersection. Right where they are putting in the street light. There is nothing there but dark asphalt and an open field of alfalfa. Amandla. A California stop. A seventeen-year-old and a back road after sunset. Did you hear about the other girls? The ones the police made strip on the side of the road? While they blocked traffic hiding their hands' caress and deep dives? Over a dozen of them. They all started like this. Amandla sits in her car. Alone. Her eyes wide. Officer darkens the passenger-side window. Taps. A spotlight. She has to open it. He leans so far in she can see his cavities. And all the things he wants to fill. He asks how to get her home. Her heart audible. Her finger a spinning compass. Sober. His lips drunk with power. Officer opens door. Slides in. She, pressed against her door, fingers gripping handle. She could carry her own weight in sprint down the dirt road. He doesn't make her. This time is a warning. This time is a slap on the wrist. This time.

Not your enemy  
Forcibly you came for me  
You leave me no choice

## Walmart Welcome

1,103 miles

Tape rolls and glass doors open wide  
no sunshine welcome or recompense  
track John's lawful aisle stride  
I close my eyes and wince

No sunshine welcome or recompense  
just motive on a guilty shelf  
I close my eyes and wince  
I confused you for myself

Just motive on a guilty shelf  
four feet, no freeze, just instant shot  
I confused you for myself  
bleeding out and havoc wrought

Four feet, no freeze, just instant shot  
tape rolls and glass doors open wide  
bleeding out and havoc wrought  
two threatening no-names dead inside

## A Death Five Ways

1,271 miles

Hear lies  
buoy of boy  
cost for dreams  
rising to swell  
brakes  
our future  
his blood  
a passing bus  
Tamired

an unloaded toy  
rocked by see  
too much  
collapse in his throat  
the internet's sensation  
knows how to sailor  
long enough to here  
a stop too short  
to his own name



## On Baltimore from Beeville

1,629 miles

Work found us in Beeville  
where the prison is currency  
and the hotels give fresh cookies  
to cut the taste of fear after six

The sun rose in the lobby  
over Texas-shaped waffles  
fruit loops, thick oatmeal, this town  
no destination, reports the national news

Star-spangled birthplace finds  
police officer unresponsive  
after rioters attacked

Fires sparked  
during the funeral  
of Freddie Gray

(whom police left  
to suffocate  
under the weight of his own  
body on the cold floor

of their van  
while they watched  
without response)

*This is a test*

*This station is conducting a test*

*If this had been an actual emergency*

Truckers mouth a murmured  
slur over continental breakfast  
of bleached biscuits  
smothered in brown gravy  
clench their fists  
till purple pulses  
around each knuckle

We sit at a separate  
but equal banquette  
chewing slowly  
wondering what part of Texas  
we waded into

## Houston to Pool Party

270 miles

The stereotype speaks  
We are more scared  
of water than earth

I watched Dajerria  
my little sister thirst  
in a hot Texas  
suburban wasteland

She gleamed of sweet  
sweat sticky and  
spilling poolside

towel around her shoulders  
feet a shuffle of flip flop  
and stalking sun

until they weren't

Snatch  
a fourteen-year-old seaweed  
suddenly replanted facedown in mud  
under the stone of his knee  
sun-scorched seedling  
forced to shallow bloom

a grinding heave of lungs  
filling with  
unprovoked hate

a free-for-all  
just not for us



## The Time We Unlearned the Rules

A routine drive. Daylight. So much blooming up. Her Pontiac Sunfire sitting red against the bustling Galleria. Sage and Westheimer. Heavy traffic near the smoothie spots and cafés. Late enough for school to be out. Bright enough to remember clearly. A Mack Truck blocking an entire lane of traffic. No time for this. The sun is calling. She changes lanes, speeds to move around the commotion. Where there was emptiness there is now a man. She screeches to stop. Two hands slam down on the Sunfire's hood—enough to make a dent. Officer. Surely placed on street duty as punishment. He's yelling, cursing. Car horns bleat. Sidewalk in slow motion and full. The officer's face a red fury growing larger until he is the entire windshield. Amandla unthinking, finds herself out of the Sunfire. She's not a mother yet. *Why you hit my car? What is your badge number? GIVE ME YOUR BADGE NUMBER.* He swells at her chest. The car door stands open. The traffic cameras look the other way. Onlookers ready phones to record. Out of body, she watches it all. She and the officer. Middle of the street like a chalk outline. Close enough to spit, to shove, to kiss, to shoot.

