

# EXCAVATING HONESTY:

AN ANTHOLOGY OF RAGE AND HOPE IN AMERICA

EDITED BY:

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# **Excavating Honesty:**

**An Anthology of Rage and Hope in America**

*"We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty"*

--Audre Lorde



**Edited By**  
**Lisa Mangini and Talisha Shelley**

**Paper Nautilus Press**  
Enfield, CT      State College, PA

**ISBN: 978-0998633305**

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## Editors' Notes

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When Talisha and I began developing this idea in March of 2015, it was not impossible to envision the world turning more violent, more divided than it already appeared to be — but that doesn't stop my astonishment at the recent flood of events. I revised this opening note after the Charleston church shooting, and again after the HB2 Bathroom Bill, and the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, The Pulse Nightclub shooting, and revisiting this writing again after the 2016 presidential election. At times, it feels utterly futile to try and keep up, to process and witness, to resist and repair. It's hard to remember that this collection of works is a first step, not a final one. Audre Lorde's assertion that ***"we cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty"*** rings so true for the action that I hope results from this anthology: that, in the face of so much injustice and division, sharing these writings will allow everyone who reads them greater insight to the experiences of others, no matter how difficult that may be at times for author and reader alike.

As steeped as we are in violence, ours is a world saturated in information as well, and the accessibility of a thoughtful article or essay is always readily available, to help create awareness and potentially reach someone. For many, including myself, I think it can be overwhelming at times, trying to capture everything and synthesize and apply all that context and meaning. When I teach, I often explain to my students Kenneth Burke's "Unending Conversation" metaphor, about how we are all walking into conversations that have been happening already, and how there is no way to know all of what's already been said — and if we listen for long enough, we can eventually contribute to that conversation thoughtfully — but the conversation keeps moving on, with or without us chiming in. I think of this anthology as a way for me to both listen and contribute at once, with full awareness that there is so much more writing, so many more voices in this conversation that cannot be captured in this comparatively short collection.

Perhaps it is my bias as a writer and poet, but I think our best hope of reaching people and building understanding is through the specificity and immediacy of personal narrative: sharing our experiences (both true and fictionalized) with someone else helps both author and audience process the complexity and grief of living in a badly damaged world of which this writing is a result, and to gain the knowledge, empathy, and connection to potentially build something better in its wake. By making this anthology a digital download, it makes it immediately available, portable, and free. My hope is that, because there is no cost barrier, this anthology can be widely shared and reach people who might not otherwise purchase or notice a collection with this theme. Another aim is for this to be a resource for educators of a variety of disciplines to use freely, as a way to keep expenses down for students while also allowing for a contemporary exploration of

these social issues, and teaching texts by writers who may more accurately reflect the identities of students across the U.S.

The deeply powerful words here is the result of nearly two years of planning and collaboration. While there is no shortage of terror or injustice, a single text cannot tackle or represent them all. In short, this anthology is something I am honored to be a part of, but it will never be enough, or the whole story. Together, I hope we can keep digging through this endless conversation to unearth the honesty that is so needed to begin to reconcile all this injustice and grief.

*Lisa Mangini, Co-Editor*  
*December 2016*

## Editors' Notes

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When Lisa and I met for the first time, on a cold and rainy day in Minneapolis, to discuss this project, we did not, could not, know that it would be released on the same day as the swearing-in of a presidential candidate who represents all that we hope to counteract. At that time, our thoughts were centered on addressing the failings of the literary world, namely, the continued underrepresentation of writers who are hyphenated Americans, queer, trans- or gender nonconforming, poor, female; we were interested in making a space for the words of those who have been historically marginalized in the dominant literary landscape. Over the past two years, the necessity of this project has grown graver and graver.

In 1981, in a keynote presentation at the National Women's Studies Association in Storrs, Connecticut, Audre Lorde espoused the merits of anger, particularly in the face of anti-black racism by white academic women. In her talk, Lorde described a series of situations where some women's own comfort overshadowed right action regarding denouncing racism, for instance, she tells us one white academic woman admitted to featuring a collection by non-Black women of Color because she did not want to deal with the "harshness of Black women." The crux of Lorde's argument is that hatred and anger are not the same, and that the main difference is that anger is useful, it aims to create change. What Lorde does not say explicitly is that the reason for this talk and others like it is that the inverse of anger is hope, that separation is a dream that we can all be woken from if only we use that anger and hope in the service of creating change.

Like the America of 1981, today's America is broken—a land of all kinds of people, yes, but a dual narrative exists: for some, ours is an idealized home that was once great, and for others it is, and has always been, a place where the residue of history—a history often denied by the nation's political leaders and citizens alike—shrouds and darkens everything. This fractured history, the story of dichotomous America, is still being written.

That we protest what enrages us offers hope, therefore we see these two emotions—rage and hope—as twinned. That is why the original task of dividing the anthology into two separate, neat, halves proved both arduous and disingenuous (the forcing of these poems and stories into two distinct categories seemed, ironically, to mirror the narrow dividing lines that separate men from women, white from black, gay from straight, able from disabled, and citizen from non-citizen).

Can words that are full of rage and truth not also be optimistic? Do we not live, at once, with anger and hope in our bodies?

The tenor and the verbiage in the poems and stories included in this anthology show that we are enraged by so many things: by black women and men slain by those sworn to protect them; by being asked to forgive the murderous; by white privilege (being told that we have it, and knowing full well we do not); by poverty; by shitty jobs and joblessness; by empire, and the many Americans it simultaneously condemns and uses to prop itself up.

We are hopeful, too, that what we can become together could, possibly, be a great thing someday, that our witness, empathy, and advocacy will be enough, that our bodies will be wholly our own, that we might be seen, embraced, and professed to be American—equally protected by the law.

In southwest Louisiana, where I taught a Composition course on hip-hop and ethics, I was sure, at some point during each semester, to pose a question to my students that I felt was essential to their understanding of theirs and others' places in the world we inhabit: *Who gets to be American?* As you can imagine, the initial responses were some combination of furrowed brows and shoulder shrugs, a general groaning, a few disinterested I-don't-knows. After some seconds of this, I would ask the question again: *Who gets to be American?* The emphasis on *gets* the second time around usually impressed upon them the notion that being an American is something that can be allowed or disallowed, that the word American itself was tied to those who felt a special ownership over the word, the land, and that this sense of ownership shaped the way we deal, as a country, with difference. My theory would immediately win some students over, while others would push back with unconsidered, oversimplified rebuffs: no one owns the term; you either are or aren't American. Sometimes this would lead to debates—teacher against student, students against students—debates that never erupted into chaos, and that could often be tempered with a perfectly-timed, "Alright, alright, settle down."

This collection seeks to be a home for conversations, like these—tame, bespeaking reconciliation—and for the kind that seem to dead-end in rage. Each piece could act as a potential answer to the question, *Who gets to be an American?* Soniah Kamal attempts to answer it in her story "Runaway Truck Ramp," wherein a Pakistani man and an American woman engage in conversations about cultural appropriation. In his poem "Shotgun," Richard Spillman paints a bleak portrait of the American dream when the long hallway of a rickety shotgun house ends in "a maze of trash." And in Andy Johnson's "Wince: George and Trayvon" the outrage conveyed by the litany of names of black citizens slain by rogue individuals, emboldened by badges or the privilege of having the right skin tone in the right country, loudly proclaim that, no, this land does not belong to you and me.

The structure of this collection—fictional and nonfiction stories interspersed between poems—highlights the complexity of Americans, who think, believe, discuss, need, and exist in divergent ways. For this reason, the pieces selected seem to answer the question of Who gets to be an American?—as much as possible—with a resounding “all of us.” Or better yet, the anthology poses a better question: How do we repair this rickety shotgun house we call home whilst accepting that we all think, believe, discuss, need, and exist in divergent ways? There are no easy answers, only excavation—through rage, hope, or something in-between—of the aspects of our culture that must be scrutinized, then corrected with action.

Finally, this collection seeks to be a veritable therapist’s couch of word, a primer for the conversations that should be had by those who live and work under the same roofs. For failure to have these conversations might lead to permanent separation, an ever-expanding gulf.

*Talisha Shelley, Co-editor*  
*January 20, 2017*



## Acknowledgements

- "Would you Believe," By Miriam Bird Greenberg, has previously appeared in *The Missouri Review* and *In the Mouth of the Volcano* (University of Pittsburgh Press).
- "As the Crow Flies," by Justin Bond, has previously appeared in *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*.
- "Artificial Cloud," by Justin Bond, has previously appeared in *Heavy Feather Review*.
- "Manual for Still Hunting White Tailed Deer in a Gated Community," by Yolanda J. Franklin, has previously appeared in *Pluck!*
- "Southern Girl Hymn," by Yolanda J. Franklin, has previously appeared in *The Squaw Valley Review*.
- "Black Writer," by Yolanda J. Franklin, has previously appeared in *Cake*.
- "Wince," by Andy Johnson, has previously appeared in *Lunch Ticket*.
- "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," by Joy Ladin, has previously appeared in *Glitterwolf*.
- "Beliefs," by Dustin Pearson, has previously appeared in *Crack the Spine*.
- "First Kiss," by Dustin Pearson, has previously appeared in *Maudlin House*.
- "An Equation to Tell Your Mother Your Boyfriend is Black," by Ploy Pirapokin, has previously appeared in *Apogee Journal*.
- "Tocolytic," by Eman Quotah, has previously appeared in *The Toast*.
- "And I Wasn't Planning to Live Very Long Anyway," by Julian Randall, has previously appeared in *Puerto del Sol*.
- "And then Grief Became the Winter," by Julian Randall, has previously appeared in *Madison Review*.
- "Biracial Ghazal" and "Freedom Vol. 2," by Julian Randall, has previously appeared in *Up the Staircase Quarterly*.
- "Black Boy Speaks of Apologies," by Julian Randall, has previously appeared in *Maps for Teeth*.
- "You, the Immigrant's Daughter," by Christine Stoddard, has previously appeared in *Dirty Press UK*.
- "Marathon," by Heather H. Thomas, has previously appeared in *Fledgling Rag*.
- "The Murder of Crows," by Jordan K. Thomas, has previously appeared in *The Toast*.

**Cover art:** photo by Ken Durden, of a suburban family's ruined belongings in front of their home, taken August 20, 2016, following the flood in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

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## You, the Immigrant's Daughter

I parted your lips and lapped at you like a kitten laps milk, but you couldn't enjoy it. Even in the dark, barely touched by the timid moonlight, guilt haunted you like tradition. You shivered as if a ghost shot through you.

I've heard that if, after oral sex, your partner doesn't look like they've been exorcised, you're doing it wrong, but that's exactly how you looked and I *knew* I was doing it wrong.

Because everything we did was wrong.

"Let's get matching tattoos," I said when you rolled over and sunk into the hot pink and green serape on your bed. "Maybe ouroboros or something."

I said it slowly, drunkenly, stroking my rosy belly and then your coffee-colored one.

"You gringas could sell your parents into slavery and convince them it was a good idea."

Your voice was rough yet warbling, and I wondered how you could sound that way when you hadn't downed the beers or puffed the cigs I had. *Women who drink are putas. Women who smoke are putas.*

When I stared at your little mouth, you pushed away my circling pointer finger. Your short, bare nails brushed my lacquered black ones.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "My mom has a tattoo. A butterfly on her ankle."

"My mom says tattoos are for putas," you said and then muttered, "Sometimes I think she wants to be a stereotype."

I chuckled. "Speaking for white people, I don't think there's a single one of us who wants to dance the way we dance." I bobbed my head and waved my arms as goofily as I could.

Instead of laughing, you sat up and locked eyes with me in your usual intense way. "But you want the good stereotypes. You want college and marriage and picket fences."

I nodded. "Sometimes."

"Mexicans want the good ones, too. The faith. The work ethic."

"No putas."

"No putas," you repeated.

We sat on the serape, legs dangling over the bed like mermaids' fins dangle from seashore rocks. I thought about the mermaid found on a beach in Veracruz last summer, the one that turned out to be a creation of the "Pirates of the Caribbean" special effects team, and wondered if her sculptor had imagined her gay or straight.

"My turn?" I asked, finally breaking the silence.

Your answer involved pushing me on my back and pressing your face to the wet warmth between my legs, in the dark, barely touched by the timid moonlight.

## Right by Her

She got in a wreck, arrived two hours late at his place and they still made love—her idea. Now she sits beside him wearing panties and his butt down, her chin between drawn up knees.

"Red light," she explains. "I didn't see it."

He has slipped back in his boxers, but everything's damp—the sheets, their skin. "Were you texting?" He uses his t-shirt like a towel. "Was it the radio?"

She lifts her head. "The radio?"

"Whatever, the phone, your...music." He can't help a dismissive wave and her frown deepens.

"And you've been swearing up and down how you love it."

She looks in the direction of the balcony doors which let in floor-to-ceiling light even now, at dinnertime. He never bothers with the shades—no condos that way, just a dry wash and the Catalinas netted in a springtime silvery-green. They're sharply visible after last night's rain.

"Fairy's mantle," she says after a moment. He follows her gaze to the mountains, but he's used to these declarations. To her, every pretty thing is like a paint chip or nail polish, in need of a more reflective name.

She turns back, elbowing him in the process.

"Easy there."

"It's *worse* than the phone!" She drills a finger onto a blemish. "I was picking at my *face* in the *mirror*."

"Oh frail estate of human—"

She claps a hand over his mouth. They stare each other down—first squinting, then bug-eyed, then him close-lidded, affecting his best *muzzle-me-if-you-must* brows. She lets up, laughing, but quickly loses her smile. Her hand goes to her forehead, then up over hair which is everywhere four inches tall.

Last year she decided to go natural: no more relaxing, no more treatments. She explained to him the politics, but it meant a scalping for the old stuff; it meant hats and scarves for months. "There's no going back," she said. "I owe it to my future kids." But sometimes he wakes to her crying: she fears her new look is less beautiful. *Impossible*, he tells her, each time.

He watches the hair go flat beneath her palm, then spring back up. He pulls her hand down to his, laces their fingers.

"Our zebra stripes," she says as he draws up the fist. He bumps it against her chest—"Why didn't you call?"—then his—"Or answer my texts?"

She's always been more lax about arrivals, replies. It's part of their relationship, of the difference in age. "I didn't know the procedure." She swallows hard. "I kept thinking it was almost over."

No one was hurt—no pedestrians, no kids. It was the intersection just before his neighborhood and on a Sunday, only one other car was even around. But information was exchanged, statements were taken. And photos. Everyone wanted their own: both officers, the other driver. She even caught the witness snapping a few.

He tries to picture the accident himself, but gets stuck in the moment just before, when all the desert's light must have been pouring in her car windows, air and music on full blast. He sees her car like a soap bubble, skimming the crosswalk, and inside, she's leaning forward, craning her neck. He captures her near-perfect face in the rearview mirror.

"At least you made it here."

She sniffs. "Sans bumper. And the passenger door's permanently shut."

He knows better than to bring up repairs. He can't guess what she paid, but she's pointed out on more than one occasion that he's the only person she knows who buys cars *new*. He worries her plan is to drive it as is, at most tack on some old bumper, whatever she can scrounge up to look the part.

He knows, too, that if he were to counter with a few cautionary tales (A lifetime of litigation teaches nothing if not what corners are and aren't worth cutting.) she'd feed him a story about how some uncle or cousin managed for decades in a car with no floorboard or windshield or something. And if he went on to say that's hardly something to aspire to, she'd come back with: "you all don't understand *anything*."

"Who all?" he might ask her. "You mean, white people?" Because he can say this to her, it's not out of bounds.

"Get over yourself," she'd tell him. "I was talking about lawyers."

Now she unlaces her fingers and kisses him, holding her lips firmly against his for a second...two. As she moves away, he says, "We'll get you a new car," before she has even pulled back into focus.

She puts all kinds of restrictions on how he can spend money on her—restaurants, gifts, even groceries—having made it clear from the beginning that she wouldn't let his

wealth decide things. So he's been careful not to give too much, to choose inexpensive outings, and to always accept from her her share. But he makes ten times what she does, not to mention assets, family money, and he sees a different ethical equation, a moral one. Yet his resistance up to now has been pitiful, amounting to twice underreporting the price of show tickets, leaving extravagant tips at the café where she works—where they met—and habitually slipping wadded bills into her car's ashtray, whenever there are others.

But he didn't like that kiss, or the way it made him instinctively hold his breath. So even as she laughs, he swells with satisfaction because he's finally been unabashed in his offerings. It is the one uncomplicated truth about this love: he would like to lay the world at her feet.

Two years ago she just appeared above him, the new hire, negotiating a full press and too many mugs. Wrong order, but he didn't complain, it never occurred to him. Not to spare her feelings, but because that day he'd been indulging a recent habit to leave his office at odd hours—he didn't make partner for nothing—and wander the city's ever-bright and dusty downtown. He'd taken refuge at the café, as had also become his habit: always after the breakfast rush, always a back-wall table where he could shed his jacket and stretch out his legs. It was in those surroundings—cheerful, anonymous, spent—that he felt free to subject his life thus far to a few game show-like calculations, and before she showed up, he'd been tallying his professional success: wins, losses, cases and disputes. (Each time, he'd figure things a little differently; never could he be sure there was a net gain.) He pushed a piece of ice around his water with an index finger and thought of his two grown daughters: delightful, safe—happy, even, if he allowed that such a state were possible. But after leaning back to hook his free arm over a nearby chair he caught the gaze of a passerby, outside the windows, and in doing so glimpsed himself as if through that stranger's dark glasses: dressed to match his profession, sprawled behind a crumb-dusted table, himself one of just a few scattered patrons, and with a puzzled, slightly open-mouthed expression. Then she kicked his chair leg. "I call this blend Red Hots," she'd said, grinning as he sat up straight.

His legs still run alongside her pulled up knees, but he has one arm propped behind her now. She's teasing him, not even taking his new car offer seriously enough to be offended or alarmed, much less relieved. But they enjoy imagining the perils of car shopping together.

"People would be so confused!" They're accustomed to the faltering expressions of waiters or hotel staffers struggling to estimate their relationship and tailor greetings.



"You throwing down that kind of money on little ol' me?" She affects a coy look. "They wouldn't know who to worry for more."

He takes the top of her ear between his teeth. "Then take mine," he says, going light-headed over the image of her safely encased in his twenty-year-old Toyota.

"And how would *you* get to work, Mr. Generous?"

The way she says it makes him stir. "I'll dust off the Yamaha."

"That rusty thing?"

It's true, for a decade, the bike hasn't left his garage. But he is too preoccupied to be stung, too busy reveling in the possibility that he might have it in him to make love to her again so soon. "I miss all the wind and grit."

"Oh, please." She leans into him, arching her back in a lazy, sensuous, second-round sort of stretch. "Besides," she exhales, "motorcycles are out of fashion. Like smoking."

"Then I'll just buy a Porsche. They're timeless." He tucks his chin and runs the bridge of his nose down her neck. Since she changed her hair it's his new favorite spot on her body. That, and the highest knob on her spine, which he finds now, pushing out the shirt's collar. "The girls always wanted me to drive something cooler, dropping them off at school."

"Your work buddies would think you were having a mid-life crisis."

With his free hand he reaches under the shirt, hooks the lace of her panties, which had been a birthday gift, a rare allowance. They'd made an afternoon out of finding the right pair with matching bra. "I like those," he'd told her, after seeing a dozen sets. The pale lace looked like drizzled icing. "They're so light, are they blue?" She shook her head. "Not blue," she said, twisting in the paneled mirror so that he could see her smile, and everything else, three ways. "Shattered robin's egg."

Now he pulls against their elastic. "I wish," he tells her.

"You *wish* they'd think crisis?"

The question of what he wishes for prompts a sudden image of himself lounging at her feet amidst all that he might bring her: crystal punch bowls and bird cages and silks. She wears purple, including the cape his imagination has adorned her with, and has one foot perched upon a large block of ice bedded in straw. With such a projection in his mind, *this* is what he thinks: there are no rules, there is only decency and love. And his lounging self tips its head back and closes its eyes.

Out loud, he explains, "I'm too old for a crisis. Three years ago another partner got stage four prostate and bought a Lotus."

She swivels abruptly, elbowing him yet again, and drops a knee on either side of his thighs. She cups his face with both hands. "They'd think *cancer*?"

He blinks at her twice, then gives the smallest nod he can.

She drops her hands and her gaze slides to his chest, his navel, but he knows she isn't seeing any of it. "That's what he wanted?" she says after a while. "A fast car?"

"I heard something about a reunion." He's starting to feel woozy. "An estranged sister."

She looks up. "He should've given *her* the money."

"Maybe he tried to."

She tips off of him, scrambles onto her feet at the side of the bed. He reaches for her, catches a tail of the shirt but it slips.

"I didn't see the light or the other car." She laughs, but looks sad. "I didn't even understand I was in an accident."

"Thankfully, you weren't going very fast."

"That light is never red."

Her voice is getting louder and he instinctively counters it by softening his. "Not at this time of day, no."

"I could have run over a kid or dog...on a different day, I might have been whistling over a cliff!"

"But there aren't any cliffs—"

"Do you understand? My whole life, my future..." She stretches her arms out, over him, over the bed, and with her palms turned up and her fingers splayed, she looks like she's simultaneously reaching for and releasing a bird.

