

ROOT WORK JOURNAL

SUMMONING FLIGHT: NAVIGATING BLACK
MYTHOLOGY, FLIGHT, AND ACTS OF REFUSAL,
VOL 2, ISS 1

A REASON (AFTER JULIAN RANDALL'S 'ICARUS')

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My mother taught me how to fly before she got her wings. Black women know the sun too well.

Shirmina Smith is a published writer, host, child educator, spoken word poet and teaching artist from southwest Philadelphia. She started doing slam poetry 8 years ago and since then has used her art to address the constructs and issues around Black womanhood, mental illness and the trauma aligned with combating systemic and economic oppression. Outside of slam, she's performed and taught at numerous locations across the states including War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, CA, Busboys and Poets in Washington D.C., and The 2018 National Women's Conference in West Conshohocken. Shirmina also serves as co-founder and member of Your Favorite Jaws, an artist collective geared towards using poetry and community outreach to create dialogue around womanhood, blackness, (youth) mental health and sexuality. Shirmina currently attends Birth Arts International Certification Program to be a certified birth and postpartum doula.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47106/12578578>

Citation: Geneva, S. (2022). A Reason (After Julian Randall's 'Icarus'). Root Work Journal, 2(1).
<https://doi.org/10.47106/12578578>

A Reason (After Julian Randall's Icarus)

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“do i need to tell you i am my mother’s child for you to know only one of us can survive?”
the black of my skin and the woman i wear are feathers of a short flight my mother did not
come back from. i am still in flight. i do not know when i will meet the sun. i do not know if
i am myth. or eulogy. or legend. i do not know whether a black woman’s death is a burning
book, or papyrus waiting for a press. but i do know that it is always fable. or scripture.
sometimes tall tale. sometimes a black woman dies and that is the only lesson to be
passed down. all i ever was good for was mourning. i’ve witnessed too many fables come
true. Icarus type eulogies. black boys too dark to not have died the way they did. or do.
black boys so fly, their wings can’t handle the ambition. parts of me have died with them.
when black boy falls into the ocean, i am seasick. my neck still signed from the proximity
of his downfall. and it is then, when i look into the ocean’s reflection, that my own
drowning is foreshadowed. a prerequisite to tragedy. an ending unfinished. there are no
narratives on the type of death a black woman dies. no one wishes to write that story. or
maybe they can’t. (they tried that with Sandra and forgot the footnotes). a black woman
falls to her death, and it is merely a suicide. a history led astray. no ripple in the ocean. no
rain. no buoyancy as evidence. my will to live was supposed to kill me a long time ago (or
maybe there’s still time for that). i fly too close to the sun at all times. it is the only thing
not angry at my skin. the way my mom tried to keep me alive, almost killed me but
worked. she did not give me wings like Icarus’ father. she taught me how to pluck feathers
and swim. she did not warn me against flying too close to the sun. she said that’s what i
was supposed to do. that’s how you keep from being buried. that’s how you learn to be a
phoenix. and that’s a dangerous type of ambition; to reject water from filling your lungs
(they will say you were never parched). to be made up of too much fire (they will torch
you). too much oxygen. (they will say it was your fault). you’d think survival would make
you a legend, something worthy of not dying. my mom spent her whole life surviving, and
drowned anyway. died a death unpronounceable. not by sun or water but of too much of
not enough. everything about her breath was approximate. which made me a body
rounded up. lucky enough to not be who i am supposed to become, but still spilling more
than i have. i am 21 today. my mother had me at the same age. my mom is already dead,
but i am back in her womb. ebony daughters are often already born part suns and at 21, i
return to my mother’s ocean. i am sizzling and wet. steam. rising and rising. i will meet the
sun, unseen and unphased. but they will need me again for the rain.