Tarred road gleams like ice  
Slack power lines now yanked taut  
Frog jumps out of pot

## One Degree

38.5 miles

Jeremyah says he met you  
at a house party  
Prairie View University  
2013  
between red cups  
and Greek letters

Your hands held  
an asylum of warmth  
he still feels  
when he drives  
the road where you were taken  
Says Bean may have known  
you better

Bean says your name, Bland  
was too familiar to hide  
in the tall grass  
Says you danced  
your initials, S.B., into the  
hardwood of the house  
party I missed  
Says we were the same  
kind of wheat

I can still feel  
the thrash  
when we hold vigil

pray your name often  
like a saint  
or harvest

I let you in my soul  
deeper than any good meal  
or saving sentiment  
can haunt



## Release

38.5 miles

When I decided to become a mother  
people warned me  
that having a child is forever  
having your heart  
floating around  
outside your body

After birthing  
two hatchlings  
into the gulf  
I know motherhood  
is not being any less  
than human  
It is more about learning  
to envelop the sea,  
watching your skin  
soft to slick to suckle to cradle  
trading your blind spot  
for the infinity of sightlines

Each surge of hormones  
turning us more cephalopod,  
and if I never believed in evolution  
my daughter confirmed me a sea monster  
My son made me more Ursula  
a sea witch in drag

Did you know that an octopus has three hearts?  
One to take all of the rejection life sends  
the other two for the pearls we breathe for  
My children's midnight risings are my palpitation  
their tangled sleep is me wrestling my tentacles  
The hardest part is not looking  
away when I see my ink blooming in them

This world has tried to tell me  
I can't have it all  
the abyss and the surface too  
I respond with my children's pyroclastic laughter

My confidence a constant in camouflage  
my spirit has scraped the bottom  
of the ocean more times than I want to admit  
turning man into nightmare  
and expectation into sinkhole

But my children give  
the poor unfortunate of my soul  
venom and a song  
Give me a reason to unearth  
myself from the sand every dawn  
scheme us into a better sea

I wouldn't trade a limb for them, wouldn't beg  
for bones or legs  
but I am happy drowning  
my sadness  
in their saltwater cure

Did you know that a mother can swallow  
a ship whole?  
If you come for her offspring  
she will drag you under  
Davy Jones is a just woman  
after too many miscarriages

When we have been stretched to distant oceans  
when the pirates of work and school and sleep and stage  
have stolen our collective chest bump, diverted  
our propulsion  
we be devilfish  
lightly touching barbs  
to get used to their cut

We are not hard  
We are not a divided tether  
We are an eight-legged doomsday  
unfurling nets curled inside us  
to seem larger than we are  
Motherhood is a monstrosity waiting to surge:  
It is a strangling safety  
It is knowing  
that you have all the reasons to whirlpool  
and are just waiting for the moment  
to release

## And We Shake

38.5 miles

After Hannah waited outside  
an ally planted at the Waller County jail  
80 days telling how the dirt still speaks

her name in hashtag  
I mourn the tether of birth  
I crave the picket

want to force them to say  
how a body can hang and not stretch  
a plastic noose

*Hell you talmbout*

*Hell you talmbout*

The Sheriff has already come for Hannah  
her collar and his gun both bet  
Jesus will protect them

My husband tells me not to go  
our heir to consider  
an unwanted goodbye in undertone

*Hell you talmbout*

*Hell you talmbout*

We offer my anger chilled  
a bowl of fruit, cold, longing to quench  
child in slumber, mother enraged

We barely make it to the cross street  
before Hannah, now fire-engine fear  
is running toward my driver's side window screaming

*Don't stop here!*

like she's seen a knight in gleaming hood  
I accelerate, my foot deadweights  
the grandfather's clock in my chest knows  
the dogs are closing in

*Say her name!*

From the back seat  
my daughter awakens in moan

*What's happening?*

Here, so close it could be our backyard

*Say her name!*

Here, a 30-minute drive from where I tuck her in with prayer

*Say her name!*

Here, where I now cower in a gas station parking lot  
calculating if it is dark enough  
to run

## Don't

38.5 miles

I have been to Prairie View before  
Taken the road that bends  
past the church, BBQ shack  
don't know the street  
name  
but I know that tree

The one from the dash  
cam  
now covered in altar  
candles  
teddy bears, a wilted  
flower's rumor

now tourist destination for the mourner  
a reminder  
of burning crosses

That tree: a lynching legacy  
close to college dreams  
surrealist hope

I try  
to find where her  
arm broke  
backwards  
and head pressed  
easy  
against the blurred limit

where the gust of  
marching band plays  
louder than I can lament

My feet stand at the curb  
under the street lights  
again  
This time knowing  
why it is dangerous for  
them to burn out



## The Pact

Even closer

Slit your wrists now Blend  
your broken with mine  
Us be family Have a pact  
sealed in blood You will do it

Whichever of us they come for  
next won't run or cower

See the red  
scope light on you? See  
how your chest welcomes  
a sniper's round? Know  
how much power lives  
in blackout We can't shy away

Cut deep  
into darkness Round the tendons  
and muscle inside  
your cheek Kiss me  
death has a badge  
and a reason to brandish