Big-girl jobs is what she calls them, what she's paradoxically aiming for and avoiding at the same time. She peruses the want-ads one day, then the next, searches on Master's programs, occasionally deciding she should get a Ph.D. "In what," he asks, and she says, "Anything." She says, "Life."

A month ago, squinting at some fine print on the computer screen, she said, "Maybe I should go back East."

He didn't look up from the brief he was writing. "You're a black woman with a 4.0. You could go anywhere in the country."

She spun in her chair, which creaked because it is vintage, cooed over by both of them when it was discovered in the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue shop. He tugged off his reading glasses.

"3.9," she said, as soon as he'd met her gaze. "In *philosophy*."

He shook his head. "You don't appreciate what you've got."

"What, affirmative action?"

"Brains, authenticity..."

She stared, waiting, but he slid his glasses back on, took his time, found his place. "Don't set your sights on anything but the best," he murmured. Then he heard her chair spin again, a few taps on the keyboard. "Please," she said, much later, and in a quiet voice that broke his heart.

Outside, the light is finally starting to dim. Shadow has overtaken the foreground and the dry wash has all but disappeared. The mountains are still visible, but her fairy's mantle is slipping into gray and soon the whole range will turn dark and two-dimensional.

She disappears into the bathroom, opposite the balcony, but leaves the door cracked so there's a vertical strip of bright light. He hears her peeing, then washing her hands, then doing something with things that clink against the counter. She is farther away now, of course, but there is something about the domesticity, her utter lack of self-consciousness—his mind lurches ahead and he's impaled by this thought: she is more his, right now, at this moment, than she will ever be again.

He swings his feet over the edge of the bed, away from the bathroom, her light, and rests his forearms on his knees. Her voice echoes when she asks him, "So did he ever square things with his sister?"

"Don't know."

"But he got his fast car."

"One of the easier things, no doubt."

"Wait." He glances back as she pops her head out the door. "Did he keep working? Was he driving that thing to the *office*?"

"Oh no, no. But this town isn't that big. No one else had that ridiculous car."

She disappears again, starts opening and closing drawers. He hears the medicine cabinet pop open, and some shuffling, and then another drawer, except this one stops, mid-slide. "So, you saw him around?" He inhales as slowly as he can.

She'd asked him once, "What color am I?" while gripping his hair. He knew she wanted creative, and tried to remember some word from one of her songs, something he's seen on her makeup. But nothing came. He was facing her on his knees.

"Sweet black coffee." He skimmed his palms along her buttocks. "Or how about...espresso, straight up."

"Boring," she scolded. "Worse."

"I got it." He reached her with his tongue. "Caffeine fix."

She approved. "Shows how much you need me, doesn't it?"

"Yes, oh yes," he'd answered, in a rush of confirmation. "Like nobody's business."

Now she's waiting for an answer, he knows, but he takes another moment to look outside. The skyline is all that remains, though it extends upward a diminishing gradient of light, as if the source were not the sun, but something down on earth, on just the other side of the mountains. "I saw him, alright." He wipes his eyes. "The guy drove everywhere those last six months."

\* \* \*

## Audre Lorde Shoots Lasers from Her Eyes

I'm sorry to show up like this, but you must come with me. This machine is called a metaphomaton and it will take us across metaphor and time. You'll notice that my head does not seem to match my body. That's because I've come to you from the future. I'm a pansexual transgender male-of-center lower-middle-class Mexican American raised traveling between rural northern California and southern Mexico by a Mexican immigrant father who is not neuro-typical, and a poor Chicana mother who's parents were first generation immigrant farmers. Well, my head is this, kind of. But my body came from a jello mold. It's the body of Chris Pratt. I'll explain on the way.

Welcome aboard *The Malcontent*. Her hull is in the shape of Audre Lorde's bust, the inside is lined with velvet and the floor is a gleaming weave of traction stars. It smells like lightning in here, like a static touch. Let me twist these knobs and push these buttons. Here we go.

Our first stop is in 2009. Grab that handle in the floor and pull. You've just opened the glass-bottom of experience. Go on, kneel down and put your fingers on the cool glass. What you're seeing is The Evergreen State College's Unity Lounge. It's where all the students of color hang out, do stuff, talk, organize. Look at the titles on the shelves: Beverly Daniel Tatum's [Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in The Cafeteria](#) and Gloria Anzaldua's [Borderlands](#). We're learning a whole new language. Popularizing it. That language, those terms, they are about to be adopted by every liberal urban center on the West coast. Look at us! We all have laptops, textbooks, scholarships, loans, agendas and tattoos. We're using big words now: "cultural appropriation", "white privilege", "systemic oppression" and "transphobia". We're all badasses.

That's me smiling in that chair, in my old, newly radicalized body. See how I'm a butch dyke? See how our mouths are moving, see how we're shaking with the power of knowledge? See how at last we as students of color have a common scholarly language that white, gatekeeping adults take seriously? We're learning to name the System's separate working parts. We're learning to know better, to think critically. That there, that is the making of de-colonial muscle-memory. Let me put my ear against the glass. Nah. I can't hear anything, but I remember exactly what we're saying.

I'm trying to re-set the coordinates to our next observation point, but something is wrong. There's a disturbance in the time-space continuum. It's like running a tongue over missing teeth. Soft gaps. We'll wait here a second while the mist settles. Computer? Where are we? It's saying that we're in San Francisco. The year is 2013. There is a new social currency and, with it, a new social order. Look at this data. Says here this subcultural social order is based on:

- how many targetships you can claim
- how many people you call out on a daily basis
- how up to date you are on the most appropriate anti-oppression terminologies

The metaphomaton has re-stabilized. Once I change our coordinates, we will be in metamode, the year 2015. Trigger warning: references to systemic violence, misogynist sentiments, verbal violence against women.... Well, you'll see for yourself. Look out the right porthole.

See this park? Strictly on-leash only. See that white lady there. Yeah, she's taking her ignorance and privilege out for a poop-stroll. She hates using leashes because her ignorance and her privilege get all tangled up, make a mess. So, no leashes for her today, and now the privilege pooch and ignorance pooch are running everywhere. Craping on people's lawns. She could give a – but look here they come. I know, I thought that too when I first saw them: my people, my Community! My fellow think-for-yourself-ers, academics, writers, queers, activists, artists and professional de-colonists.

But, alas, they are arriving in dogmatic thousands. They are well practiced now in the new formulaic response to conflict. The white woman is now in a pit. As they approach the edge of the pit, the Community are taking a sheet of paper and writing a criticism, a death threat or call out on it. They are then balling up the paper and throwing it into the pit. At first the sheets of paper are falling on her head, boinking off it's blond top harmlessly. Let's skip a few hours forward. Now the papers are up to her knees and now her bellybutton and now her chin. Come away from the window, you've seen what needs to be seen. You want to know if it worked? You want to know if the fetishistic monolith tumbling of this one white woman ended the badness? Put your eyes against this rubber viewer, it will show you all the possible historical permutations. You see? It didn't change a thing.

Look out the left porthole. Same year, different moment: The Sistahs on the Reading Edge book club is being forced off a train in Napa's wine country. They have

been ejected for laughing while black, and are being put in vans by police. Now they are being offered a personal apology by the owner of the train and a train car's worth of free tickets. But the book club actually knows better. They know that a personal interaction is a tactic to defuse their critique of the company's culture of racism. The owner *wants* the public to put him in a pit. He is the lizard's tail. The lizard, the company, the System flees unscathed.

This last historical stop will be quick, a little skip backward in 2015: We're at a conference called Effective Altruists. It's full of, you know, the biggest gears in the works. Smiling rich white guys in jeans and soft, logoless, heather colored t-shirts. They even smell comfortable, that is how comfortable they are. The thing they want to talk about is artificial intelligence. They want to talk about it because *that* is the thing that keeps them up at night. The richest, most influential, most powerful people in the world fear their own systems. That is how deadly these systems are in their ability to complexly self-evolve. And we, the slow ones, here at the mercy of our own abilities to self-evolve.

CLOACKING DEVICE! Too late. We've been spotted. Computer, speed 10 - SHIT. Hold on tight, the metaphomaton is detecting an anomaly, and were headed right for it. POWER and FEAR. Power and fear. When the powerless overpower the powerful it creates fear. And when power re-overpowers the powerless, the powerless become extreme. Extremism creates more fear, and because fear generates power, the power-hungry will point at the extremists and assure us that with their demise comes freedom. Meanwhile, meanwhile, within the powerless, new power rises, new power guised as empowerment, new power that offers clearcut answers in a fearful world. RED ALERT. RED ALERT. CALL OUT. CALL OUT. Caution: fascism! Caution: fascism! Caution: the wolf in QTPOCMOCPOCLGBTQIAAAAAAAAAA'S clothing! Caution: artificially intelligent queers! WHO. IS. SERVED. WHO. IS. PRIVILIGED. CAUTION: FACISIM APPROACHING FROM PORTSIDE. IMPACT IMMINENT IN THREE. TWO. ONE -

Wake up. Get up. You've been out for hours. We're here. We made it to the eye of the storm. Something is wrong, all wrong. I have a bad feeling about the Master's tools. We have to check on them. Make sure they're still locked up, safe. We're just about there. We are flying low over the great desert of the unlearned, just look at that treeless, mountainless, cityless distance. We are landing beside the freight container. I'll keep talking while we dematerialize and rematerialized outside. You might not remember, but

back then, when we were in school, when we were being educated, when we were being radicalized, we gathered up the Master's tools and melted them into children's play structures. All that was left, all the industrial residues? All right here. Let me open this lock. The doors are loud from need of grease. Cover your ears. Let's go inside. It smells like blood in here. Let your eyes adjust, standing here, you'll see the Tools, their quiet, dusty gleaming.

Wait. Where are they? The container is empty. Someone's taken the Master's tools! But how can that be? Only you and I had a key. Oh? You're saying I have the Master's tools? You're saying *I* am the ableist, classist, misogynist, colorist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, patriarchal, normative, higher-educated, documented, internally-oppressed user and protector of the Master's tools?

Enough. Sit in this chair and put on that belt. There is a small monitor in front of you. Turn it on. That blinking red dot is where we're headed. If you zoom out you'll see our destination is located at the center of me. We will go inside me. We will make me separate from all the rest and we will find inside me the Master's tools. I will be armature and effigy now: pansexual trans male of center Mexican – the locator is having trouble locking on target. The red square that should be locked in my center keeps splitting into many little red squares and locking on you, too, and all the rest. Are we hydra? Us, an ilk, of a certain education, of a certain conviction, of a certain culture, a Community, all of us rrrradicals... Too late. I'm initiating a boring sequence. If you look in that little periscope, you will see the drill begin to spin. It's pushing in, making a hole in me/us. We're going to get to the bottom of this, if it's the last thing we do.

Don't touch the walls. *The Malcontent* is growing hotter as we get closer to the molten core of my/our lack of accomplishment. Do you feel the smell of my/our own untapped potential tangling in our nose hairs. Feel me/you perspiring multiple graduate degrees, making slick these relatively-pale skins, relative to the other, the other, the other. Note our approachability, this resourced-ness, slippery to the touch. Influence! Affluence! Note the miracle: access in excess. Food, water and phones. Make a fist with me and feel the ache in the softened muscle of our under-exercised privileges. O habits of distraction and consumption, set me free! My eyes are stinging now with this interminable search for authenticity, are yours? Breath deeply. Hold my hand. *Victim, victim, victim. Privilege me because I am a victim. Adhere to this code of subcultural social conduct that grants status to the victimiest victim.* Ah, you hear them too, the



voices. Here, at the heart of the matter, the acoustics are very good.

Initiate scan. Lasers are coming out of the eyes in Audre Lorde's bust. They are scanning over our flesh, and we all feel an electric tingling. The results are loading on the screen. There are our bodies, objective, objecting, objectified. There are foreign objects inside of us. There for so long our flesh has grown into them like a tree closing around a wire: the Master's tools are inside of us. In use, out of use, consciously and unconsciously, for liberation and for colonization.

No, you say? No because I, after all, chose the body of Chris Pratt over my non-binary-pansexual-queer-trans-person-of-color-male-of-center-working-class-two-spirit-Indigenous-Mexican-immigrant-Xican@ one? I have one more device for you to use. It's actually just a toilet paper roll. I will put it against my eye and you will put the opposite end against yours. Close your other eye. In this darkness it's not the future we will see, but the futurity.

Do you see a figure standing in the middle of the unsafe-space, do you see how it is triggered? That's me amongst my Community, mutually self-inflicting remnants of the Master's tools. Being assigned labels, pronouns and behavioral prerequisites yet again, and this time by people who know better. What you are about to see is an obligatory alchemical reflex, an exodus. I'm sorry if the ring of cardboard against your eye hurts, but I just really want you to watch. Watch me severing my self from that wounded body of political codependency and compliance. Not a beheading, but a heartbreak, a dispossessing. Watch me turn away and feel my Community's disapproval hotly silent on my back. Watch me pour jello into a mold of Chris Pratt, and watch me affix my head to that body with florist's wire bent into ragged stitches. Watch me linger ugly-pretty in a liquid filled gestation tank for months while my head affixes to that white, muscular, normative flesh. Watch it not be a solution, just a weepy relief while I try to figure out what to do.

Those words, those terms, these behaviors. *Their necessity as social passcode?* That isn't me. And Chris Pratt's body? It's not me either. Obviously. It isn't a better body or even a good one. It is made of *jello*, for fuck's sake. But, I would rather be a head completely misplaced and disidentified from body than be a necklace of buzzwords strung around a bloodless neck. Better that than to be neat cabinet or metal organizer for the Master's tools. Do you know, I would rather be nothing! I really would rather be

nothing. Thank you for coming, for your time. I will now dematerialize you into your present. I must return to the future.

## **Celilo Falls Revival: Celilo Village, Oregon**

Maybe the great cascadia earthquake  
reveals Nine Mile Falls during my lifetime,  
and the sudden rushing water frees everyone's minds,  
and we all decide to dynamite "white civilization,"  
try to get history right this time,  
and thereafter celebrate, declare  
the waterfalls and towering gorge cliffs  
everyone's forevermore, gather  
to hear water crash over the rocks again,  
as the cataract mists grace our faces,  
we all see the Columbia, by far the largest river in the West  
with fifteen times the water of the Colorado  
roar from the Canadian Rockies  
through the chutes and narrows of Wyam,  
see the millions of glittering chinook return,  
so many salmon that the seals and sea lions  
swim upriver again from the ocean to meet them,

And lost Native American fisherman  
who hovered over the river on platforms with dipnets  
appear before us, swinging back here  
through the ages, Yakima and Klickikat, Nez Perce  
and Cayuse, those ropes tied to their waists  
protect them and lead their souls back to shore,  
and Coyote is here, tricking the Bureau of White Man's Affairs  
and interfering with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
until they finally keep their word--*yes*,  
it bears repeating, these white men honor a real treaty,  
rebuild rather than pillage flooded native villages,  
and Coyote takes the virtual images of the drowned falls  
the engineers used to show us through sonar  
and relocates the greed of white commerce within them  
so we all live like nothing has more value than our souls.  
All tribes join together at the prayer rock  
in the greatest meeting place  
in North America, in existence for 15,000 years.

## Poem for Robert Lowell

Today, I went to the bookstore  
in Pirate's Alley to find  
a copy of anything  
by Cal.

My son had never  
read him, and I wanted  
to see his eyes when  
he turned the pages.

But there was nothing,  
not a single book  
of poetry in the glass  
cabinet by the door ...

I walked to the river,  
found the first  
empty iron bench  
and sat down.

I wondered what  
the world would  
be like if Lowell  
had never lived:

no spiders marching  
through the air;

no black, bronze Union  
soldiers in a savage  
modern world;

no RFK forever young  
in death ...

I looked up and saw Algiers  
across the water.  
Slaves were kept there,  
fed and bathed, made ready

for the auction blocks.  
But there was  
no city then or now  
of such mixed beauty:

Creole doors, dormer  
windows, Jazz played  
for no reason,  
every day a holiday.

Yet the crime rate  
was high, robberies  
and murder in  
the old cemeteries.

But where else could  
I have my cards read  
on the steps of a  
cathedral?

This was truly a city  
of the living and the dead.  
The Lord survives the rainbow  
of His will.

## First Grave

In our family cemetery,  
there is a single grave  
marked only by  
a rock headstone,  
no name or dates.

Some say the first  
settler is buried there,  
a man who crossed  
the hill country,  
made peace  
with the Creeks.

They taught him  
to fish for mud cat,  
grow corn in  
the bottom land,  
live through  
the coldest winter.

Others disagree,  
say this is the grave  
of an infant  
who died of crib  
death. He just  
stopped breathing ...

No one really knows,  
but on Decoration Day  
when weeds are  
pulled, flowers laid,  
his grave is cleaned first.

There's a time of quiet,  
and it doesn't matter  
where he came from  
or if this was simply

a poor baby.

He must be remembered  
or we'll be forgotten,  
our graves uncared for,  
choked by kudzu vines.

## Turnabout

Walking down the men-lined city streets we  
women would like to turn those men around  
and pinch *their* behinds or sit next to them  
on buses or subway trains with our knees spread  
out so wide they'd have to sit all tensed  
and small as possible to avoid any contact  
or we could give them our seat and then  
stand over them to look down their shirts.

And we'd never let them forget  
that they have a penis or that we have a thing  
for chests. We'd call them dear and doll  
so we don't have to remember individual  
names and when we talk to them  
we'll stare at them below the belt  
and when they're walking down the street  
we'll keep up a barrage of whistles and comments  
to keep them continuously aware of us.

In business we'll judge them  
by their looks and how they type.  
We'll pay them less than women  
working in the same positions.  
In bed we reassure them  
that we've had hysterectomies  
and we'll tell each one of them  
*You were great, baby, you're my main man.*  
But when they demand equal rights,  
a male E.R.A., we'll mention the selective service  
public bathrooms, the closing of their clubs  
and cite some vague religious reasons  
to explain that their masculinity would be in jeopardy  
and that it is ludicrous to make such a fuss over status  
since we usually buy them whatever they want.



When we finally run out of arguments  
and they still insist on equal rights  
we'll just have to tell them how awful it would be  
for us.

## **Yes, As Usual Politics**

Be sure you have my good side toward the camera.  
I hope this isn't live as I like to edit, at least my aides  
do. HaHa. So here goes: My Fellow Americans,  
we face a huge black hole brought about  
by the opposition but doing nothing is not an option  
so let's draw a line under it and move on to face  
the elephant in the room in order to enter into a full  
and frank debate and never get into bed with compromise  
nor have a knee-jerk reaction nor engage in obvious  
feelgood tactics because the facts speak for themselves  
but having said that knowing we have nothing to hide  
though I can't comment on individual cases  
and like to confront all the issues in my own way  
for the good of everyone concerned though again  
I'm not ruling anything out since lessons must be learned  
and let's be absolutely clear about this and take  
the moral high ground and let's put on gloves  
and stop being mister nice guy since there's no road map  
for where we're headed. Just remember that I will  
always keep my eye on the ball and when presented  
with irrefutable facts offer my most profound message  
to the people of this great land: No comment.

## Living Amends

The dessert was monochromatic and angular. Sometimes we'd stare across a plane that gave the appearance of having a slightly domed curve, but most of the landscape was broken and fragmented. The ages chipped away from a solid brick of rock, and crumbled it into dust, and E.C. pressed me about the amends I'd made. Drugs were just another thing we talked about: we'd been driving on and off for ten days and any topic was fair game. It happened to be during the leg of the trip between Vegas and the Grand Canyon, via the Hoover Dam, that recovery came up. "It seems so incongruous," she said. "Maybe it's because I never knew you back then, but you don't seem like that at all now."

I told her that I'd basically been the same person, not so different, just a little fatter, sweatier... I smelled worse, stumbled more, and slurred my words. I also stole money from loved ones and lied savagely to my ex-wife. I was bothered by the fact that E.C. couldn't imagine me causing trouble: it might mean I'd lost my edge. Drinking and doing drugs had been a convenient way to rebel, and the loose alliances of drug addicts and drunks suited basic needs for comradery. Furthermore, addiction was a statement of refusal to be productive in the ways I'd been told were required. My own self-destruction seemed the purest rebellion against all social proscriptions. Of course, I admitted, that was the mentality of a selfish man. There were other things I could have done, active participation in the world, that would have achieved my purposes better. But I'd been young and foolish, and by the time I'd aged enough to recognize my ineffectuality it was too late.

E.C. said she could relate: she'd felt the same way as a teenager. She drank plenty and smoked pot with the stoner boys, but she'd been scared of harder drugs, though she romanticized them. E.C. worried that she'd missed out, and envied my experiences, not for the selfishness of them (which was plain to her) but for the difference between them and the experiences most people chose. Hearing this, I felt better, because I thereby reestablished an aura of recklessness. But then E.C. went on to talk about how boring the druggo kids were: they were all the same. Sure, many came by their troubles honestly, but she'd come across little in the way of an ethos or political philosophy. E.C. said that all identities, all of the personas we affect, are like that. We're always hiding the fact that we have nothing to say, and all non-statements are made in a bombastic voice,

screaming how unique it believes itself to be. "The louder the costume, the more boring the person wearing it," E.C. said.

