

## MOTHER OF LETTERS

For hours my mother hovered over us,  
her hand gently guiding mine, her wrist  
a helm for my unsteady ship.  
I knew how to hold a pencil,  
how to grip it between my thumb  
and pointer finger, how to lean softly  
to avoid a callus. I knew how to form  
all my letters perfectly before starting school.  
For every birthday, a new notebook  
would appear wrapped tightly with a bow.  
I would bury my nose inside it  
as if the pages would write themselves  
with my breath. The pages I'd fill with words  
my young tongue was too knotted to express.

WHEN I BUILD

I remind myself  
it is not more of our stories that will build a bridge.  
I only have one back,  
and it is mine until I die.

I show up and let my mouth  
run free as the Black River,  
blow people away while rice fields flood  
what's been forgotten with blood,  
let people figure out what happened,

I collect the check.  
I am from people with their feet on the ground,  
heads in whole other worlds.

**CONSIDERING BIRDS**

A heron waits at the water's edge—wondering.  
Wade or wait—fish or not?  
No multitudes to satisfy—no flock to feed.  
Just one lone long-legged-longing thing.  
Choose wisely wader,  
wishes and wants won't will the hunger away.

Had I wings to fly how far would I wander? How high?  
It's tasked to earthbound souls like mine  
to worry over flight—  
or falling.  
A sparrow sings the knowing  
a feather's lift is faith enough.

GOSPEL OF THE GRITS

Nothing good in life comes without stirring—  
the promise of butter, the salty whirring  
of pressure in a pot. Breakfast comes naturally  
in the South—wake up, bacon. Wipe eyes, biscuit dough.  
Sting of coffee silenced by sugar, kiss of milk.  
Grits, stones made soft with water and time,  
when I think of you, I think of heat  
and your chorus of fiery *amens* when you reach a boil.  
Some know you as fire,  
I know you as love on a Sunday morning,  
burning reassurance on the first day of school,  
the perfect canvas for sausage gravy—  
a soup of mornings and southern mothers,  
goodness in bellies all over America,  
hot spit of breakfast—peppery and white.

GOD SPEAKS TO ALABAMA

I molded you  
from red clay, sweet cornbread,  
the slow drip of a lemon  
squeezed over sugar and ice.  
I kissed you to life, on the lips.  
Mama bird I am—  
my tongue feeds you blood.  
I have waited  
in this heat for you  
to pucker  
and say my name—  
Hallelujah, Alabama.  
I give you fire  
and blackberries  
and white, thick cotton.  
I give you the honeybee  
and the yellowhammer—  
find me, swallow me down  
and whisper me  
to passersby  
as you sit, nightly,  
on the creaky  
front porch.