Hurry this urgency is a now kinda thing

We all gotta go  
sometime Now it's promised  
more swiftly It's now  
or now we don't know no  
never speak

our name Say we are  
the same or fuck us

I hope it's you  
just so  
it ain't me

## Personal Effects

Here

They will try to sell you  
the myth of my lips  
that I talked myself into more  
trouble than my color could let  
me live through

Try to convince you I knew  
how to chameleon into two hours  
of un-angled camera-feed static

With two hands mistook  
myself for Hera dangled  
myself from gold-chained plastic bags

They will try to say  
I was quicksand  
too much Texas  
mud not enough blind  
obey  
My character  
tin can on a backwoods fence

Tell them I never sat still  
enough to be anyone's easy  
target Tell them I have never  
been able to stretch my lips  
wide enough to swallow  
my whole self This time

the body in the cell had no  
holy water for spit  
but had more God  
in her than a Bible  
Belt Make them wince  
my name till it echoes  
indictment

Teach them  
we have always been  
black magic  
never intended to



## The Time We Shook to Death

In the stretch of I-10 from Baton Rouge to Houston. Vidor. Historical Bermuda triangle for all things black. Husband and Amandla rushing back to watch their children rise for school. The lights flick on just past city limits. Trained now. After Philando. Amandla knows the drill. Hands on dash. Head bowed. Window cracked just enough to be audible. Phone landscaped to cover the widest terrain. Mothers are supposed to shield their children's eyes when fathers expire before them. Her children are asleep in their own beds, but her hands itch to press their lids closed harder. She sees him laid before her. His last breath brushed across her cheek. The officer shines in on her hands. Tells her all of that is not necessary. Yes, she says. *It is*. She talks loud and clear for the transcript to come. He runs his hand across the butt of his gun. Then disappears. She and her husband are two branches of the same road. She takes fear, he takes resolve. Asks her why she is so afraid. He has reconciled death as ordained with godly timing. She prays not to know God this way. The officer returns with a warning for driving on the left too long. He tells them to get right. Drives away. Amandla shakes through hours of alternate endings. His hand in hers. Pulse elevated.

Highways in moonlight  
How we tremble together  
This, the way we love



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For every family still waiting for justice, may you know that your loss is not in vain. May we say their names like royalty. May our ancestors lead the way to equality.

To every fan or reader that has supported my work whether written, on stage, in audio, or video, thank you for believing that one person and a bucket of words could shift this world even one degree off its axis.

Let's start the difficult conversations.

The text of *Newsworthy* is set using the family of Frutiger serif typefaces designed by Adrian Frutiger and Akira Kobayashi in 2008 based on the metal type version of Meridien.









International performance poet, Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton, is the first African-American Poet Laureate of Houston. Formerly ranked #2 Female Performance Poet in the World, she is executive director of VIP Arts, a non-profit dedicated to promoting literacy and the arts in underserved populations. Her genre-bending poetry has engendered unconventional collaborations with groups as disparate as the Rockets and the Houston Ballet. Her work has been featured on NPR, the BBC, and the TEDx circuit. An opera for which she wrote the libretto premieres at the Houston Grand Opera in the spring of 2020.

*Praise for **Newsworthy** by Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton*

“In this debut collection, D.E.E.P.’s poems are as brilliant and deeply moving in print as her long celebrated work as a performance poet has been. The field of the page becomes the stage for words visually in motion—from more traditional free verse lyrics to prose poems to the dialogic imagination navigating the page, margin to margin. The irony of the volume’s title itself, *Newsworthy*, is a testament both to Mouton’s wit and her commitment to defying what’s been hidden: sanctioned white violence perpetrated against racial minorities. In ‘Eleven Questions for Political Asylum,’ she writes, *Didn’t your momma/ever teach you how/dangerous/reaching/can be?* D.E.E.P. enacts just such reaching here, poem by poem, to expose the history of racial prejudice, bigotry—its devastating violation of human dignity. And to offer hope to every family waiting for justice.”

—Robin Davidson, author of *Luminous Other*

“*Newsworthy* has solved an important and difficult equation: How does one not shy away from the direct glare of these horrors and not despair? Mouton has written a collection in which the most harrowing stories interlace with the always boundless imagination of children and the music such imagination conjures. It is this imagination—even as it runs into sour realities—that frames a black resilience born of our ability to absorb, integrate, make new, redefine, and be redefined by all which meets us. She dances powerfully and smoothly while looking us in the eye, and in that work has achieved something wonderful, rare, and as old as Blackness itself. This is the collection you need if you want to be gifted new ways with which to meet and successfully tackle old demons. We owe Deborah Mouton a great debt.”

—Roger Bonair Agard, performance artist and author of *Bury My Clothes*

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