I contested that everybody is actually boring, regardless of costume. But E.C. said the basic folks were at least not compelled to make such a racket about it. She could relate to rebellion: it was a good impulse because the world beats us down and forces us into these little cubicles – metaphorical and physical – and our minds need to rebel when we become hysterical with discontent. But she'd always chosen sex. "I never understood why people act like it's so bad. Sex was the best way to show everybody what they thought was wrong. Drugs were dangerous and made people boring, but sex made you wild. I could sneak out of my house. I could scare boys with how outrageous I was, show everybody what dumb prudes they were."

E.C. was the most sexual woman I knew and she did have an ethos about her deviance, though it was sometimes muddied by the fact that she loved being controlled but refused to be taken advantage of or victimized. She loved getting what she wanted in the way she wanted, and often told me the only reason she kept me around was because I knew how to be mean to her in the right ways (though I also believed she'd grown to love me). She self-consciously referred to herself as a deviant. She pursued subjugation on her own terms, and worried out loud to me that she wasn't a good feminist because she enjoyed being desired – though only in certain ways, because the vast majority of masculine attention was designed to belittle rather than to deify, and she preferred deification. "It's the only power or value society tells me I have, so what's wrong with turning it to my benefit? But I don't want to perpetuate these imbalances either..." E.C.'s sex was so profound it made me nervous, and I told her that her body was a proving ground, which she liked hearing.

"You had sex when you were younger," E.C. said, "you must have treated some girls badly." E.C. was only half right. I'd never been a Lothario – certainly not when I was younger – and I was a virgin when I left high school. I told her that, sure, I'd made some mistakes and had been unkind at times. I was a young man and a drunk, and those things lend themselves to selfishness and cruelty. Young guys are baffled by sex, and I didn't know how to be good to girls – even if I'd wanted to do that. But E.C. didn't seem to understand. "No. You must have been *really* bad sometimes. You must have hurt a lady or two, right? You were a little shit, from what you tell me." My gaze left the highway for a moment and I turned to see E.C. pressed into the corner of her seat, staring directly at me. Her legs were spread and I read hunger in her eyes. I'd grown familiar with her lechery, and felt captured by that gaze. "You did bad things to girls; you

must have made amends to them. What did the ladies say when you showed back up after having been such a bad man?"

I sensed E.C.'s disappointment when I told her that I'd never made amends to any women, save for my ex and a few family members. "Well, that hardly seems fair," she said. "I mean, you go around to everybody you've harmed and you pay them back and ask for their forgiveness, but then when it comes to ladies you just get a pass? That's bullshit." I told her that it wasn't so simple as that. With ladies you had to make a living amends. You needed to stop hurting people and live like those past mistakes had changed you for the better. "But you're still a bit shady. I mean, you've had sex with prostitutes. You've told me other stories..." E.C. went on, and I could see that she didn't buy the notion of the living amends.

I told her there was more to it than that. Men (and probably women, too) weren't supposed to make amends to past sexual partners because it was a double transgression: this is a person who never wants to see you again, and you're approaching them without anything to offer, but with a request for exculpation. "I don't get to inflict myself on someone just because I want to be able to move on with my life." E.C. wasn't thrilled, but she accepted my answer for the time being.

We'd left the Hoover Dam several hours after noon, and the desert had turned to shadows during the drive. We'd passed through shanty towns that once supported mines. These weren't the old western ghost towns springing out of dust as a reminder of our crumbling frontier past. Rather, the dead mining towns were made of corrugated metal, and they rusted themselves into piles of red oxide. The structures didn't remain standing, didn't possess grandeur, and when they fell to ruin, they didn't represent the movement of historical time, but rather the futility, and, worse, the cruelty of human endeavor. And because these towns were on the highway, there were always a few holdouts, folks whose homes didn't fall to ruin only by a force of will, a human pushing back against nature from within. They offered mechanical services, sold gas and fireworks and beef jerky, but they'd been left behind by an industry that had ill-used the land and moved on without more use for it.

## Liberty, Maine

The discordant banjo string resonated longer than the other four, snaking around the microphone and over the linoleum barroom floor, past beer-soaked tabletops and ashen, soggy-cornered coasters. It flirted with the worn bills of camouflage baseball caps and combed-over bald spots and peeked down leathery middle-aged cleavage caged in sequined polyester. The untuned note, mischievous and wandering, escaped the corralled sound of the four-piece string band, soared over tapping feet and clapping hands, hovered pleasantly near indifferent, beer-logged ears and, undeterred by neon wall signs, escaped the bar, maneuvering around the rusted brass doorknob and past fogged glass panes out into the Maine night, where wakening raccoons stretched and yawned, preparing to begin their nightly sojourn through the dumpsters of the six-store unpaved road.

The note, losing steam but still moving through space, split in two at the bar's entrance, and, weakened and divided, drifted down either direction of Main Street, past the pharmacy that sold bright orange arthritis splints to match the most geriatric hunter's uniform, past the mom and pop ice cream shop that peddled candy cigarettes for a quarter but closed at 4 and opened when it pleased, and past the video game and music store that had made a brief attempt at youthful rebellion and commercial consumerism but soon shuttered once it became apparent all the youthful rebels and commercial consumers had left town after graduating high school, some before. The note floated past the boarded up storefront where old Frank Perkins used to sell his guns. He had retired after the shooting, and climbing weeds had since conquered the hulking wooden *Guns & Ammo* sign, curling in and around the flecking green paint. The most pious of the Borderless Souls Enlightenment stopped here every year on their pilgrimage to Liberty, Maine, standing before the store to light candles and bow their heads, white robes drifting over bare feet in the dirt. One of them had painted a likeness of Ubadiah Ghent's small wrinkled face on the wall of the storefront. A faint outline of his narrow eyes was still visible on the red brick.

Across from the storefront, leaning against a chain link fence, stood Arlo, who swatted at the dying resonance of the note like a gnat. As he smoked, he traced lines in the dirt with his boot, creating and destroying patterns of earth and gravel. A troop of house finches gathered around the dropped crumbs of some unidentifiable pastry,

picking at the flakes in bobbing dashboard doll motions. Every now and then the finches flew a low altitude path across the street and then up to the roof above the *Guns & Ammo* sign, where they built their nests.

Arlo had never left this town. After high school, he landed work on a schooner that took wealthy tourists to the islands off coast. He knew nothing of sailing, but he made it a point to learn. He studied the wind and tried to predict its tendencies. If they were near shore, he watched to see how fast the leaves rustled and how far the branches bent. If nowhere near land, he measured the insistency of the ripples on the water. He knew it was futile, especially at dusk when out of nowhere the humidity would grow thick and present and send the sails flapping and the water lapping at the boat and then, just as suddenly, disappear in an abrupt calm.

Soon, he was sailing full time, working for bad-tempered seamen who made their living making a show of navigating off the state's rocky coast. He taught wide-eyed wives and momentarily hardy husbands when to reef the mainsail and how to avoid the constellations of lobster traps dotting every cove. He let himself burn in the sun and adopted a blue-collar mutter crafted to impress.

When he first met her, she was a liberal arts student summering outside Portland. The hard-drinking son of one of the millionaires he sailed around invited him to a party, and when they arrived, she was dancing in the middle of the room. She made full use of the space, flirting with chairs and couches, moving in slow, studied movements, lips faintly counting the beat. She looked down, eyelids half-closed with an intimacy that forced most to look away. He talked to her that night and learned that she was from Connecticut and played lacrosse. He learned her name was Victoria, and she loved Victorian novels, and yes she thought that was a funny twist of fate. He learned she liked mimosas, and developed a faint English accent after two, which transformed into a slight Louisiana drawl after four, and again into crisp New England declarations after six.

On their first date, desperate to show her that Maine, too, had culture, he sailed her to Monhegan. They wandered the island, passing the distracted legions of silver-haired, sandal-clad artists who lived there. She noted that all the houses were similar, sporting their worn wooden shingles like uniforms, whether in an eerie or darling way she couldn't say.

He followed her onto the dirt road that went past the one room schoolhouse and up to the lighthouse, where they paused to take in the view as a Hemingway cat rubbed against their legs. They continued on beyond the boundary of the village until they were surrounded by forest and silence. They reached the southern border of the island, where

the cliff dropped to meet the ocean. The breaker foam mixed with sea gull waste, creating a blank canvas of slick white rock. Trees sprouted sideways from the cliff walls. If only more people had a chance see this sight once in their lives, she had said.

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Timothy Marter shaved the red bark off the wood in measured slices, running the blade down the length of the tree until his arm could stretch no further. The bark was soft from the night's rain, and it separated easily from the trunk. The slivers gathered in a mass grave of rough ribbons in the snow. He worked in silence.

It was not necessary to skin all the bark, but he liked things clean, tidy. He would use the wood to build the front door, the doorframe, and the latch, and it had to be presentable. With sandpaper he began to wear the rough edges down, until the tree was clean and pure and suitable. He stepped back to look at his work. He had made her beautiful again. It was an excellent start to his shelter. He sat on a rock near the fallen tree and pulled a roll of bread and a thermos from his rucksack. He opened the mug. The aroma of cinnamon floated up to his face, and he thought of all the dangerous things in the world.

He walked into town, for the gun shop was almost closed, and loitered with a cigarette outside the storefront. Above the entrance to the shop was a brand new *Guns & Ammo* sign, painted in forest green, and he watched as old Frank Perkins ducked out to admire it. Hanging from the door was a Borderless Souls Enlightenment flyer, one of those pastel green atrocities that papered every public surface in a dull shine, the wrinkled eyes of Ubadia Ghent staring kindly out from his photocopied prison. Timothy walked to the counter, and when he spoke his voice was low and ragged from lack of use. He chose a Steyr assault rifle and a vintage Colt. By the time he left the store, the night was dark and cold.

He had more firepower now, and this made him feel safe and strong. In his home on a small plot outside of town he kept his hunting rifle and handgun. The rest he stored in his underground cache in the forest, alongside crates of canned goods, emergency blankets, first aid kits, bottled water and cans of gas for when they shut off the supply lines. His bunker had bags of rice, extra batteries, radios, flashlights, and ammunition. Just recently he had built a chicken coop. Their eggs would give him plenty of protein, and for the rest he would hunt.

He pitied those who weren't preparing, but it was pity diluted by contempt.



Anybody could see there wasn't much time left. Before he had gone away, his father had taught him how to watch for the signs. He had taught him which way the world was going, who would try to hurt their way of life, and how to prepare for the inevitable, final, dreadful sequence of events that would bring freedom and America and everything decent and worth preserving crashing to its knees.

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Victoria moved onto Arlo's boat. They didn't have enough money, but neither did anyone else in town, so somehow that made things alright. She didn't leave him for one of the college men with careers, like he feared she would. She didn't get bored with the sleepy Maine fishing town, as he thought she would, and, most of all, she didn't tire of him, as he was sure she would. An older sailor he sometimes fished with let him build a small one-room cabin on his land, not far from the water, so that when the weather turned biting they could sit indoors feeding logs to the fire. She would pretend they were a fishing family on the Aran Islands, primitive and content. She called him Man of Aran and learned how to make bread over the fire. She let her hair grow and stopped dying it, before finally cutting it short one night before the mirror over the galley sink.

On his days off, they explored. On a trip inland to a small, secluded lake he knew of, they stopped at a roadside stand and she bought a thin, tattered book for a dollar. On the cover was an etching of a man's small, deeply wrinkled face. His narrow eyes peeked from behind wire-framed spectacles, and the hint of a gray beard darkened his jawline. Radiating from his lenses was a psychedelic swirl that navigated around his face and formed letters atop the cover: *The Art of Selflessness* by Ubadiah Ghent. Arlo said it looked like self-help nonsense and she didn't disagree, but that day at the lake she spent hours lying on a rock jutting out into the water, reading with the book angled just so to block the sun.

Later that day they dropped acid. The water shimmered and lifted them with hands of cool algae. Across the lake from their campsite was a cliff, thirty feet of flat rock. They swam to it and hoisted themselves out of the lake by grabbing the roots of rough plants near the water's edge. Climbing over brambles and muddying their feet, they made it to the top. Looking down, it seemed much higher now, and a tree sprouting from half way down the rock face looked impossible to clear.

The sun was lowering, and soon they would build a fire and drink whiskey and dry themselves. Below them they could feel the water cooling, preparing for night.

Choruses of frogs and crickets grew louder from the woods behind them, and they felt like warriors plunging into battle. Arlo leapt first, sure to push off far from the rock to avoid the tree. He cleared it easily and plunged deep into the water before spreading his arms to slow himself and work his way back to the light and air. As he broke the surface he heard Victoria's cheers, and he smiled up at her as she prepared to make the leap.

Her small face set into focus as she geared herself. A hawk screeched as it dove toward the lake. Victoria smiled, pointed at the hawk, and jumped. For a moment, panic. Arlo felt her heartbeat and her adrenaline. His organs moved aside so he could feel what she felt. Then she was flying, screaming in exhilaration, and within seconds she had resurfaced beside him, slick and delirious with delight.

That night, she read aloud to him excerpts from the roadside manifesto as the traces of acid left their bodies, leaving them warmed and tired. She read of the falsehood of the self. She read of relieving yourself of the burden of the ego and joining souls with those you love. She read until their very skin seemed to dissolve and they pressed together flesh to flesh in the sleeping bag, and he felt again, as his brain flickered between sobriety and expansiveness, the oneness he had felt right before she jumped off the cliff.

They married a year later, quickly and quietly on the waters of Damaris Cove. Once she was pregnant he picked up more work hauling tourists from island to island. One fall day, on a trip to Monhegan, he picked through the discount table outside a bookstore. He found a books-on-tape version of Ubadiah Ghent's second work, *Forgetting Your Name*. She listened to the tapes that night as he rubbed her feet and felt the rumbles in her womb. It was the first time they had heard Ghent's voice, and they laughed quietly together at its soft, Scandinavian cadences. Months later, weeks shy of the baby's arrival, she saw in the local newspaper that Ghent was coming to speak in Liberty. Arlo had to work, but she told him she would remember every word, every gesture, and report back to him their next assignment on their spiritual journey. They laughed, but he saw that Ghent spoke to her. He calmed her.

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The first time Timothy heard of Ubadiah Ghent was inside a vegan restaurant he had accidentally entered while on a lumber haul to Portland. The walls screamed in unnatural reds and yellows like a child's nursery, and the tiles on the tabletops clustered in loud mosaics, and as he read the menu Timothy realized there was no meat, no eggs

even. Too proud to admit his mistake, he ordered a tofu burger.

A screen on the wall, too big to possibly ignore, played a recording of a small bespectacled man pacing a stage, speaking carefully in a soft, accented voice. "To be yourself," he said, "to realize your self, you must recognize that there is no self. You are your neighbor and your neighbor is you. We hold in our mind always the boundaries of our selves, our bodies, our minds, but these are only artificial expressions."

Timothy tried to signal the waiter to change the channel, but the man was in rapture, beaming at the screen. He caught Timothy's gaze and walked over smiling.

"Do you follow the teachings of Ubadiyah Ghent?"

Timothy saw the waiter take in his dirty jeans and faded flannel shirt, and he knew the waiter knew full well he didn't know who goddamn Ubadiyah Ghent was.

"He is our leader," the waiter said.

"Whose leader?"

"The leader of the Borderless Souls Enlightenment movement." The waiter turned his attention back to the screen.

"When you recognize the tranquility of the oneness," Ghent was saying, "and relinquish yourself, there will be great calm." Ghent closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, his ribcage expanding against his white tunic. "So you may go about the mundane tasks required by the world we have built, not as a fish struggling and flapping in the air, but as tranquility itself.

Timothy grew angry, sitting in that restaurant, listening to the man talk. His tofu burger came, and it was offensive. The Indian waiter's smile was offensive. The loud cosmopolitanism of the restaurant, its foreign designs and inscrutable symbols, made him angrier still. He saw then that his father had been right. The nation was sick, and he had a duty to fight the illness.

That urgency faded, at least for a while, when he met his wife. He still remembered how she looked behind her desk at the lumber depot, forever reorganizing her pens as she took calls, the light through the blinds creating patterns on her face. She was younger than him, just out of high school, and he could see the uncertainty in the way she answered the phone, the trepidation in her hands and around her eyes, a little shaking of the skin that made him feel protective and alive.

The day her car battery died she walked up to him in the parking lot, clutching her purse and looking apologetic. He fumbled the jump so he would have an excuse to drive her home, and as they drove he was aware of the sad filth crusted on the seat belts, the yeasty smell from the empty beer cans in the back, and his stupid, uninspired

silence. Mercifully, she began to talk. She spoke of how she liked to draw the trees, but after coming home from answering phones and typing all day she was too tired to do much drawing anymore. And, besides, capturing how the wind teased those branches was just so hard, and she didn't know if she would ever be able to do it just like she wanted. He resolved then to build her a screened-in patio, surrounded by trees, where she could sit all day and draw her life away.

They married at the courthouse, and her friends from high school decorated his truck with streamers and cans. When they drove back to his house on the outskirts of town, the clank of the cans behind them, she chatted and he listened, as he hoped it would always be. He lifted her when they crossed the threshold, and when he put her down she looked around at the brown carpet and wood paneling. She fell quiet, looking at her hands before meeting his eyes again with that uncertain smile that made him feel boorish and big.

When he did talk, he tried to teach her about the way the world was, but the more he explained, the more frustrated she grew with what she called his "politics." He tried to explain that it was real, and if they didn't open their eyes they would fall with the others. Most of the time though, he just listened to her go sweetly on and on about nothing really, and thanked God as he closed his eyes and reclined in his chair that he had her voice to distract him.

He started driving tractor-trailers on lonely hauls through the country. It meant time away from home, but now they could afford for her to quit her job and keep the house like they planned. To pass the time while he was gone she brought home books, little bent paperbacks she picked up at the second hand store. They were westerns and romances with pastel covers she tried to copy on the easel he bought her. She looked so young then, drawing those figures, small hand clutched around the charcoal pencil, brow furrowed and a strand of hair between her teeth. Soon, though, the books began to change. Self-help, spiritual explorations, inquiries into auras and past life regressions. And then one day, home from a two-week haul, he saw the small wrinkled face of Ubadiyah Ghent staring up at him from the kitchen table. He grew loud, and soon a door slammed and sobs reached him from inside the bedroom. She just wanted to know what else was out there, she said. Didn't he ever wonder? He rubbed her back and listened, but stayed firm. He had a duty to teach her how it really was.

For weeks she stepped quieter around the house, placed his plates down gently and feigned interest in his preparations. Months went by, and he began to find BSE pamphlets hidden around the house, under couch cushions and in the glove box of her

car. When he came home one day to find her closet cleared out, he felt a blankness in his chest. Open your mind, the note on the kitchen table said. Dr. Ghent taught me the true way of life, she wrote, and he can teach you too.

After she left, he resolved to not become distracted again. He saw his fellow Americans fall back on the government, at first like needy children, then like fiending addicts wailing for more. He saw the fascists move to strip the people of their guns. He saw the Muslims and Blacks and Gays and Mexicans build in numbers, until they were infecting even the frontier lands of Maine with their foul food and the insistent beats of their music. He saw American industry suffocate under a wave of Swedish and Chinese particleboard. He saw the words God and freedom disappear from public conversation until he was given funny looks if he so much as mentioned the Bible or Jesus or the Constitution until gradually he just stopped talking altogether.

He saw it all through the windows of his tractor-trailer, through long stretches of strip malls and Wal-Marts and fast food joints and go-go bars. Serenading him on those drives were the voices of the few awake enough, intelligent enough, to see what he saw. The voices spoke truth into microphones, and those truths traveled over radio waves to realists like him, men who saw the danger the country was in and, instead of flinching from it, educated themselves and prepared. He practiced his aim every day, and increased his food supply. He started choosing his targets.

He knew people were calling him crazy. His mother ridiculed him. Girls ignored him at bars. He had never needed friends, but now the mere presence of people was painful. Brushing against them felt like his skin was made of raw nerve endings. He stayed out of stores and bars when he could help it. He took longer truck hauls, and the only voices that didn't irritate the raw inner fibers of his brain were those on the radio, those voices he trusted to lay bare the secret mechanics that chugged along behind closed doors and stripped the country of what made it great.

And, through it all, he saw Ubadiah Ghent. He saw him peering out from bookstore windows. He heard his lectures from barroom television sets and saw his face on billboards, looking serene against peeling backgrounds and rising suns. The BSE had made inroads into America through its chain of vegan restaurants. First they appeared in the places that were already lost, hippie havens like Burlington and Seattle and San Francisco. Then they spread from the coasts inward, to places like Nebraska and Missouri and Tennessee. And with each restaurant an unassuming Indian or Thai or Nepalese family moved in. Within months, their families' families would come, congregating in groups in Applebees parking lots and Wal-Marts, leaving behind a

rainstorm of flyers wherever they went. *Borderless Souls*, they read. Be saved from yourselves.

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Arlo had never worried when Victoria was late. She was the one who worried. He worked in a dangerous profession, she would say. He could fall off the boat and hit his head and drown. He could get caught in a freak storm that would leave him fighting white caps in cold water. He could die and leave her alone. He would kiss her forehead and tell her he was the safest sailor in Maine.

He never understood her worrying, when everything was about as good as it could be. When she was late that afternoon he didn't worry as he should have. He didn't even think twice. It took him a full three hours to hear what had happened.

For days the footage of the shooting was everywhere, in grainy loops behind gas station counters. The same angles, again and again. The man in the dirty flannel shirt, five rows back from Ghent, screaming, his face red. Veins bulging from his neck and his fat finger stabbing in the air with such force it seemed he would jerk his shoulder out of its socket. Ghent clasping his hands in front of him and listening patiently, as if waiting for a child to wear himself out.

The gun came suddenly, and in a moment Ghent's white tunic was red. The man smiled as people screamed—screams that were silent on the security camera footage—and nodded as if accepting applause. Out came another gun and more bodies crumpled. Still more. The man was now out of camera range but his victims were not. Parents fell on their children, and men threw themselves before their wives, but the bullets tore right through them.

The footage looped on television, interrupted with breaking news from the state forest, where the gunman held police at bay with fire, rapid and precise. By then the BSE were already gathering in white-robed vigils across the country and reporters were tracking down anyone who knew the gunman, which, it seemed, were few. They interviewed his mother, a skeletal woman who seemed unsurprised by the legions of reporters outside her trailer door.

Police suffered more casualties. Cameras were pushed farther from the scene. Reports of an explosion, then a fire. The next day—when they found the gunman's charred remains deep in the forest—came as a blow to Arlo. Everything that reporters and police would dig up about Timothy Marter was finite. He would never be able to ask

him why.

Victoria's funeral was the same day as Ghent's, and everywhere was coverage of his mourning. The sweet, low Norwegian murmur became intolerable. At night, Arlo dreamt of foul things, of rodents biting with sharp cruel teeth. He dreamt of prisons, of cold concrete floors and windows like eyes half-shut. He dreamt of white-robed armies marching on his house. He dreamt of fire and wild bloody messes of hair and he woke up sweating and gasping in the cold sea air, hearing ghostly waltzes from across the water. He dreamt of the dead.

For years afterward, pilgrims came to pay homage at the site where a madman had shot down Ubadiah Ghent in cold blood. They ran their fingers through the dirt that caught his blood in the town square, packing soil into small pouches to put on mantelpieces or hang above dashboards. Somewhere deep in the state, a vast stretch of forest was still fallen, trees burnt and prostrate, waiting for the man with the knife to return and tell them their purpose. And Arlo, now alone, went often to stand before the weed-ridden *Guns & Ammo* sign, stare into the fading painted eyes of Ubadiah Ghent, and wonder how to prepare for the pale stretches of time awaiting him.

## The Hyphen is Not a Subtraction Sign

There is a fountain of difference between trees and human beings. Here is the one as illustrated by the philosopher's favorite alleged mystery, if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound. This question is not about acoustics but about silence and witness. So what is the difference between trees and human beings? If the former falls when alone, that or if there's a sound doesn't matter. This is not true for the latter.

*Does it matter?* is an utterance of distress. If you do not hear a tree's neck breaking, we cannot know if you're not hearing it hurts the tree. But we can know if this sort of silence hurts the human. And the silence I mean is exile, which is the double bind the people ranked low are tied with, which is the dislocation from the truth. An example: women, if you're not pretty, you'll never attract a man and if you never attract a man, you'll never be worth anything BUT if you're pretty, you'll be raped and it will, of course, be your fault because you're pretty like you were instructed to be in order to achieve value. Though we all know and live and breathe them, none of these binds are factual, hence the alienation from the truth. But to speak out against them as a woman has only been done from within the present hushed and hushing arrangement of bodies. If a woman says anything, she is only seen as out of place; if a woman says nothing, she is not standing up for herself – which would also, then, be her fault; it is agreement with and participation in her muzzling.

So I am one instance of witness to life as a woman. But I am a white woman. Like a tree, I did not choose my soil. White-woman isn't hyphenated like Japanese-Korean, African-American, etc., but, if we take off one layer of the masks words can wear, it should be: oppressor-oppressed, historically speaking at least. I do not think we can get any further along the long arc towards justice until we fess up to this. And what does oppressor mean? It is deeper – and now quieter – than chains and out-loud beatings and then turning around and taking credit for constructing an entire country, rich and powerful, all on your own. One form of it is that you are invisible in the good way: you can blend in, you statically can slip under the radar of cops and teachers and officials and even your suspicious behavior is often laughed off or seen as a cry for help. You have the luxury to not even think twice about when you attribute blessings your *privilege* has proffered you to God.

What, then, does oppressed mean? I know that it always means much more than this: your lethal visibility is but caricature; you are invisible in the bad way. No one knows



*you*. When you put a picture of a white man up, people see just him – his achievements and accomplishments and don't really remember those who helped him get there – and there is always a helper. The 'self-made' man is a myth and grease for the gears of subjugation. If you put a picture of a white woman or any person of color up, it is of their entire gender and/or race. They as an individual are invisible and what they have done, who they are, etc., is applied to all women or all people of color, in terms of expectations, of visibility, for that whole gender or race. This is how stereotypes and pigeonholes, racism, sexism and unbridled division are fertilized.

But is the problem really illusory partitions strategically placed by those in power? Some things are chosen for us: if your dad is white and your mom is black, you are not one or the other. If your dad is Japanese and your mom is Filipino, you are not one or the other. If you are white and you are a woman, you are not one or the other. The hyphen is not a subtraction sign. Yet the division and stalemate endure. Are we really all in this together? Surely not all white people are oppressors and surely sexism and racism are not the same. But saying "not all whites are racist" misses the point, which is that "nonwhites *are* oppressed" and it is *whiteness* as the cultural favoring lens it has fattened itself up to be that is the perpetrator.

And no two oppressions have to be the same for both to be as damaging as they are valid. I have both never had a conscious worry about my skin tone and have been presumed to cheat on an exam because of my superior grade in a class where I was the only woman in "man's subject" (engineering) such that the professor automatically failed me. To relieve one's exile, one must reunite with the truth. Here it is as I understand it so far: I have greatly benefited from this external veneer society slathered on me and my parents and their parents and their parents in ways that I cannot originally or clearly articulate. In that way, I am not "in this together" with the darker bodies that lay bleeding in the streets with no impartiality forthcoming from this ogre we keep calling the justice system. I also was brought up to never, ever, ever be alone at night, to carry mace and my keys between the knuckles of my clenched fists and to make eye contact with men I do not know in public only as long as it takes me to notice facial hair, special markings, eye color and if and how they are looking back at me.

There is a certain amount of solidarity in the fierce fire of fear and the uneven mudslide that is anger. Solidarity is a noble end in itself between those who plaint for justice on behalf of the oppressed and those from whom it is yet withheld. But does solidarity reconcile the self rent by ancient societal diktats passed down to her in ever furtive and smiling yet incising forms? For those who are paying more attention than to think that

wearing "I Can Breathe" shirts,<sup>1</sup> or, even show up at a pro-police rally, come to think of it, will bridge any gaps, the hyphen between oppressed and oppressor in *my* identity is the thorn upon which each is jammed. Selves can be considered as microcosms of their cultures, though admittedly, it's anyone's guess which holds the door for the other. But the hyphen in my identity correlates to the wider culture's hyphens because the culture put it there in the first place. The hyphen, for me and this society, is not a subtraction for the same reason that being colorblind is racism by other means and gender equality has to mean more than dressing women up to pass as men or even sexually ambiguizing everyone. The hyphen is also not a bridge. It is a gate we have not as a society, exceptional though we've been programmed to believe, found a way to unlock yet.

And here we come to another difference between trees and people. Oppressor-oppressed relationships trade in power and gridlock. Trees unlock sun into branch and loyal turning for the seasons. Whatever power a tree has is in its beauty even more than what we may process it into for ourselves but this beauty comes from its natural course of growth, not from striving or anxious comparing nor from manufacturing and maintaining enemies. A tree needs light, not opposition, for strength and stay. The nature of human power, at least as we usually know it, is not so much an ordinary development as it is a ripping of relationships and resources to redirect them into hierarchical, and thus mass-impoverishing, allotments, light and dark, high and low, where the very few get the very much and the rest are left to divvy up the very little that's left. Having to fight for the rest means little rest and so there is yet a further threat of rifts. The gate remains bolted on both sides for we have set up a system in which we all cannot help but be complicit in, though contributions are certainly not equal.

Of course, there are two things more powerful than power: fear, for it is power's fuel and apathy, for it is its kryptonite. Love might come to mind, but love isn't more powerful than power, it is *redeemed* power. How can I be both oppressor and oppressed? It is more than the common notion of abused becoming abuser. It is more than the oppressor's dehumanizing of another cannot but dehumanize and thus oppress himself. We are not really all in this together. Not yet. Because those who have gathered the power that is privilege somehow know they have pilfered it, whether it was by pillaging an old world and covering over the blood by calling it new or hundreds of years of unrequited toil or border control programs or taxation schedules. They know that as soon as the lock on the gate springs free, the light will reveal that the divisions between

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<sup>1</sup> [http://gothamist.com/2014/12/20/pro\\_cop\\_rally\\_city\\_hall.php](http://gothamist.com/2014/12/20/pro_cop_rally_city_hall.php)

who's in and who's out, who's human and who's "not" are an utter sham. The grammar of division is the language of domination.

On a pure survival level, it is hard to want your own demise. Yet, I pray that it is harder still to bear the fabricated illusion that some people matter more than others to the point of (public and humiliating) death. This hyphenated identity in our rifted culture is an identity as split as relationships and resources. To be dissociated from one's self is to hollow out or sterilize what you offer here, which is the place where amazing, shifting light soundlessly falls without hesitation. Not all separations will be or should be bound together, however. Some need to be exposed by the torch of justice for the unrepentant lies they are. This is not simply toward a healed self understanding as a hyphenated entity in the present climate. And it does not stop at right and wrong. This is about the truth. And so I turn again to the tree. There is a fountain of difference between trees and human beings. The communion a single tree can hold, let alone a forest, being in and because of the wildly diverse ways of unlocking light is one of the differences. But that each tree and each thing in a tree witnesses differently to the silent light does not have to remain a discriminating factor between trees and people.



she'd manufactured from a dollar bill.

Would you believe

what lengths I went to, to call myself

happy then? Star of blood that blooms

beneath a bruised fingernail, star

of silence left high in the heart of a room

after the door's slammed. A couple sits, watching  
one another's reflections in a mirror. The two

talk like this as evening falls

around them, and neither has the heart

to get up and turn on the light. "My body's here  
but no one's in it," writes a friend; for me

it's different. I'd spent my childhood

in a house made of bees; on hot days honey

dripped through cracks in the ceiling. Me, I hummed,  
coiled tight. It hadn't been long since I'd slept

in a creosote field while grainers crashed

in the switchyard nearby. Actual tumbleweeds

turned like prayer wheels crossing the tracks

and the constellations coyotes called to,

streaked across the night, were more miraculous  
than freckles on the face of god. Around then,

hitchhiking past Death Valley, a pair of truckers

stopped for me. I used to haul cattle

to LAX, one said, But I couldn't take looking

into their mournful eyes anymore. I guess I wear my heart

on my sleeve, he said. They were climbing  
through the Sierras to pick up a load of honey, telling jokes,

they both had wild white beards. I hadn't yet come  
in my life to peer over the lip of a volcano,

I wasn't yet made of a cicada's coils  
and tymbal. Still, I carried a bit of string, a *quipu* I used

for eavesdropping on the passage of time.  
If someone had put a knife in my hands, even then,

I'd have taken it. I can hear  
two birds quarreling, tangled in midair. I'm afraid

one day I'll find myself trash picking, tearing  
corners from a twenty. I'm afraid I'm no longer

lost as the runaway I met hopping a train  
out of Colton that summer

who carried a small white jar of her own baby teeth  
with her in her pack.

## Marathon

In the room of not-knowing,  
you are texting, thumbs fluttering  
in your lap like butterflies

until I mark you absent  
because there are no butterflies here.  
*Text* is now a verb like *like*.

*Kitchen pots used for bombs,*  
Crystal informs us from the corner,  
scanning her iPad amid

"A Ritual to Read to Each Other."  
The world's a broken bell jar.  
A rabbit will be king of the ghosts.

Three days' fever washed out of my hair,  
I'm about to reveal the difference  
between *lightning* and a *lightning bug*,

between logical and ethical appeals.  
Despite the bombing in Boston,  
this is not quaint. This is not

an academic exercise. This is King  
writing his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*  
and my lesson against forgetting.

Each day it breaks through  
the cocoons before me as you  
who are writing down your lives

on the bomb of an alien god.  
To climb out of the craters  
and the hate they contain

with the same hands that move  
a pen. In your taps on the screen  
I hear the rush of wings opening.



## Hundreds, Thousands

Back in high school, before I got fat, I had an arm like a Howitzer and the control to put the pigskin wherever I wanted. People in the stands made signs with my name on them. The town hung my number, 4, in the city hall lobby next to student photography of farm machinery. Family fridges were wallpapered with news clippings about the records I'd broken. They called me "Wayne the Pain." But all that was in the rearview before I knew it and the only passes I could complete were the bacon cheeseburgers I threw at my face.

Palmer, Ohio had a new quarterback breaking my records and people were already—when they saw me at the grocery store or the gas station—beginning conversations with "Oh, I remember you." Or "Damn, Wayne, you were the shit back then, but this guy..."

I was twenty-four when Sophie got her acceptance letter from the Engineering Department at the university and we moved from our nothing town to a tough neighborhood in Portland, Oregon before the start of winter term. Sophie was twenty-two, a sophomore when we met in high school. We'd been married four years when we made the move west. She was filling more beautifully into her figure every day while I was exploding out of mine. I'd put on a good forty, fifty pounds since casting off my cap, gown and football jersey. Had Sophie not fallen in love with me before I blew up, I believe now that she never would have.

I tried junior college back in Palmer but it didn't take. Dropped out after midterms and took a night job at Farmer's World as a security guard. I wandered the aisles, watched grainy TV and offloaded leftover donuts from the break room counter. I got a decent paycheck every two weeks—enough to take Sophie to a movie at the second-run theatre and save a few bucks.

The real estate ad contained terms like *up and coming* and *transitional*. To us, this translated to *cheap*. And we needed something fast. We came out for a few days in November. It was the third house we toured with Sheila, the realtor we'd found from an ad at a bus stop. The house was a light grey with darker trim. It had a single detached garage, a decently sized covered porch and, on the second floor, dormers like slitted eyes watching over the street. But the place needed work—interior paint and new carpet and a shitload of window screens, a project. A dream home in the making. Plus the

house was a ten minute bus ride to Sophie's campus. Sophie's father, flush with dairy cash, gave us the downpayment and I'd saved enough at Farmer's World to cover a few months of the mortgage.

There was a Walgreens and a Safeway within walking distance, condos being built on the next street, a vegan bistro slated to occupy the ground floor. Sheila told us the concrete buildings across the street from were the last of the projects not only in North Portland, but the whole State of Oregon. They'd be phased out by next year, she said.

"How do you phase people out?" I'd asked. We were standing in the living room which had been furnished with the essential Ikea set pieces to make the space feel lived in. The housing in question was visible through the large bay window and a heavy sheet of rain. A high rot iron fence wrapped around the structures. Tricycles, deflated basketballs and other childhood essentials rested against the fence and along the less traveled paths next to cinderblock walls.

"Not the people, the housing," the realtor had said.

"They're going to move the buildings? Tear them down?" I'd asked. The floorboard creaked above us as Sophie walked around the upper floor planning color schemes and the placement of infantile mobiles.

"Oh no. After the program was," Sheila paused, "dismantled, a private investment group acquired the units—the same company who flipped this property actually." She tapped her foot on the polished Pergo flooring. "They'll be renovating them, after the current residents have vacated of course."

"How many units over there?"

"Nearly three hundred. One, two, and three bedrooms."

I asked, "So, where will they be going?"

"Who?"

"The people living there now."

Sheila stepped to the window, her heels clicking on the floor, and closed the blinds.

"I love it. We'll take it," Sophie said from the foot of the stairs, and Sheila smiled before leading us into the kitchen.

During our first night in the new digs two months later, on top of Sophie and heaving and snorting toward the finish, I heard a crack from outside; a cross between a car backfiring and an encyclopedia dropped onto the floor of an empty library. Not right out front but close enough to make Sophie pause the rhythmic flexing of her hidden

muscles and hold me inside her, grabbing handfuls of my flabby ass. "Did you hear that?"

"Baby," I said, "it was nothing. Kids with fireworks."

We were in the upstairs bedroom, surrounded by sealed boxes, stacked up like miniature skyscrapers. A comforter was rolled between Sophie's bare skin and the hardwood floor. My knees ached from carrying my weight. Sophie pulled me close and whispered, "That was a gunshot. We should call the police."

All I could think was to turn my fat ass into a blur of pistoning energy, but that wouldn't work now. Something outside had killed the mood. Sophie moved her hands to my chest and pushed me off.

"What would we tell them?" I asked. My nakedness was imposing so I rolled back and slipped on a shirt. I felt better in clothes. Sophie rarely saw me naked since I'd put on the extra pounds. Being fat was still new for me.

"That we heard a gunshot." Sophie's voice was thin, taut like a tightrope.

"You're in a city. It's not going to be quiet like back home. Your parent's farm was like sleeping in a black hole," I said. I'd spent a summer with my cousins in Cleveland my junior year and I fancied myself an authority on big cities. Technically, I stayed in Maple Heights, a suburb, but close enough. There were always sound effects from outside—the electric hum of air conditioners, the rattling of cans in a shopping cart. "You're getting yourself worked up."

The bedroom was dark, except for the single candle burning next to the duffle bag Sophie was using for a pillow. I found my ratty checkered boxers near the door frame and pulled them on. They had holes rubbed into the thighs and when I slipped my foot in, my big toe hooked and tore down to the stitching. I knocked over a stack of boxes on my way to the window. They hit the hardwood with an expensive crash.

Our street, Boyle, had more streetlights than I'd ever seen, one for every two or three houses. They produced wide circles of light on the layer of snow that had started to fall when I pulled the U-Haul into the driveway earlier in the afternoon. For the moment, it wasn't snowing and the street had that certain stillness, like a novelty snow globe resting on a shelf, waiting for a child or season to shake it up. Two sets of deep, asphalt-black grooves of tire tracks cut into the street. "Not a soul," I said. "Too cold. People here don't know Ohio winters. They're all inside next to wall heaters."

Then I saw one set of footprints leading off the sidewalk up to a pile of trash, or maybe clothes, on our front lawn. The pile shook.

I felt around for my glasses and saw the clothes, an orange, hooded parka and blue jeans, were attached to a man, tiny puffs of steam rising from his mouth. His hands were laced over his abdomen. My brain switched gears, offense to defense. I said, "There's someone down there."

"Who?"

"I don't know. There's just someone in the snow out front." I yanked on my jeans and struggled to button them.

"You're not going down there, are you?" Sophie asked. As she sat upright, the sheet fell revealing her breasts. Sophie covered herself again.

"I've got to go. We're homeowners now."

Sophie stood, the comforter wrapped around and under her armpits like a flannel evening gown, crossed to the window and peered out. "Remember what the realtor said?"

"Not everyone from the projects is a gang member. This is different. The person might be hurt," I said, the old confidence back in my voice.

"That was a gunshot, I'm sure of it."

"Who'd be shooting? This is a *transitional* neighborhood," I said and smiled. "It's probably some drunk guy passed out. I'm going to make sure he doesn't freeze to death on our lawn. That wouldn't be the best welcome to the neighborhood."

"Neither would my husband getting shot."

I wiggled on a pair of shoes and started out the bedroom door. "If anything," I said, "I'll get hit up for some change."

"Wayne, I don't want you to go down there. Let the cops deal with it."

"It's my responsibility as a man." I made sure the last word had some growl to it, which felt good. If I couldn't control what I put in my mouth, at least I could try and regulate what ended up on my lawn. On the first floor, I put on a coat and unlocked the front door. I flipped on the porch light.

"Take something out there with you."

I hadn't thought of that, but Sophie was always smarter. I grabbed a wooden dowel from the window track. "Stay up there and watch from the window, Soph."

The cold hit me like the back side of a shovel. I'd worked my temperature up with Sophie but now the sweat on my body was turning to needle points. I pulled the hood over my head and wrapped my arms around myself. When I stepped off the porch, I looked over my shoulder and saw Sophie framed in the window, backlit by the candle.

It energized the fuzz of her silhouette, her red hair, and she looked like cotton candy. Sophie pointed a flashlight at me, the beam faint on the snow.

When I got closer, I saw blood in the snow. I knelt beside the figure. Beneath an orange beanie, a boy with black skin, talking to himself. I didn't touch him right off. He coughed and gurgled and stared through me with wide, glassy eyes. Two teardrops were tattooed under his right eyelid. He didn't look old enough for a tattoo. The hands he pressed to his stomach were wet with his blood. I shivered and not from the cold. "What happened? What's your name?"

The boy said through stained lips, "...and the hallway was at like seven stories up with these small lights on the ceiling. It's dark on the floor and I have to walk with my fingertips touchin' either wall. And then I seen—"

"Were you shot?" I asked, though the answer was apparent and my first thought was, *Sophie was right*. I glanced at our bedroom window. I couldn't see her face but I assumed she was giving me the you're-getting-yourself-into-some-shit-again look.

"—a ball of orange light right there in front of me. The closer I get, the bigger it get."

I checked the pocket of my jeans for my phone and remembered I'd left it on the kitchen counter. "Sophie," I yelled back at the house. "Call 911." But she wasn't standing in the window any longer. Maybe she was already calling. *Make it quick*, I thought. *This kid is going to die*.

I couldn't tell exactly where the wound was underneath his layers of clothing, and the boy wasn't being responsive so I pressed around until he winced and I kept my palms there. Just above his belt. Warmth bubbled up between my fingers. I hadn't ever seen that much blood in real life. My ear drums thumped with every heart beat. For a moment I was back on Palmer's football field, kneeling over my blocker, Shaun Garmin, his arm bent backward from a misdirected tackle. The hushed crowd and opposing teams watched as I carried his two hundred pound body through the rear gate and set him in backseat of the coach's car.

I don't think I'd lifted anything or anyone that heavy since then, and if an ambulance didn't come soon, I wondered if I could do it again. The U-Haul was much closer than the coach's car had been. I figured I could manage.

"When I roll right up on it, it ain't one ball of light," the boy said. "It's hundreds, thousands of tiny little lights flying around. Like them fireflies I seen in the country."

"Where'd they go? Who did this?" I asked. And it hit me then, my legs weakened, numb from the cold and the realization that this wasn't Palmer, I wasn't on the football

field in the QB jersey. I was playing in someone else's stadium. Whoever shot him had to still be close.

"I try to touch it, but the ball pushes in like a balloon. Then my arm get sucked right into it. My whole arm," the boy said. He was still staring through me. "Then it pulled the rest of me in and I was in this ball of light, all them fireflies flying all around me."

I heard the creaking of boards behind me on the porch. "Sophie, did you call an ambulance?" I yelled. Then, realizing she might know the severity of the situation I added, "He's been shot."

"I can't find my phone," Sophie called. She had changed into sweatpants and t-shirt. She was shivering as she took the first step down to the lawn.

"It's in the kitchen," I yelled and put an arm up, palm in her direction. "Both of ours, on the counter charging. And stay inside."

Sophie walked backward across the porch, nearly tripping over a loose board then slipped back into the dark of the house.

"And then, I look down at myself and I'm just like them fireflies. No clothes, no skin. I'm just another light in the ball. I been havin' that dream e'ernight since I can 'member," The boy said. I could feel his eyes on me then. His pupils were enormous, stretching almost to the white. He was on something, I was sure it. Last time my pupils resembled open wells, I'd been rolling. Did Ecstasy thin your blood? Did all pills? Or was it just alcohol? I was warm and wet with the boy's blood up to my elbows, his wound like a faucet. "We need to get you to a hospital. What's your name?"

"Cameron."

The boy knew his name at least. Maybe he was capable of more. "All right, Cameron. I'm Wayne. My wife's calling an ambulance. If it doesn't come soon, I'm gonna have to drive you. Can you stand, help me get you to the car?" I wasn't talking to the boy exactly, more to myself. Convincing myself that I could do it. A little pep talk.

I kept pressure with one hand and turned in the direction of the U-Haul. Would it be easier to carry him there or back the truck down the driveway? I could get it within three feet. That was something I could manage.

I was about to yell for Sophie to find the rental keys when a car appeared at the end of the street, creeping around the concrete block apartments. The headlights painted us and lurched forward, the wheels pushing out a wake of powdered snow. I let go of the boy and dropped my ass to the ground. A small jet of hot blood jumped from where my hand had been, and for the first time, the boy groaned.

My bare hands sunk into the powder and I could feel my heart through my ribs. *Stay inside, Sophie, I thought. Lock the fucking door.*

The car was an old Cadillac, painted the color of a brush fire and it sputtered as the engine cut off, a layer of snow stuck to the headlights like eyebrows. They furrowed when the back door of the car opened and a large man stepped out, his shoes crunching the slush of the gutter. Sophie came back onto the porch at the same moment, searching above and around the front door. "Found the phone, Wayne. I need our address so they c—"

"I wouldn't do that, gingerbread," the man said. His voice was soft, smooth, the kind a puma might have if they found words inside of one. He also wore a puffy orange parka, with a color-matched baseball cap and as he stepped closer to me, I could see even his shoes had orange laces. He said, "It's too late now—a call like that would just wake the whole neighborhood. You don't want that, being new and all."

I crawled backward, feeling snow fill the crack of my ass. I threw my hands up. "We didn't see anything."

"What you mean 'see anything?' I didn't ask you that." He said, his eyes focused not on me but on our house.

The front doors of the car opened and two women appeared, one much older than the other. They descended on the boy, opening the layers of clothing. The older woman pressed a towel to Cameron's stomach while the younger cradled his head. They were so composed, Cameron's blood staining their hands now.

I was shaking then—through bone and ligament. My veins ran with ice water. But it wasn't from the cold. "I mean, I didn't see you—I didn't see Cameron get shot."

"You think I shot him?"

"Didn't you?"

"I'm the one looking out for him, teachin' him," The man said.

"Wonderful job you're doing."

As I spoke, one woman took Cameron's arms and the other, his legs. When they lifted, he folded and moaned. I started toward them, but the man blocked me. "Stop tryin' to keep me from it, then," he said. He still hadn't made eye contact. Back in Palmer, the other team locked eyes as much as they could, tried to stare you down. But they did things differently there.

I watched them load him in the back seat. The older woman got in next to him and the other waited by the driver's side with her arms crossed for a moment before

getting in. I studied the snow, the reddish, boy-shaped indentation. "He's lost a lot of blood."

"I seen worse. How you know his name?"

"He just told me." I could hear Sophie breathing behind me. Short, heavy gusts like she was having an asthma attack. The boards creaked again as she sat down on the steps. I asked, "If you didn't shoot him, who did?"

"That's a question youn't be askin'."

I got to my feet and with a sudden burst of balls and said, "Then here's another. Who the hell are you?" As if waiting for my raised voice, snow began to fall again.

His voice dropped an octave. "Do you know where you is?"

The realtor's voice popped into my head and all I could think to say was, "A transitional neighborhood?"

"What you mean?"

I had no answer for him, having no idea what it meant either.

The man kept his eyes on the peak of our roof. "This was my mama's house," he said. "She ain't been gone three months and y'all is here."

Then he turned back to the car. The engine coughed twice then rumbled alive. I felt the vibration all the way on the porch. A steady plume of black exhaust shot out and mingled with the fresh, falling snow.

"Are you taking him to the hospital?" I asked.

"He goin' where he goin'." He walked around the massive hood of the Cadillac and vanished into the passenger seat. The car broke away from the curb and then down the street, where it turned the corner behind the last of the projects, out of sight. I went and sat on the porch. Cameron's blood had become frigid on my hands and briefly I wondered if it was cold enough for it to freeze to my skin.

Sophie got inside my coat and pressed against my thick body, like she couldn't get close enough to me. Lucky for us, there was plenty of me to go around.

\*

A few months later, another couple moved in down the block from us. Angela and Kyle. They'd arrived with family money from Rhode Island. We got close quick and we ate dinner at each other's houses. Kyle and I drank beers and talked sports. He'd been a football star in high school too. We threw a football back and forth every weekend when summer came. We borrowed each other's tools for home improvements. I painted most of the rooms in the house and fixed the back stairs, but the windows still needed screens. We were saving to get new carpet. Sophie loved it, said it was going to be



perfect. More couples, mostly white, moved into recently vacant homes down the block. The concrete apartment across from us were under heavy construction, new window cut out of the brick to allow more light, the tall rot iron fence removed.

We didn't hear anymore gunshots and Sophie wanted to get pregnant. I did my best to accommodate her.

I thought I'd see Cameron again, either in the neighborhood or in a black and white yearbook photo attached to his obituary. I checked the paper for weeks, until the snow melted and the rains came, but found nothing. I was on the verge of forgetting about him when I saw him in the corner of the Safeway parking lot, standing just outside the parking lot lights. I waited in my car, watching him. It was January again. We'd been living in the house for a year. He stood hunched, his head hung low as though the hood of the orange parka were weighing him down. Every so often, someone would appear from the dark, shake his hand, then fade out.

When he started toward the store, I saw that he walked with a limp. His right leg barely left the ground. I got out and timed my entrance to the store with his. The teardrops gave him away. I reached out for him, my hands stained from throwing boxes into the back of a FedEx truck. "Back up. I'm done for tonight," he said. "Ain't got nothin' left."

His stared through me. He'd seen my face a thousand times, but there was no recognition.

"My mistake," I said.

He turned away, his foot dragging across the asphalt and onto the polished tile. His big orange parka absorbed the fluorescence of the store when he walked through the automatic doors, lit up like a sun.

I watched him go.

## Orientation

the school of cultural studies is proud to announce your language  
will now be a white person's profile

Picture

mzungu munchies all over this motherfucker

Rip off

the band aid they left  
seventy five years ago  
and lick your wounds like potato

Chip

remains on grade school fingers  
praise the hair that hasn't been  
straightened yet

## Dearest Faddah, Darling Muddah

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am pregnant with your first grandchild. You don't know this because we haven't spoken in over three years.

The last time I saw you, both of you were throwing all my things out onto the front yard and released my dogs into the neighborhood and into the night. Remember? I was broke and starting over again. I moved in with you for help. I started working at the local hotel as a buffet server and was going to school full time. This is when I took on the habit of drinking. Of course you remember, the last thing you said to me was "You are nothing but a drunk."

Before I was pregnant, my boyfriend asked me when I started to drink. I thought about it carefully. It was that summer when I moved in. Before, drinking was a lift of spirits most of the time. Wine with food. Beer after work. Drinks were fun with friends. That was before. When I moved into your house in Washington, something clicked and changed.

I didn't grow up in that house, but I remembered growing up with you. I don't know if I ever told you how uncomfortable I was as a kid. I always felt too tall and clumsy. I was always worried about school and soccer. I always was asking "Are you mad at me?" and "Do you love me?" Mom, I remember how that got on your nerves after a while.

I was so sensitive. I listened to the silences. I watched you both work all day and waited for a terrifying supper. Meat served with plump yellow fat clinging to dirty bone. A few spoonfuls of cool vegetables. I remember the explosions in the middle of our meals. Dad, you would just jump out of your seat like a Roman candle and leap to our side of the table. Your hand shoveling food in our mouths with bellowing orders to swallow.

Later, Mom told me that your father used to make your brothers chew their food forty times before swallowing. She told me like I should feel lucky it was never that bad. Maybe I am.

Have you ever wondered why H and I can't stand listening to other people eat? We both struggle with dinner dates. H gives her boyfriends plastic cutlery so she doesn't hear the sound of teeth on metal. Michael, my boyfriend .... you haven't met him— he and I must eat in separate rooms now. The sound of chewing is like cold slime crawling up my back. The sound of swallowing is worse. Michael scolds me a little and asked that I get over "this" before I give birth. He is right.

I want us all to sit down together at the kitchen table and eat like a family. I don't want my child to see my aggravation with something as necessary as eating. I've buried the table under bills and plastic bags, vitamin bottles and dried flowers Michael gave me months ago. I've never felt comfortable sitting there. Isn't that a tragedy? Did you feel the same way when you bought us a house?

Remember that house? I still have nightmares about it. I remember hearing strange footsteps at night. I remember the sound of the county fair floating in through my cracked bedroom window. I remember harsh, yellow, plaid wallpaper and was it green carpet? A Fred Savage poster on my door. Over 250 stuffed animals I named, logged and kept track of in case of tornado warnings.

I was scared of the bathroom across the hall. I was scared of failing at cursive. I was scared of you, Dad. You fucking terrified me. Your temper was hot. I couldn't move before you crossed the room to spank me. I see a lot of people advocating for spanking now and I wonder if they are talking about your kind of spanking. If we were sick and crying, you hit. I remember once Mom was helping put lotion on my backside because I wasn't feeling well. I was squirming and whining from the pain. You glided in and smashed so hard on my exposed butt cheeks, the pain tripled.

Dear Dad,

I think a lot about you. You said Vietnam made you a better person. Who were you before?

I know you blame Grandma for your father's death. When I was young, you said he suffered a motorcycle injury and died shortly afterward. Then we found out he checked himself into a mental institution, underwent shock therapy and hung himself.

Grandma told me about his mother crawling down the hospital hallway with her finger pointed: "You. You did this. You killed him."

I remember you said she pushed him to work too much. You said she just wanted to be a housewife. I don't know, Dad—I don't think people check themselves into institutions because of nagging wives.

You told me about the men who came through your life after your Dad died. The drunk who lined the bottom of the beds with empty bottles. The German who walked around naked and was accused of staring at the neighbors with an erect penis gently resting on the Venetian blinds. Grandma insisted he was a pedophile. You were always so mad at Grandma for marrying those men. Both you and Mom accused her of being lazy and never wanting to work. To be fair, your mother was probably terrified of raising three boys alone without any money coming in. It was the late forties, how lazy could she have been?

It upsets me to think all those men polluted you. It upsets me to think they are why you polluted me. I am afraid of polluting the child growing inside my belly. Like dirty water from one spigot to the next.

You've been in my dreams lately. Almost every night. I remember as a child when sometimes we dreamt of each other the same night. In my pregnant dreams, you aren't the angry giant who threw my Snoopy doll out in the rain because I wouldn't stop crying from an ear ache. I was four. You weren't the monster who took the safety cap off a Marine's sword and pressed it against my chest challenging me to a duel. I was 10. You weren't the man who hit me in the face for the first time, over dinner, when I smacked my lips. You left me with a nose gushing of blood. I was 13. You aren't any of those shades of yourself. You are my Dad. You are checking up on me through doors and windows in my mind. I wonder if you are dreaming of me now, too.

My baby will never know how great your taste in music is. He won't know the euphoria of your cackle. He won't learn your humor, which is a tragedy. The menacing trickster, the thoughtful philosopher or the tender father.

It is better I throw out all of you than risk your contamination.

Dear Mom,

When I remember you, I remember your mole. I have one too in the exact same spot. I remember begging you not to have it removed as a child. I remember the faint smell of milk and Oil of Olay. My favorite memories are your ranting at the television set whenever Ronald Reagan spoke or when politics failed us again.

I remember how hard you worked all the time. You worked a job full time. You went back to school. You kept an immaculate house. You ran marathons. You never stopped cleaning, studying or working. You pushed yourself harder than he did.

I suppose an orphan must prove her worth. When you were five, your mother died. You said you only remember her sitting at the mirror, brushing her hair. Your memories aren't fond. You think she was silly and simple. Someone must have told you that.

Your mother needed braces on her legs to walk. You were told it was because she never changed her menstrual pads. This is so odd, especially for a child to hear and believe about her own mother. You knew she was beaten by her husband. You don't think much of him either.

Joseph and Mary. A couple born from the Book. Your brother thinks your mother was beaten to death by him. You believe it was a brain aneurysm. Either way, you lived with him for a while after her death. You were yanked around by his mistress to late night movies and shared a bed with her pet monkey. When they found you in bed sheets of feces, they took you away to the orphanage.

When you told us about the monkey, I made jokes. I thought it was funny. You were hurt and cried in the twilight of Christmas tree lights.

You told me about the orphanage. I memorized the stories. You broke your ankle and they didn't believe you were hurt at first, forcing you to walk on it. The nun stabbed to death by thieves, former tenants of the institution. The priest who took little girls into a field to touch them. I saw his picture and hated him.

For nine years you suffered in the orphanage. Nine years. When you were 13, your Aunt finally came for you.

You tell the story like Cinderella. You cleaned and lived like a second class person with your cousins. You were told you were fat and ugly. You believed it. You suffered. Then you met Dad.

He was handsome. He came in and swept you off your feet in his Marine's uniform. No one believed that he wanted you, but he did. And three months later, he married you. He told me he thought he was going to die in the war and wanted you to have a widow's pay— just to get you out of that house.

But he came back. And you lived together for a while without children. You traveled Europe together and speak warmly of that time. You let it slip that once you came home with a new hairdo and Dad dragged you around by the hair for spending the money. Maybe that is why you didn't look shocked when he dragged me around by the hair. Your brother told me, during that time, you thought about leaving him. Why did you stay? I see that you love him. I see that you think he loved you more than anyone else in your life. But what about me and H?

You chose to stay. You decided to have babies with him. You chose to leave the room when he hit us. You chose to look the other way. You fed into the frustration. I remember how easily you lost your temper with me. Remember at a soccer game when you were furious with me, held me down and yelled in my face until your spit flew in my eye? Another mother was so concerned; all she could do was threaten to call the police. She didn't though. They never did. When I ran away or Dad kicked me out, my friends' mothers never let me stay. No one wanted me to be their problem. At least not until I started to have sex. Then I was allowed to be a problem because I suddenly had a purpose.

Remember when there was a miscommunication after school, and Dad didn't know where to pick me up? I was with my friend. She watched him drive up, slam me against the window and throw me in our car. Then you watched him drag me into the bathroom by my hair as he ordered you to check for my virginity. You hid in the bathroom with me and told me to calm down. You never looked outraged just ... tired.

Maybe you didn't stop him because you were scared. Maybe you didn't stop him because you thought it was normal. But, even as a child, I knew that you should have tried to stop him. And for that, I have hated you.

I miss your laugh. I miss your cooking. I miss the way you flung your face at the sky like you were feeling sunshine for the first time. I miss going to the craft fairs with you around Christmas. You are funny and more intelligent than you ever gave yourself credit for.

Dad did reach out to me once or twice over the last couple years. But never you. Never you.

Dear Mom and Dad,

As my windows rattle to a desert thunderstorm, I remember when I was 15. I remember the day a doctor labeled me bi-polar after a five-minute interview. Those few minutes of questions led to a handful of years, a handful of pills a day. Those one, two, three, four, five minutes led to a lifetime of false accusation. When I reached puberty, I started breaking things too. I started hitting back. When I came into my own, I grew angry. That wasn't a disease, Mom and Dad— that was a realization.

The pills dimmed me. They slowed me down. They made my skin raw, red and overcome with acne like a corpse submerged in acid. Did you think that would work? Did you think that made me a better person?

I forgive you for that part. It is easier to diagnose than to see your own reflection. That would be too much. I don't forgive you for what you did that last summer: after throwing my personal items into the sunset, you spread a rumor in that very small town that I was sick. After I carried my dogs and my things somewhere else, after I continued my course work and continued to work full-time, over time, and extra days, after I saved myself and moved back to LA on my own... you gossiped about my mental health. I was remembered as a story, not a person. You took that from me. After all, you were never my parents. You were two orphaned, small children in grown-up bodies. I suspect you will die that way.

You left me with one last mark on my arm, as Dad squeezed it in anger. His perfect thumb mark rose in ugly greys, yellows and greens. It blackened. And faded.

I want to excuse my child of our family legacy. I will never be able to pick your bones out of my skin. You made me who I am. I cherish education. I work harder than most people. I play music and make people laugh. I also hand myself over to men who hurt and use me. I work for bosses who exploit and demean me. I beat myself up over the little things. I battle the paranoia that someone is frustrated or angry with me just because they are quiet. I still study the silences. How do I protect him from all of your ghosts?



Michael. Michael is the gentlest man I've ever been intimate with. He never hits. He never uses. He is the only person in my life to love me unconditionally. And he is the only man I trust to put the child ahead of himself.

His mother hates me of course. She wants to believe that my writing is a luxury that cost us money. She wants to believe that I refuse to work full time and spend his money on frilly writing retreats. It is truly bizarre. I've worked harder in the last few years than I ever have in my entire life. I ran my own business. I took multiple part time jobs. I wake up at 4am just to fit in time to write. Instead of people recognizing my accomplishments, I am suspected of shallow intentions, manipulation and selfishness. Whether it is a boss or a lover, if a man stands by me, I am expected to absorb into his side— like a mythical rib. You never prepared me for how hard it is to be a woman. I am not sure anyone could. Sometimes I pretend that Mom is here to defend me. You would be so outraged.

Sometimes, I pretend that you know I am pregnant and saw his first picture. Michael and I listened to his heartbeat on Tuesday. In that moment, when his heartbeat danced over the speakers, it felt like a window blew open and all the love in the world filled that room. I already loved him more than any other human being on the planet. It was the best 30 seconds of my life. We watched the movement of his heart through soft skin, bubbling like hot soup on a warm stovetop.

Dad, I remembered our talk in the study. I confessed that I knew you loved Mom more than us. You laughed. "You figured that out, huh?"

I am already different than you.

Dear Mom and Dad,

If you can hear me, so far, so good. He looks healthy. He is upside down but strong and healthy. I know you always wanted a son. Michael and I feel like he is a boy, but it is too soon to tell. We are leaning towards the name "Elvis", since "Jesus" and "Santa" would carry too much expectation.

I remembered when Mom said she loved being pregnant. I think about that all the time when I am curled up on the bed with a pillow pressed against my stomach and a shot of apple cider vinegar at the bedside. I am struggling with the fatigue and nausea. I really

don't like it at all. Then I picture Mom walking with a big belly and smile on her face, eating a Snickers bar every day. A baby was an excuse to be good to herself.

Dear Mom, did you cramp this much in the first trimester?

Dear Mom and Dad, did you know I had a miscarriage last year and went mad? I should have been weaving baskets and talking to a therapist every day. Instead I tried to kill myself, went back to work, alienated myself and drank more. I was broke, after all and didn't know what to do.

Dear Mom, I am afraid of miscarrying again.

Dear Mom, how did you handle migraines when you were pregnant?

Oh Mom, it takes me a day and 25 minutes to poop? How can I get around that?

Dear Mom and Dad, did you know I teach elementary school now?

Did you know I am one chapter away from finishing my first book?

Did you know I completed my second Master's degree?

Dear Mom, why am I showing at nine weeks?

Dear Mom and Dad, could I have my old stuffed animals back for the baby? Or did you burn and donate everything of mine like you coldly stated that last summer?

Dear Mom and Dad, why would you do that?

Dear Mom and Dad, what will I do when you get sick or die? I don't know.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Your last words to me were "You are nothing but a drunk."

My last words to you were "You turned your daughter into a whore."

I stopped drinking in August. It was only a bottle or few beers a week, but I was rotting in bitterness. I would feel more anger. Sometimes I would cry. Sometimes I would remember something horrible.

Michael asked me to stop drinking, and I did. Cold turkey. All by myself.

Physically, I didn't feel altered, but emotionally a planet of thoughts and memories spun around and around in my mind. Now, I think about the bad things sober. It hurts. It makes me uncomfortable and quiet. But I am healing.

Then I found out I was pregnant. There was no one to call. There was no celebration. It was just a kiss before the sun rose. The pregnancy test was Michael's birthday present. He fell back asleep with a smile melting over his face like last night's candle.

My baby doesn't have excited grandparents even though deserves it. That is his first disappointment. I don't know whose fault that is. Maybe it is no one's fault. You did the best you could. It just isn't good enough for my baby.

Last week, Michael watched me lean forward, with pinched skin over my nose, sitting quietly in the car ride home.

"Don't worry," he said. "You will be a good mom."

"Really?"

"Can you imagine your mother teaching elementary school?"

"No. She said she hated little girls."

Love & Goodbye,

Vita

## What They Call Him

They call him "Hot Chocolate," my mixed-race son whom everyone assumes is adopted. Unlike Barak Obama, for example, Elijah does not look biracial; the crowd assumes he plays basketball – and very well at that -- due to his African-American heritage; he never disappoints. In the 99% white Christian middle school from which he has just graduated, he was the fastest runner, highest scoring shooter, best-looking, most charismatic boy there.

Lest you assume this is proud mother braggadocio, be assured I came up in the world of newsprint and chain-smoking reporters -- just the facts, Ma'am. "White Men Can't Jump," an older basketball movie that epitomized a certain haughtiness, offered a handy vocabulary for Elijah's ego-boosting, self-engendered and propelled.

My son has no African-American background, however; his father is French, of Haitian, Congolese, Moroccan, and Cambodian descent. On my side, he is Jewish -- Eastern and Western European all the way back -- including a Holocaust survivor. My father was born in Berlin, 1913, fled to Shanghai in 1939, then left Mao's Red Chinese government in 1949 for the United States. This pointedly detailed biography pinpoints the lack of any genetic basketball forebears whatsoever.

Elijah's skill is all his own, his drive -- the same. His absent father did not play sports, not even soccer in Marseilles, due to childhood asthma. From me, he inherited intellectual and artistic inclinations, but zero by way of athletics. My physical activity focused on ballet, then jazz, then Afro-Haitian dance classes, though I was never very good: a worker, a tiller in the field, as one teacher called me by way of compliment, but not talented. A chubby girl, I was the proverbial last-picked for kickball in elementary school, and team sports, as in junior or high school activities, never even crossed my teenage radar. I did not know what "varsity" meant until my son began playing basketball.

This trajectory into the world of highly competitive ball has educated me in every possible way, predictable as well as unimaginable. I never attended a sports event of any kind until Elijah wanted to see the big high school boys play our season opener a few years back. Born in New York City 1960, a girl nurtured on "Hair," Woodstock and "Fiddler on the Roof," I never realized how much of America's energy, money and time is invested in the various ways balls can enter baskets and goals, fly over nets, and slide

across ice or fields in the form of pucks. I now know how very little I knew though I saw myself as a sophisticated New Yorker.

Where was I, these 50 years and more, that I failed to recognize the greatest obsession of the American public? Overseas, you might ask? Mining ore underground? No. I was residing in Academia for much of my adult life, where the crowd I hung with -- English Department-types, primarily, did not talk about buzzer beaters, ally-oops, double-triples, or like vocabulary.

Hot Chocolate liked his nickname, though it made me uneasy. As we have just moved to a more cosmopolitan world where he won't be the only person of color in school, nor the only Jew, this queasiness on my part might abate.

Fulfilling stereotypes makes me uncomfortable. As a New York Jew who's spent her adult life in very Gentile parts of the West, I know what it means when strangers make assumptions about me based on my religion, my birthplace, my nose.

In Spain, once, the guard at a museum in Toledo pointed at me, not unkindly, saying, "¿Judia?" When I nodded, he did the same. "La nariz," he said, indicating his own nose. This in a town which once housed 10,000 Jews, but none since the Inquisition. As I'd just visited the exquisitely preserved synagogue, his remarks chilled me. It was possible that his ancestors tried to force my ancestors to convert, or flee, or die under torture.

People see me, my olive skin, my generous proboscis, and make assumptions. Likewise, they observe my son -- his long strong legs, his afro, his athletic grace -- and say, Basketball Player.

They don't say orthodontist or mathematician or any other career that might accurately predict the outcome of his very decidedly scientific bent in the classroom -- again so unlike my own proclivities. Yet why does this bother me?

At night, Elijah watches videos on YouTube of young brown boys actively scouted by basketball professionals. Not just high schoolers, but some in middle school, and lately, even elementary. The wunderkinds on the court are always dark-skinned, though not every boy is from the traditional inner-city background nor the product of a single mother, like Elijah.

I don't belong in that group of single-mothers-of-Black-basketball-prodigies and could never claim that pride of place exemplified in women like Le Bron James's mother, Gloria, who was 16 when she bore her son, a child who would defy every statistic of the demographic category into which he was born.

Elijah's demography is faculty brat, only – and spoiled -- child, the youngest of his wealthy Jewish grandparents' progeny, a boy with a prodigious college fund awaiting post-secondary and post-graduate education, a direction all in my family expect him to take. All invisible to the fan in the stands.

But will he direct his future there? At 14, of course he doesn't yet know for sure. At his first practice, the new coach matched him with the older brown boy on the JV for defense. I wondered about this – why, with only two brown boys in the combined JV and C teams with 22 all together, does a young white man with an Irish surname match Elijah with a boy I'll call Jaden? Are they the best two players there? Or does he assume the boys will be comfortable together because they share a similar complexion? Alternatively, could he be shielding the other boys, mostly white but also Chinese, Indian-from-India, and a few of mixed-race (a category in which Elijah officially belongs but is never recognized as such due to his appearance) from being guarded by a zealous black boy?

Attributing such blinkered race consciousness to a young white coach in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may sound paranoid on my part, but, as the daughter of a man who fled for his life from his native country solely because he was born a Jew, I judge others with extreme caution before they prove themselves worthy of my trust. Worthy of entrusting my old child to their care.

My father, 5 feet tall and fragile by the end of his 87th year, divided human beings into "he who works with his head and he who works with his hands" -- the latter category obviously inferior to the former. The latter were necessary, of course; they changed the thinkers' tires and fixed their fridges and made life function smoothly for the brainy. The handymen were to be respected and well-paid, but not admired. Not aspired to. If Heinz were still alive, would he be disappointed in his youngest grandson, whose pre-natally announced existence so thrilled him?

"A grandfather at 86!" he crowed, as if my late pregnancy, at 39, somehow attested to his own virility. "A child of the twenty-first century," he called my son or daughter, celebrating such mixed-race status prior to Elijah's birth.

A young man in Tientsin during the 1940s, Heinz had fallen in love with a Chinese woman, but both concluded it out of the question to marry, as they wanted children, and in that time and place, children of mixed race suffered. They were looked down upon by both groups, who saw in the *mélange* evidence of traitorous behavior on the part of mother and father. Yet Heinz had made it to America by 1949, where a child like Elijah was not only possible, but on the cusp of the new millennium, fifty years later,

longed for. Beloved.

My mother died ten years after Heinz, and she, too, bequeathed a college fund for my son. Elijah need not worry about affording the university of his choice. Yet adults said to me, while Elijah was still a toddler, "He'll be able to get an affirmative action scholarship!" Some who made that pronouncement were other college professors. Those white colleagues didn't utter the phrase with meanness, yet there was something insidious underlying their expression – envy? Were I to have that conversation now, I would suggest that the way the Supreme Court is going, affirmative action will be dead by 2018, when Elijah applies to school. As is by now obvious, that consideration is irrelevant to his choice of college.

However, basketball scholarships are what he wants; this way he can stand with the other brown boys, hungry for recognition, eager to earn it. The more I learn about basketball, the more complex it seems; the 32-page book of plays to memorize before his first game with notations and abbreviations appeared similar to sheet music, a language I never learned, unable to master the time signature or play an instrument. Elijah possesses that gift too and might have mastered his horn had he chosen music, but he scorned band, labeled it "girly," in favor of sports. One doesn't become a man by playing brass; one acquires manliness on the court.

In his new world of mutli-hued teammates and competition, he can't be Hot Chocolate anymore. The other teams often have boys darker chocolate than he, offering the obvious lesson of context. He's not the best anymore – not the most talented, most able, most dedicated. On the opposing teams are hungry boys, for whom the basketball scholarship is the proverbial ticket out of poverty, a chance for mothers like Gloria James to prosper. Not Elijah's story.

But it is that story nevertheless strangers conjure when they observe him playing. Nowadays, Elijah can't say "white men can't jump," because he plays with and against white boys who can and do. He can no longer be the guy to save the day for his team, game after game.

Today, he said he was glad to be relieved of that possibility. "Everyone plays so hard here, Mom." This afternoon, his team gained their first victory and suffered their first defeat, pre-season. In the huge city gym, parents black and white and of all intermediate shades and hues commingled, their common focus the every-colored boys on the paint, vying for the ball.

Whatever stereotype audience members might attach to various players, the boys themselves, for their precious seconds on the boards, remain oblivious. As the ball soars

across court, seeking the net in the slivered breath before the buzzer, I observe Elijah gazing at the precipice of hope, his last throw his only thought, his most vital self.



## Speaking of Whiteness...

I'm white. I bet you knew that,  
even though this "I" is nothing more  
than a black mark backed  
by unmarked whiteness,

you know I'm white, an unsubjected subject,  
ahistorical in ways I might be ashamed of  
if shame were not a matter  
of self-conscious coloration. Shamelessness

is one of the privileges  
I am privileged to forget.  
Remember when whiteness  
discovered America? Loaded boats

with utopian hopes  
for freedom, furs, arable land.  
Was that too much to ask?  
I find it hard to think of whiteness

as unusually rapacious,  
to think of whiteness at all, in fact,  
except in the physical sense,  
as a synthesis of every color.

That sounds democratic, as though whiteness  
had been unanimously elected  
to form a more perfect union  
in which, like the black marks on this page,

whatever is marked  
as other serves  
whiteness to say "I am."

## Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Those were the days when we were always afraid  
our faces would melt  
like papier maché in rain.  
That parents would see we weren't their children.  
That the FBI would kick down our doors  
and arrest us for not being human.

Those were the days when we had always just landed.  
To blend with the native population, we taught ourselves  
not to count higher than two, to be this and not that,  
to say "or" instead of "and." To communicate  
via static. We told ourselves we knew  
what hiss and crackle meant.

These days, making a living  
means answering questions:  
How much of you has been cut away?  
How much of you is left?  
Is it more polite to stare  
at your face or your chest?

Words for us multiply  
in academic journals and sidewalk cracks.  
Power scribbles all over our bodies, power lays its eggs  
in our most controversial orifices,  
colonizes our genitals and pronouns,  
our wardrobes, our tones of voice, our gestures.

The bursts of static are coming closer. We are too.  
We walk right into public restrooms,  
inscribe ourselves in directories and databases,  
play ourselves playing at being human  
on Broadway and television,  
strewn streets with stripped-off clothes

and recycled representations.  
Some of us are inspired, some of us bemused  
by the increasingly frantic attempts, ours and yours,  
to define us as a form of you –  
as colors on your spectrum, cyborgs, post-whatever  
you're longing to transcend.

Some of you have also begun to blossom  
out of the bodies you were given, as distinctions  
that once seemed solid as tables and chairs  
dissolve in the light of a future  
you never saw coming  
because it was already here.

## **Hospice**

Constance slept in her fourth strange bed that month. The first was at a typical hospital, where Marla took Constance after her latest bleed. The bleed was esophageal. It was frequent and flowing. It was migrating liver cancer. It was gravy brown as much as it was red. Constance knew it was cancer but had not told anyone, always with pride as a protector.

Kyle knew. It had been documented in her charts. The charts had travelled from doctor's office to hospital to rehab facility to the St. Leonard's hospice care facility. Kyle was the weekend nurse there. Constance's charts had been on the move for two months.

Her room had only a bed and a leather armchair. Silence surrounded. There was no need for things, no need for adornment. Constance laid flat, head tilted back, ornate silken wrap covering her bald head. Her covers were pulled up tight, without consideration that it was the middle of July. She could only be seen from the neck up. Constance was prone. Her mouth stayed open wide. Her teeth were still white, straight  
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and in tact. They were the sign that she was still strong. Kyle knew that there was always that sign: a dancing eye, a sturdy breath, the most profound final words or, perfect, unspoiled teeth.

Kyle did not know that five months before, Constance was shaking her ass to Atomic Dog. Her girlfriend Barbara's son had gotten married. Constance crushed the reception, dancing by herself and with any man who dared come near. She'd felt fantastic, encumbered by nothing. Constance was sixty-seven-years old.

It was eleven a.m. Kyle was preparing to meet Constance's grown children. The call had gone out. She had come to St. Leonard's over night. First, Kyle made his patient as comfortable as he could. He bathed and clothed and tucked Constance in. Kyle sang while he worked. Motown. Even though they were all before his time, Kyle sang heyday Motown hits because he loved them, because every patient knew them and, for all involved, they triggered better memories. The songs calmed everyone, chilled things out

if need be. It was hard to be pissed and listening to Smokey Robinson at the same time. *If you feel like loving me/if you've got the notion/I second that emotion.*

Kyle walked in and out from Constance's room to his station, singing, humming. He updated paperwork and checked in on his newest patient. Sometimes families didn't like the singing, sometimes they thought it disrespectful. But he saw patients' shoulders twist, the corners of their mouths move as if they were singing along. So he didn't stop amid any protest. The most he would do is sing softer. Kyle shifted from 'Second that McKinley/Hospice Emotion' to 'Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing.' He was on the second verse after tube feeding Constance her meds and water. As he walked back out of the room, all he saw were yellow flowers.

3

David figured he'd be the first one there, but he didn't want to be. He didn't want to go at all, but that was not an option. In an effort to not get there too soon, he found a florist and bought the biggest pot of golden buttons they had. It didn't occur to David that the flowers served no purpose here at all.

He breathed deep and walked forward. St. Leonard's was the cleanest, emptiest, freshest place his mother had slept at in a while. David didn't know where he was going. He walked around. He checked out the family lounge, the coffee room, the books in the quiet area, the business center. David realized that folks must stay here around the clock. He knew that he would not be one of them.

The flowerpot was getting heavy. David needed to set it down. He followed a melody down the hallway. He could've sworn it was Martha and the Vandellas. David walked toward the sound. The singing guy in scrubs looked young. He looked at ease. David was jealous already.

"Excuse me," David said. "Can you tell me where Constance Williams is?"

"You must be David."

"How do you know who I am?"

"We spoke on the phone. I'm Kyle, your mother's care giver."

David still wasn't sure how this kid knew who he was. "So, Constance's room?"

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4

This is getting heavy."

"Of course. Let me take them. They're lovely, by the way."

"Yeah," David said. "Thanks."

"Your mother will be happy to have them."

David thought: *This boy doesn't know what he's talking about.* Constance was happy about once every Presidential term. And, if it was not cash, she didn't appreciate getting anything. David recalled the many Christmas presents that tore up her face, her flat out declarations that a card with a check would've been better.

One year, David bought her a bathrobe. They were in Macy's and she saw it on display. "That's pretty," she said. "I could wear that around the house all day."

So, David did that thing that you're supposed to do. He made a mental note. He went back and got the robe. That Christmas, Constance opened the box, moved tissue aside, scrunched her nose and said, "Oh."

"Oh?" David said. It was all he could muster. The next year he wrote her a check. As the years passed, her act got tired. David was exhausted. He walked in with Kyle who set the flowers on her windowsill.

David stood at the head of the bed. Kyle said, "I'll let you be alone. You can come and go how you feel. David figured that's what he was supposed to say. He wasn't mad at it, but he did not want to be there alone. Constance's head was tilted all the way back. David tried to come up with some pre-text to get Kyle to stay but, by the time he came up with it, Kyle was out.

He ran a hand along the side of her bed. David looked over at the flowers. They  
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were pretty and stupid. Constance's chest rose and fell. Her eyes were wide and still. Nothing moved but her sunken chest. David assumed that he should say something, but he did not have a ready supply.

"Well, Jesus," David said. "Here we are. Day of reckoning. Or maybe it won't be today. Maybe it will be tomorrow. But, we're here. How are you feeling about all of this? What goes on with you, Constance?"

Constance did not answer. She did not flinch. David assumed that he should touch her, show some affection. But he did not have a ready supply. Affection had not been placed inside.

David clutched near her elbow. All he felt was bone. His breath got as heavy as his mother's. David was not sure if this was burgeoning grief. He didn't know if that would be inside.

*She really is wrapped up tight.*

David thought this now as he had her entire life. He moved his hand up Constance's arm. Despite how much she'd withered, Constance looked puffy under so

much cover. David reached up and turned down her blanket a little. He assumed that he should. David choked up in an instant. He saw pink and then, when he shut his eyes, the brightest, reddest flash.

"I'll be damned," David said. "The fucking Christmas robe."

"Yeah," Kyle said, standing in the doorway with Marla. "I made sure to put that on her. It's soft. And it was the only piece of clothing in her bag."

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6

Marla was drunk. She didn't often drink, only when it was important for her to be sober. Marla swayed a touch in the doorway. Kyle held his expression as if he didn't notice. He turned away humming The Supremes. Marla stepped in.

"Hey, little brother."

Her voice had its same old singsong lilt. Heavier when she'd had a few. He envied Marla for being smart enough to drink before she came here.

"Hey," David said.

"She looks peaceful."

"Yeah. The war was costly, but at least it's over." David didn't know where that statement even came from. Marla wore a fastened overcoat. She smelled like a whiskey flavored Jolly Rancher. David wanted the Motown kid to come back. He watched Marla bend down and kiss Constance's forehead.

"You're going to be alright," Marla said. "Fine. Just fine."

She walked over to the window. David took a seat in the only chair in the room. He leaned his head on his fist.

"You brought flowers," Marla said. "That was nice." David didn't respond. His sister's voice was now without a bit of the lilt.

Marla stared out as if something on the parking lot below would tell her what to say next. David wanted to cry. He had come here from his office, forsaking happy hour and the company of an Asian summer associate. Marla babbled something. David wasn't listening, but he thought it was something about Solomon not yet being there. Other than

Constance's silence, this was all typical. The only other exception was Kyle's music

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outside the door.

"He'll probably show up after we've done everything," Marla said.

David lifted his head. "What exactly are we doing?"

"We're *being* here," she said. David dropped his head again.

He remembered their first fight. It was ten years before, on Thanksgiving Eve. It started with an argument over neck bones. It ended with haymakers and Constance chasing Marla with a carving knife. David remembered it being a draw. Both women got some good shots in.

"Crazy," David whispered.

Some minutes passed. David was content to sit in quiet. Marla kept on.

"You know he's going to come in here loud, trifling."

David ignored her, thinking that at least their brother probably wouldn't be drunk.

She went on and on. "He hasn't done anything to help. And I don't want any mess from him when it's time to plan everything."

David stood up, exhausted. He stood to stretch, to shut her up, to leave. David only managed to stretch. In the hour and change that he had been there, Constance still hadn't moved. David walked to the doorway. He looked left. Four construction workers surrounded Kyle. Solomon and crew. Kyle was doing some kind of Zen shit because all these men were calm. Solomon, who could usually be heard for blocks, could not be heard down the hallway. Marla was still yapping. David wished for Kyle to come work some of his mysticism on her. David walked down the hall instead.

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8

"Seven to ten days," were the words David heard when he walked up. *Seven to ten days*. Kyle's tone was kind and unwavering. Solomon, in work boots, flannel and plaster dust, broke down. He collapsed into the chest of one of his boys. Solomon sobbed. David knew this would happen. His brother, Gulf War veteran, blue-collar strong man, wept worse than a baby.

David figured that his brother would soon think of cocaine. Solomon was clean six years. Weighing heavy on him had to be the fact that Constance was critical to his sobriety. She had disowned Solomon when she found out he used. The two did not speak for somewhere between seven to ten years. And now they had as many days.

David reached them and placed a hand on Solomon's shoulder. The older brother stayed slumped over. Kyle turned away to go back to Constance's room. There was no more singing.



By the time they all saw her, said whatever it was they had to say to both Constance and each other, hung out for a while in the beautiful calm suite and made plans to come back the next day, it was after one a.m. Kyle's shift was over at two. None of Constance's children availed themselves of the family sleeping quarters. Kyle made his rounds. There were not many. He went to Constance's room last. One of her children had folded her hands atop her chest. A cross on a silver chain was placed in her right hand. Kyle could not guess which of them had put it there. But that didn't matter, because the woman who had not moved all day clutched the chain tighter than Kyle had ever seen.

Constance's eyes were still closed, her mouth still set wide open. But her holding  
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hand was straining. Kyle sang a Four Tops hit. *Reach out. Reach out for me.* Constance stayed still. So did the bright yellow flowers in the window. Kyle told Solomon seven to ten days because Solomon asked for a firm number. Kyle knew it was wrong to give one, knew that there was no right answer. As he finished the song, Kyle saw that while Constance's grip had not slackened, her chest and hands no longer rose nor fell.

Kyle worked late to get her to her final bed. He worked well past two. And, when enough time had passed beyond daybreak, Kyle called her three children again.

## In the Courtroom All She Understands Are Numbers

*For Liu Bao Zhu Chen*

She never could comprehend  
what they did to her husband:  
*savage brick and blood*  
*boy who crushed his skull.*

So when the boy stood in the courtroom,  
turned to her and spoke softly  
all she could do was sob  
so her thin body convulsed,  
tears rippled her face – a reflection in water  
permanently distorted.

She couldn't understand his English words – low,  
inaudible – but she knew what he was trying to do,  
solemn in his suit and shiny shoes, taller than  
her own son who never smiled anymore.

*The phone call was part of the plan, the court translator*  
*whispered to her days before.*  
The call brought her husband to that darkened house,  
carrying two heavy bags of food worth \$60.  
The children waited with blanket and brick.

She cut off the boy's words, wailing in her dialect:  
*Why? Why? Why?*  
*All he was doing was delivering food.*  
*Why would you do this to him?*

Back in China her husband had told her:  
*It is easy to make money in America.*  
They borrowed \$20,000 to smuggle him there.  
She didn't want to leave her home but America  
was "gold mountain", her husband reassured her.  
He named the restaurant the Golden Wok

for prosperity's promise, for  
escape from their *eat-bitter* life.

She understands numbers: *18, 18, 16, 14* the ages of  
those children. *17, 13* the ages of her son and daughter  
who huddle with her inside the shuttered restaurant, shivering  
at night in rusted cots wedged between jugs of oil,  
bags of stale fortune cookies, boxes of plastic  
containers they filled with food every night

even though her feet ached from standing all day,  
her fingers bled when the cleaver slipped,  
how she worried about her glazed-eyed children  
and the stench of grease on them  
when they went to school.

Piles of unpaid bills, eviction notice taped to the smudged door,  
red ribbon tied to her husband's photo.  
The Golden Wok is all they have.

In the courtroom all she understands are numbers.  
*17, 16, 11, 7*: the years the children will spend in prison.  
She hears the words pierce  
silence under bright white lights.

Meaningless, she wants to tell them. They  
will never bring her husband back.

## Friendly's

*Assignment #4: Explain why you want to improve your English.*

I always say eating at home is best –  
both tasty and cheap.

But my son and daughter wanted to eat French Fries  
not rice, and ice cream in tall glasses -- not plastic bowls.

We went to Friendly's, sat on red stools  
waiting and waiting for the waitress,

a white woman in pink apron.  
She walked past us again and again.

No one asked us and I  
didn't ask. My kids wondered, "Where are the French Fries?"

Finally, I said to them, "Let's go. We're going home.  
No French Fries tonight. We're going to eat rice at home."

## The Boys Go Camping

Jonathan had dragged his son camping like a good, gay father. Ian sat on the hood of the car wearing a retro Madonna T-shirt, orange headphones, and white sandals. He was fourteen, also gay, and tall for his age. He had his father's dirty blond hair, the back of which nearly touched the neck of his T-shirt. Jonathan knelt before the fire pit and stacked wood like Lincoln logs. His partner, Patrick, stood nearby with his tanned arms crossed, watching. Patrick was fifteen years younger, and had filled a cooler with cocktail party appetizers and enough Pinot Grigio for a dozen guests.

"Pay attention and you might learn something," Jonathan said.

"Oh?" Patrick ran a hand through his dark hair and wiped the sweat from his neck. "Isn't it a little early for a fire? You'll work all night to keep it going."

"I doubt the wood will burn down that quickly."

"Of course it will."

Jonathan was silent a moment. "Is this a train wreck?" He sighed, brushed his hands on his khaki shorts, and stood. "The camping, I mean."

"Don't we camp every day?"

"Be serious, baby."

Their campsite was in a designated clearing that had water and electricity hookups, though Jonathan had insisted they avoid such luxuries as they would ruin the experience. Along the clearing were a dozen or so campsites, some with tents, others with small pop-up campers and motorhomes. It was just a short walk through the tree line to the lake if they decided to swim, which he had assumed they would. Jonathan purchased the tent and fishing poles several days before. Now he glanced from the sad fire pit to Ian, and considered going home.

"Oh, you know how I feel about the wilderness," Patrick said, throwing himself into a canvas chair, and crossing his legs. "I'd much rather be in a club dancing alongside go-go boys. *But*, I think you two have a lot to catch up on."

"His entire life?"

"Baby steps."

"Ian!" Jonathan yelled. "Come over here."

"What?" Ian asked, hopping from the hood of the old Jaguar.

"I'm going to set up the tent," Jonathan said. "Then we can have some fun. I have the fishing rods, or we can swim."

"*Fish?*" Patrick said. "That's it. I'm opening the wine."

"I don't really know how to swim," Ian said "I doggy paddle. Do you even know how to work a fishing pole, *Dad?*"

Ian had only recently begun using the word with Jonathan, and drew it out sarcastically.

"We both know the only pole you can work," Patrick whispered to Jonathan.

"Enough," Jonathan hissed. "And please, it can't be difficult."

"I know how to fish," Ian said. He shrugged, rolling his eyes. "Mom's boyfriends all knew their way around this stuff."

"Guess she'd had enough queens for an entire life," Patrick said. "You wore the girl's nerves plain out, Jon-Jon. Too much Barbara Streisand? That would be my guess."

"Patrick, will you please put a fist in your minty mouth?"

"I'll be as quiet as a shrub," Patrick said, pulling out a folding fan, which he snapped open. On it was a photo of Jesus. He fanned Ian and said, "Do you like?"

"I don't believe in God," Ian said.

"I told you not to bring that fan," Jonathan said, glancing at the nearby campsites. The closest was one-hundred feet away, a young couple staying in an RV. "People will get offended."

Both Ian and Patrick had suggested a vacation at a posh hotel, or even the place Jonathan and Patrick had rented three summers in a row at Fire Island. Jonathan told them camping was a bonding experience, and that at a hotel they would do their own thing and ignore one another. The truth was that he didn't want to spend a gay vacation with his young, gay son. He wanted out of that world, even if just for a weekend.

Two weeks before, Phillip Burstyn—one of Jonathan's colleagues in the theatre department—was found murdered in his apartment. Police quickly identified the killer who'd made no effort to hide the evidence. He hadn't worn gloves, hadn't even washed his clothes. Phillip had written about the killer in his journal, "I think I have finally met someone, and this makes me very happy." The killer, an Iraq war vet decades younger, was claiming he had been sexually assaulted, a plea that stank of the "gay panic" Jonathan knew homophobes loved to use after buyer's remorse set in. Jonathan recalled climbing the four flights of stairs to their offices with the fifty-something Phillip, and

remembered how the man was always out of breath when he got to the top of the stairs, how small boned he had been.

When Jonathan heard about the killing on the news, he had simply stood in front of the television unmoving. Patrick had stepped into the den, wearing his yoga clothes, green mat under his arm. "What's wrong?" Patrick asked.

"Phillip, the guy who teaches with me? The one we had over for dinner?"

"The Cabernet guy?"

"He's been murdered. A hookup stabbed him to death."

"That's horrible."

"Christ," Jonathan said, sitting on the coffee table. "He was just here, Patrick."

"Want me to skip yoga? Want to talk?"

Jonathan was silent a moment, then forced a smile. "No, I know you don't like to miss."

Once he had secured the canvas to the ground, Jonathan turned to the tent's poles. He fitted the poles together, resulting in several straight poles ready for use. His hair was plastered to his forehead, and he cursed, pushing it back.

"I'll make myself useful," Patrick said, walking to the car. He returned with a can of bug spray. "Ian, I see you scratching your arm."

"I haven't been bitten, it's nothing," Ian said. "Spray yourself."

"Up, up," Patrick said, motioning for Ian to rise from the canvas chair he'd just unfolded. Ian stood, and Patrick began spraying. "Nobody wants to see the pale boy covered in red welts. *So unattractive*. We gay boys have to be as pretty as a chiffon gown on Tony night."

Ian groaned, fidgeted, said, "I can do it myself!" But Patrick only rolled his eyes and told him to raise his right, then left arm.

Jonathan stared at Patrick, watched as he sprayed the fronts of Ian's legs, the backs, tops of the hands. Patrick asked if Jonathan was okay, and Jonathan nodded his head for a moment, still staring, wondering why it had not occurred to him, this simple act of protection, the need to spare your son the discomfort and sting of mosquito bites. Jonathan felt acidic bile in his throat.

"Here, let me at least help with the poles," Ian said, once he was coated in bug repellent. He picked up and finished his Coke and tossed it towards the fire pit, missing. Jonathan eyed him, and Ian said, "What? I got close."

"How often did you go camping?"

"Couple times. Maybe four." Ian shrugged. He examined the tent, said the poles were in the wrong positions.

"We did it exactly how the instructions say." Jonathan looked at the instructions.

"Ian is the one who's been camping before," Patrick said.

"If you want to be helpful, come fan me," Jonathan snapped. He tried connecting two poles, but that didn't work. He returned to the instructions, moved around the tent, examining.

Jonathan rearranged some of the poles. He again pushed his sweaty hair from his forehead. He took a step back. His foot became entangled in the canvas and he fell backwards, dropping the poles. The entire contraption collapsed to the ground like a sick man to his knees. Red faced, Jonathan stood, began kicking at the poles and canvas.

"It's okay," Ian said, eyes wide. "Want to just let me give it a shot? Okay?"

"A hot mess," Jonathan said. He walked to a canvas chair and sat. He sucked in his breath. "I think they even make tents nowadays where you open the box and the thing just sort of explodes, setting itself up."

"I'll figure it out," Ian said. Jonathan watched him fiddle with the poles.

"The point was," Jonathan said, then paused for a moment. "The point was you and I, ah, never mind." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Within an hour Ian, with a bit of help from Patrick, had set up the tent. Jonathan watched from his chair as Patrick jumped up and down, hugging Ian, then moving away, embarrassed looks on both their faces. Ian waved his hands at the tent, like a game show hostess presenting a prize. "What do you think?"

"A real beauty, home-away-from-home," Jonathan said, attempting to seem cheerful.

"We'll work on the mattresses later," Ian said. "Before it gets dark, though."

"The moon will light our way," Patrick said. "I'm ravenous. At this point, I don't know what I'd do for some food."

"I have an idea," Ian said, his eyebrows lifted.

Patrick squealed, placing an arm over Ian's shoulders. "Listen to our miniature me!"

"There really is no God," Jonathan said sardonically. "Let's go eat."

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Breeze carried the smells of charcoal and grease. It was just past five o'clock, the heat index dropping a few degrees. Griffy Lake was mostly a haven for weekenders with giant pontoons and jet skis. Jonathan, Patrick, and Ian were on the side of the lake that



was mostly for recreational use; their own house was miles away, on the other side of the water, in quiet solitude. They sat at an iron table, sharing curly fries drenched in ketchup, each with their own burger in front of them. All three laughed and touched one another's arms and shoulders. The place was a sun-swathed rectangle of concrete with tables and chairs all laid out before a shack that served simple, seasonal foods, and the tables were close to one another. Jonathan could hear all the conversations around him, which made him wish they had gotten the food to go. He noticed the couple from the nearest campsite step onto the patio, taking the table closest to them.

"At least I'm not forcing you to do what my father did with me the one and only time he took me camping," Jonathan said to Ian. "He was a shirt and tie sort, but knew his way around fishing and hunting. He drove me to a lake, not this one, one further south called Patoka. He made us sit on the lakeshore for hours. We used *real* night crawlers. Disgusting."

"Gross dot com," Ian said, placing a curly fry back on his plate. "Catch anything?"

"Not me," Jonathan said. "He filled an entire cooler with trout, or something. That made him happy."

"Nothing like family memories to lift the spirits." Patrick was wearing an enormous straw hat with a black bow tied to it and white sunglasses. His shirt was a tank, and his red shorts the shortest Jonathan had seen on a man. Patrick motioned to the couple near them. "You're in the campsite next to us," he said to them. "The TV was a smart choice."

"I guess we aren't real campers," the woman said and laughed.

"Think they have slushed margaritas? I would kill for one."

The woman, brown haired and mousy, studied him for a moment. Then she smiled a bit and said, "I'm not sure. This is our first time."

"Just ask the waiter," Jonathan said.

"Fine, fine," Patrick said. He lowered his voice. "I was just being social."

"I'm sure they have something equally fruity you'd like," the man said. He was muscular, pockmarked, and close to thirty. "Maybe a *daiquiri*."

"Oh, no thanks, we have some Pinot Grigio back at camp," Patrick said. "If you get thirsty, join us." He moved his hands, drawing a square in the air before him.

"Thanks for the invite," the man said, placing his hands behind his head, his enormous biceps moving. He glanced at Patrick, then Jonathan. He returned to his wife and spoke in a softer voice.

"What an asshole," Ian said. "Hey, are you going to make us fish with real bait?"

"Never." Jonathan took a bite of his burger, swallowed.

Patrick crossed his legs, leaned in, and spoke in a conspiratorial tone, "Our dear neighbors here, Christians. I saw the 'Jesus Saves' sticker on their bumper on the way here. If he takes us up on our wine offer, we can pretend it's sacramental wine and sit around the fire singing hymns."

"Once I was lost..." Ian began to sing. "Promise me you two won't find God."

"Well," Patrick said, getting his fan out of his bag. "He was a looker, right? White people's Jesus, I mean,"

"Anyway," Jonathan said, chuckling and darting his eyes at the couple, "I got some marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers. For dessert tonight."

"Cool." Ian took a gulp of Coke.

Patrick leaned in again, glancing from the couple to Jonathan. "The guy is a butter face, but isn't half bad if I focus on his body."

Jonathan studied the couple. The man reminded him of a guy he had dated a few years before Patrick. Masculine, Jonathan thought, like the Navy killer. He again returned to the night he heard about Phillip, could still see himself standing before the television, and then walking over to watch Patrick drive away. He wondered whether that night, or any night, Patrick had been truly off to yoga, or if he was taking advantage of the agreement they had had for the past four years: Patrick could play around with anyone he wanted, so long as he used protection. Jonathan swore to him that if he brought disease to their home, it would be the end. Even worse than disease, though, was getting a phone call saying Patrick had been found stabbed, his throat slit. And all for what? A fuck? A blowjob?

At first it had been lust with Patrick, and Patrick's draw to him was a sort of security blanket, Jonathan supposed. Then it became something else. Jonathan recalled that about six months after Ian arrived at their house, they went to a performance of Patrick's in Chicago. He was dancing in *La Sylphide*, in the lead role as James. Jonathan remembered laughing throughout at the silly, fantastical plot. But Patrick was charming as James, a young Scotsman who runs away from his wedding to dance amongst his dreams in the forest. Afterward Jonathan presented Patrick with a dozen pink roses and asked another dancer to snap a photo of the three. Jonathan stood with his arms around both Patrick and Ian. In the photo all three were beaming, Patrick resting his head on Jonathan's shoulder.

That same night they lay in the darkness of their hotel room. Patrick whispered, "Jon-Jon?" When Jonathan said, "Yes?" Patrick continued, "We need Ian, he makes us

better. I believe that." Jonathan had not snapped on the light to talk further. He knew it was the moment, the honesty coming from the darkness of the room, and that the next day they would awake and shower and touch one another, but would not speak of it.

Jonathan went to the register at the shack to pay. The neighbor was suddenly beside him, smiling. "Hi, I'm Alan. That your son and...?"

"My partner," Jonathan said. He cleared his throat. "Lover, whatever you want to call it."

"Gotcha," Alan said, nodding, his face as neutral as a news anchor.

Jonathan stared at the gold cross around the man's neck, tangled in his chest hair.

"For the wife," he said, grabbing the cross. He leaned in, said, "To be honest, I think it's all bullshit."

"You and me both," Jonathan said, because he did not know what else to say.

"I would rather spend my Sundays golfing. Or anything else," he said, winking. "Maybe I'll see you around." Alan walked away, stepping into the restroom.

"Christ," Jonathan said when he sat down. "Had an awkward exchange with Alan, our neighbor." He glanced over and saw the wife was talking on the phone.

"Did you?" Patrick giggled. "And did you confirm my suspicion? I suspect he's mostly straight but very gay in bed. His wife makes a good beard, I'm sure."

"Bathroom time," Ian said, leaving.

"A ménage-a-trois?" Patrick said. He fanned himself, said, "*Kidding.*"

"Are you?" Jonathan sighed. "This trip is supposed to be about us three."

"And it still is." Patrick patted Jonathan's hand. "Don't be mad. Ian is having fun. And I was just ...I was just teasing you."

"Baby," Jonathan said. "You're sounding sincere. It's a new shade for you."

"Cunt!" Patrick laughed.

"Ever been?"

Patrick was quiet for a moment. He placed his elbows on the table, rested his chin in the palm of his right hand. "I didn't know you were still upset."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, this trip is about Ian, about us. But it's about *us*. You know."

"The whole thing has me so unraveled. I've never been this close to it." Jonathan paused. "Phillip Burstyn thought he could trust that guy. He invited him into his home."

"Not everyone is nuts."

"No, this is true." Jonathan stared at him. "But that doesn't change how I feel."

"Lover," Patrick said, but paused. He drummed his fingers on the table. "I've become boring, anyway. Dreadfully boring."

"Oh?"

"I haven't been with anyone else in months."

"Don't lie to make me feel better."

"No, you know I'd never do that," Patrick said. He fanned himself. "I'm being honest."

Ian returned and said, "I just saw one of the chubby waitresses eat a fry off someone's plate after they paid."

The three sat sharing one another's laughter. Even after they had settled down, Jonathan gazed at both Ian and Patrick, and when they noticed, Jonathan did not lower his gaze. The sun shining above brightened their skin and felt comforting on Jonathan's shoulders and neck and face.

---

That night, towels and soap tucked under their arms, Jonathan and Patrick made their way to the shower area. Ian said he would shower in the morning, that he would have the fire going when they got back. It was a brown square building with showers divided by neck-level cubicle walls. Jonathan stared down at their flip-flops and said, "Don't you dare stand in that shower with bare feet, Patrick."

"I've stood in worse."

Jonathan stood for quite a while letting the nearly scalding water spray over his back. His eyes were closed, his arms dangling at his sides, careful not to touch the walls. There were only three showers, all in use. Jonathan sighed. He missed his shower at home which was enormous with cream tiles, the size of a large walk-in closet. He thought about Ian, who had looked content preparing the fire. Jonathan hadn't expected that from the boy, given his usual turning up of the nose at such tasks. Perhaps even gay kids liked fire, Jonathan supposed. He was glad Ian had come to live with them, that he sought out the father he had never met. He was grateful his son was softening, maybe starting the stage of relinquishing his anger against Jonathan, justified anger, but it hung on Jonathan like shackles. With Ian around, this whirlwind with Patrick—which had begun in lust—finally had the pieces of something real. The task, Jonathan realized, was keeping those pieces together.

He glanced from above the shower door and saw Patrick at the sink, face lathered white and a razor making swift motions along his jawline. Next to him an elderly man rinsed his toothbrush and returned it to the plastic tube. The man checked himself one

last time in the mirror before making his way to the door. Jonathan turned and let the water beat at his face, wash the shampoo from his slicked back hair and down his back. He watched the foam swirl around his sandals and disappear down the drain. When he turned off the water, he heard two voices coming from behind him at the sink. He concentrated on the voices, and realized it was Patrick. And who? A deep voice. It was Alan, the neighbor. Jonathan toweled himself, but focused on what they were saying.

"The wife is already in the tent asleep," Alan said. "Can you believe that? We go camping to spend time together, and the second it gets dark, she's out."

"Me, I don't sleep," Patrick said.

"Something tells me I won't much tonight."

"Terrible."

Jonathan quickly took his shorts and T-shirt from the small shelf on the back of the door and dressed. He opened the door and stepped from the shower into the coolness. Patrick was facing the mirror, Alan standing behind him with his crotch pressed to Patrick's behind, his face buried in Patrick's neck. Jonathan gazed at Patrick in the mirror, who stared back with wide eyes. He mouthed, "Told you so."

"Alan?" Jonathan said, clearing his throat.

"Oh," Alan gasped. He jumped to the right, shoved his hands in his pockets. "I, um. Oh Jesus."

"Jesus is right," Patrick said. He turned and faced them. "His wife is sleeping, you see."

"I've been drinking." Alan placed his palms on the sink and stared down. He raised his gaze into the mirror and Jonathan locked eyes with him. "Who am I kidding?"

"Go back to your wife," Jonathan said. "Forget this happened."

"No," Alan said. He nodded at the door. "There's a lock on the door. We could have the room to ourselves."

"This is not happening," Jonathan said, his teeth clinched.

"Come on," Alan said. He ran his hand along Patrick's waist. "He's a cute one, isn't he? I could bend him—"

"No." Patrick slapped Alan's hand, moved away. "This cute one is tired tonight."

"I see," Alan said, pulling his shoulders back. "Well." He seemed nervous for a moment, cleared his throat. "I guess I got the wrong vibe."

"Go home," Patrick said, walking to Jonathan's side.

"Right." Alan left.

"Christ, Patrick," Jonathan said. He ran his hand through his hair. "What the hell"

"He came onto me. I wasn't going to let him fuck me in the bathroom. It wasn't going to go anywhere." He picked up his bathroom items and before Jonathan could say anything more, Patrick had stepped out into the dark.

The night sky endless around him; the first thought that occurred to Jonathan was a wish: that Patrick would turn and tell him they were enough, and he, Jonathan, should not worry. That he would never enter the fear again. As they walked past laughter and campfires, lamps lighting the night, he waited for Patrick to fulfill the wish, to lift the weight from his shoulders. Certainly, Jonathan had felt the fear many times; it came in various shapes. There was the time early in their relationship when a man became so obsessed with Patrick they discovered his car parked along the street, the man sitting, never approaching the door, but always there. This had gone on for weeks until finally, one day, the car was gone and when Jonathan asked Patrick about it, Patrick had simply touched the back of Jonathan's hand and said nothing, as though that was enough, his actions were words and they said it all. But they didn't. The incidents, the tricks, were scattered about the five year relationship, caught in Jonathan's mind like insects in a spider's web, harmless on their own, and yet, there was the looming fear that could easily strike.

It was so upsettingly easy to imagine, really: the Grindr invitation that sends Patrick driving to the far side of town to a house in a run-down area, the man answers the door stripped from the waist up, and Patrick catches his eye with a grin, a grin so charming it puts the man's nervousness aside and he invites Patrick to the bedroom and they fall to the bed; once their connection has been broken, though, the man's eyes are dulled and behind them, inside him, is the aftermath's shame and fright, and Patrick's own shame turns to fear when the man strikes him, fist to flesh; it will be quick, Jonathan knows, as though he too is in the room, watching from a dimly lit corner, fixed to the floor incapable of moving, only able to watch it all unfold.

This cannot happen to us, Jonathan thought as they approached the campsite. Jonathan wanted to reach out and touch Patrick's thick, damp hair and then his shoulders and thin waist, to tell him, "This cannot happen to us," and explain the fear; but it was too much to tell. And they were at the campsite anyway, where Ian was sitting in a canvas chair knifing a stick into a fine point for s'mores. The stick looked, to Jonathan, sharp enough to draw blood. He knew Patrick was aware of the fear, but finally, as he collapsed exhausted into the chair to Ian's left, he let his mind go to the place he had avoided since the awful night Phillip died: did Patrick care?

Ian pierced a marshmallow on the stick and held it out to Jonathan, said, "You were gone so long, I already made two others."

---

An hour later the three were still sitting around the campfire, Ian and Patrick somehow continuing to roast marshmallows and eating them, having abandoned the chocolate and graham crackers. Jonathan couldn't imagine how they kept eating, the sweetness having coiled his stomach into a tight fist. Ian was finishing a ghost story, grinning broadly, stickiness on his upper lip. "And then he looked up and it was the rotting corpse with the hatchet."

"Oh, creepy!" Jonathan said.

"Stupid, I know. And I messed up the part about the—"

"No!" Patrick said, picking at his marshmallow. "It was *so scary*."

"Ian, you're burning that," Jonathan said.

"Yeah?" Ian pulled the stick from the fire. "It should be black all around. Me and Mom used to roast them over the stove, hers would always be in flames."

"Charred," Jonathan said. He finished his second glass of wine. "Patrick, no wine?"

"Not feeling it," Patrick said. "We can always *take it home*."

"Wine isn't good once opened, you know that."

"Jonathan," Patrick said, crossing his legs and nodding in Ian's direction. Ian was just staring into the fire, not speaking.

Jonathan nodded, corked the wine, and placed it on the ground. "It'll keep."

"Any more stories?" Jonathan said to Ian. "Patrick won't be scared, the tent isn't big enough."

"Well, you could tell one." Ian wiped his sticky fingers on his cutoffs. "The guy who died."

"What do you mean?"

"The guy you worked with." Ian's eyes were wide, looked to Jonathan like two enormous question marks. "I saw pictures."

"Pictures?"

"On the news. The living room carpet. The stain."

"Leave it to the news," Patrick said.

"Will the guy go to jail?"

"Of course," Patrick said.

"I don't know," Jonathan said, moving his gaze from Ian to Patrick. He hadn't mentioned the murder to Ian, had only discussed it with Patrick. He supposed Ian

recalled Phillip from the time he'd come for dinner, saw the news and connected the dots. "Men have gotten away with it before. What strikes me is the suitcase on his bed. It was mentioned on the news and in all the stories published. He had the suitcase all packed, was going on a trip to Maui to visit a friend the next day. If he had just left a day early..."

"Did he know the guy?" Ian asked. "I mean, a lot?"

"No, he didn't," Jonathan said. He paused. "And I think if he had known him a little better, he would have noticed something. Anything."

"Okay," Patrick said. He stood and walked to the tent, glanced inside. "Jonathan, help me inflate the mattresses?"

"Oh yeah," Jonathan said, standing. "Before we get too tired."

"Hey," Patrick said, touching Jonathan's arm, lowering his voice to a whisper. "We both know I don't have the mouth of a saint, but he's just a boy."

"I know..."

"You can't talk about that stuff, it's too dark."

"Blame the wine," Jonathan said. He stepped into the tent and hooked the nozzle to one of the mattresses. "But Patrick, it wasn't for him. I shouldn't have said it in front of him, but it wasn't *for* him."

"Jonathan," Patrick said. He kneeled next to Jonathan. "This is about the bathroom, isn't it? I don't even know or like the guy. His skin looks like he played goalie for a dart team! And as I said, he came onto me."

"But you still gave him the 'in.' And that's the point. What if he had gotten angry?"

"Lover." Patrick placed his hand on the small of Jonathan's back. "I'm fine."

"That's not the point."

"I know." Patrick kissed him. "It's scary."

"For both of us, for Ian, for us all." Jonathan kissed him hard on the mouth. He kneeled staring at Patrick, with his hands on both sides of Patrick's head. He ran his fingers over Patrick's forehead, down his temple and to his cheek. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Oh, this game," Patrick said, smiling and fluttering his eyes. "Wouldn't you rather I dance for you?" He began to twirl around, but Jonathan pulled him back, again touching his hair. "You want me to?"

"Always."



Patrick closed his eyes for a moment, said, "Let me think." He opened his eyes after a moment, snapped his fingers. "Oh! When I was a boy, eight or nine, I vehemently decided I only wanted to wear dresses to school. My dad was furious, because boys don't dress like that. He wanted a football-loving, legs-spread-wide, macho boy. But I refused to give in, and so did my grandmother. She wanted a girl, but got three boys, so she loved the idea of buying me dresses. Of course she was the boss. And so, one day I showed up at school in this frilly thing. And guess what?"

"What?"

"The kids, boys and girls, were relentless in how they mocked me. 'Fag,' 'fairy,' 'homo,' you name it. I went to the nurse's office, said I was sick, and called my grandmother. Of course she told me it was fine, that I could just wear boy clothes the next day. But I got up that morning, looked at the three dresses I had, put on a white one, wore these little white shoes, and marched into school. Kids still called me names, but after a while, it wasn't so bad. I felt proud of myself."

He threw out his arms in a "ta-da" way, then put his arms around Jonathan again, kissing his cheek. "I felt amazing."

---

The next day the three went swimming. The water was clear, warm, wrapping Jonathan's body like a blanket. Since Ian was not an experienced swimmer, they did not swim out too far. Less than two hundred feet out was a dock. It had a diving board. They swam toward it, Ian trailing behind with smaller strokes. Jonathan periodically glanced over his shoulder, calling out to him, "Are you tired?" or "Even strokes, Ian. Don't kick so frantically." Jonathan noticed Ian liked to dip his mouth in the green water, take in a swallow, then spit it back out. Jonathan and Patrick reached the dock, Jonathan placing his palms on the wet wood and swinging himself over, shaking his head like a wet dog. He watched Ian approach, wanted to kick himself for letting such a distance come between them. What if he had gone under? On the way back to land he would be more careful. All three lay side by side, flat on their backs. The sun hung directly overhead and began to dry them out.

"I've loved swimming since I was a kid," Jonathan said.

"Mom threw me in a pool once and yelled 'Swim!' but I just sunk like a rock," Ian said. "She never tried that again."

"In high school I swam for the swim team," Jonathan said. "I could teach you."

"You never told me that," Patrick said.

"Really? I was good. A determined swimmer, the coach said."

"Why didn't you keep swimming?" Ian asked.

"Well, I got a scholarship for swimming at a tiny college, but I really liked theatre, and decided to go to a school that had a strong theatre program." He glanced at Patrick, laughed. "And if I hadn't followed acting, I probably wouldn't have met Patrick all those years later."

"It was fate," Patrick said, touching Jonathan's arm.

"I'm sorry," Ian said. "That you quit, I mean."

"It's all right." Jonathan sat up and scooted to the edge of the dock, dangled his legs in the water.

"When's the fishing?" Ian asked.

"About an hour, I was thinking."

"We have to?" Ian asked. "It's just so gross."

"Let your dad fulfill his idea of a father-son day," Patrick said. "You don't have to touch the fish, if you don't want. We'll make him take them off the hook."

"It's just fish," Jonathan said. "It's called not thinking about it. Just do it."

"It's called butch assurance, lover," Patrick said. "I wish I could have somehow brought my hat. I'm going to get too tan. Skin cancer here I come."

"Ugh, fine," Ian said. "But I won't promise I'll catch any."

"Couple hours, not too long," Jonathan said.

"And fish are smelly as fuck," Ian said. He pushed his hair from his eyes, sat up. "I'm thirsty. Why can't they have a soda machine on this shitty dock."

"Honey, life isn't all Skittles and unicorns," Patrick said.

"Watch it with the language, Ian," Jonathan said. He kicked his feet in the water, studied the clear blue sky. He wondered if fishing was a bad idea. They could swim back to shore, go for a hike, maybe. But he had bought the poles. And they had been more expensive than he'd imagined. But what do you do? Jonathan wondered. Take the son you don't know on a camping trip, and expect to fill the gap absence creates? Jonathan had these friends, a lesbian couple, who would show him photos of their babies, claiming love was instant. And perhaps it was, he reasoned; but there was that first moment, the draw he imagined you felt when you held this pink creature in your arms. He stared at Ian, wondering if it was different. Maybe he was already feeling it: that he couldn't name it because, obviously, it was different from the love he was used to. Yet, he felt he could not know for sure. He could not know, not yet.

"What's a little cussing?" Ian asked. He sat up. "You've let me try booze before. That seems worse."

Two boys, both about fifteen, pulled themselves onto the dock. They nodded in Ian's direction and said, "Hey," before moving to the other side of the dock.

"It is worse," Jonathan said. He watched Ian pull his legs to his chest, wrap his arms around them. Ian turned his head in the direction of the boys for a moment, then straight ahead again. Ian pinched leg hair between his thumb and pointer and rolled, twisting the hair into a knot. "But that was before, this is now," Jonathan continued. "We're all maturing in this family."

"I'm mature already. One of Mom's exes had a son, and we did things." Ian smirked. "He would have me take my hand—"

"Okay! Time to cool off," Jonathan said. "Join me for a swim?"

"Later," Patrick said.

"I'm tired," Ian said, lying back again.

Jonathan hopped to his feet, stared out at the water. He squinted, making out the faces of some of the people along the edge of the lake. "I'll do a dive, want to see?"

"Yeah, okay," Ian said, sitting up. "Go."

Jonathan placed his feet together, pumped up and down on his toes. He teepeed his arms and dove, cutting the surface. Beneath the water he opened his eyes, could make out a few fish through the green, floating moss. Out in the air, he gasped for breath, heard Ian and Patrick clapping. He pushed the hair from his forehead and stared up at Ian. He looked exactly like Jonathan at that age. But Jonathan hadn't done things with men until he was in college, when he finally shed his fear. There it was, he thought, another fear that had overwhelmed a period of his life. It was a miracle, he realized, that he'd never had an ulcer. Jonathan wondered if Ian's mother was aware that her son had "done things"; and he couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen when this occurred. But there had been nobody to stop him.

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They stood on a steep embankment, clutching eight-foot spinning rods. Ian reeled in, and said, "Something got my bait!"

"Let me help you put on another worm," Jonathan said. He placed his reel on the ground and took Ian's. He inserted the tip of the hook in the middle of the rubber worm, all the way through the body. Then he inserted it back into the body but did not penetrate the other side, hiding the barb at the tip of the hook so that the fish would bite down on it unexpectedly. Jonathan *hoped* that was correct.

"You can cast it," Ian said. "I'm not very good at it."

"Just this once. Next time it's on you." Limp line over his shoulder, Jonathan jerked it forward, watched as it uncoiled from the spool. The lure plopped in the water five or so feet from his own line. The water wrinkled, then smoothed itself like a bedsheet.

"Thanks. So, we've been standing here for an hour," Ian said, "and caught nothing."

"I think it takes a while," Jonathan said.

"A pastime for the dull," Patrick said, sitting in a chair fanning himself, again wearing his straw hat and sunglasses. "Like cross-stitching or weak cocktails."

"We'll give it a bit longer," Jonathan said.

"Okay," Ian said.

"Oh, here." Jonathan placed his pole on the ground and over to his canvas bag. He took out a bottle of sunscreen. "Put some more of this on. I've sure you lost most of it when you were in the water."

"Fine," Ian said. He rolled his eyes, squirting the cream in his hand. "Bug spray, sunscreen, more sunscreen."

Jonathan watched as Ian smeared the sunscreen over his arms, his face scrunched in annoyance. A sense of defeat, the same defeat that had been with him the entire trip, washed over him and he had to ask.

"Is this trip as ..." Jonathan paused. "As bad as the ones you went on with your mom?"

"Don't put the kid on the spot!" Patrick yelled. "Really!"

"What?" Jonathan asked. "Just a question."

"It's fine," Ian said. "And yeah, Dad, it is better."

Relief washed over Jonathan and he let his shoulders relax. "Good, that's good."

"Those usually ended with her and a guy finishing off a bottle and arguing around the campfire. Then she'd go pout in the tent and he'd sit there nodding off and I'd have to make sure he didn't fall face-first into the fire."

"I'm sure she had good intentions," Jonathan said.

"That's not enough," Ian said. He removed his T, throwing it on the ground.

"Best keep your shirt on. You'll burn your shoulders and back," Jonathan said.

"Too hot. I'm sweating like a pig."

"Suit yourself."

"Too bad we don't have a radio," Patrick said.

"Scare the fish," Jonathan said.

"What?" Ian said. "Says who."

"Your mom's fisherman boyfriend never told you that?" Jonathan said, glancing at Ian. Ian shook his head. "Well, well. Guess he didn't know everything about fishing. It's one of the few things I remember from that awful weekend with my dad. He told me not to talk so much, that it'd scare them away. I always figured he just said it because he wasn't a talker, but before we came here I read about it. He was telling the truth."

"Wow." Ian scratched a shoulder, seemed to consider it, said, "So, we shouldn't have been talking all this time."

"I don't care that much about catching a fish," Jonathan said. He smiled to himself.

"Look," Patrick said. "There goes our socialite neighbor."

Jonathan turned to watch the neighbor and his wife drive past in their RV. He did not glance in Patrick's direction. "Leaving so soon."

"Hey!" Ian yelled. "Who cares, I've got a bite! Look!" He held the pole out to Jonathan, who dropped his to take it.

"It has to be a giant," Jonathan said, surprised at the pull of the fish. He handed it back to Ian. "Here, he's yours. Reel it in."

"Oh, God," Ian said, biting his lip and cranking slowly. Ian yanked against the wild line. The fish stayed beneath the water. His tennis shoes rutted into the sand.

"Here," Jonathan said, placed a hand on the side of the pole without the reel, his other hand gripping the pole, and together they pulled. "We can do it, just pull hard as you can, and keep reeling!" Finally, the fish, salmon-green spotted, crashed through the surface of the water and danced drunkenly at the end of the line.

"It's like a foot long," Patrick said, suddenly standing by them. "Now what?"

"Someone has to get it off the hook!" Ian shrieked, slamming the fish onto the ground. "I'll stomp the nasty thing before I touch it."

"We need something to kill it," Jonathan said. He glanced around the embankment, searching. "Should have brought a knife."

"Here!" Patrick called. He was holding a rock above his head. He ran toward the fish, stood over it, and slammed the rock into the fish's head. The rock rolled away, but the fish wasn't dead. Patrick picked up the rock and repeated the motion. The fish stopped moving. "Goodness, I never thought killing something would be so ... exhilarating."

"It's really dead," Ian said, kneeling. He waved his hand in front of his nose, said, "Gross.dot com, it reeks."

Jonathan stood behind Ian, placing his hands on Ian's shoulders. "I'm proud of you."

Ian smiled up at him. "We don't have to eat it, do we? I don't want to just leave it."

"We won't just leave it," Jonathan said. He reached down and picked it up. "We'll put it in the cooler with the remaining ice. It's empty now, anyway. And we'll take it to one of the neighbors before we leave."

"So we don't waste it," Ian said, nodding.

"I think it's the best plan," Jonathan said to Ian. "Now let's go for a swim, to cool off. Then we'll get milkshakes to celebrate your victory."

—

They made their way along the wooded path toward the beach, and Jonathan guessed it to be about four o'clock. They stepped from the woods, out of its shade into the warmth of the sun. Ian said he was too hot to move at their pace, that he would go on ahead to the water.

Ahead was the small restaurant shack, tables and chairs. To the right was a parking lot littered with cars, then the beach and lake to the left. A large woman in a black one-piece smoked and watched her two children wade into the water; a young black couple ran from the lapping water and threw themselves on a cartoon themed beach towel. Jonathan heard a voice through a megaphone coming from the lifeguard stand: "NO FIREWORKS ON THE BEACH." He saw the two teenage boys from the dock, shooting bottle rockets from into the water.

"I felt relieved when I saw Alan leaving," Patrick said as they walked along the beach.

"Why is that?"

"Because I know how upset and worried it made you."

"It did."

"Will you try and not worry so much? I've been more responsible since Ian came, and so have you."

"I know, Patrick."

Patrick nodded. "Glad you've noticed, lover." He paused, then continued. "I need you to know that you don't need to be afraid for me, not anymore."

"It's not that easy, not a switch I can turn off." Jonathan glanced over at Patrick.

Even though Patrick hated camping, he moved through the woods with such ease, as though he was indigenous to the trees and brush and animals; his long limbs

stepped over fallen branches with such grace, while Jonathan was tense with each step, imagining himself doing a nosedive into the ground. He had come to Patrick out of pure desire: to caress those limbs, the full mouth, the toned pale body, a dancer's body, lithe and fit and youthful, so much younger than Jonathan's own body, which he had once been scared of, and now felt a longing for the boyishness he'd once possessed. But now with Patrick it had shifted and while Jonathan still craved the body, wanted to consume him, there was more and it was real.

"You're not understanding," Patrick said. "I don't want it anymore."

Jonathan stopped. "What?"

"It scared me too," Patrick said, staring at him with his large eyes. "It did."

"You never said—"

"Don't you know me?" Patrick gave him a wink. "It was awful."

Jonathan nodded.

"I don't want anyone—"

"Shh," Jonathan said and pressed his mouth to Patrick's; he just pressed his lips, but did not kiss him. They stood still, neither speaking any words, no further assurances or explanations. Eyes closed, they stood taking in one another's breath, both were even and warm.

Then Jonathan's mind turned to his son, another fear, a new one. Now Ian was sexually active and in the same danger as the rest of them. He had wanted to hear about Phillip's death while sitting at the fire, and threw out comments about his sex life. It made Jonathan's palms sweaty as he and Patrick continued their walk across the beach. Someone would have to instill the same fear in Ian; sometimes, Jonathan realized, that fear that you carried with you was necessary. Ian had to be safe.

Jonathan studied the beach, the water. He didn't see Ian. He placed his hand above his eyes for a better look. He turned to Patrick. "Do you see Ian?"

"No," Patrick said, looking. "Maybe he's getting food."

"He's not, he's not up there."

Jonathan quickly moved along the beach, toward the water. And there was Ian, definitely in over his head. He went under, then came back up. He went under again. Jonathan glanced at the lifeguard, who was swinging his whistle and talking to a girl. Jonathan tugged off his shirt and ran into the water, cold and then warm. He dove so that he could move through the lake faster. In the distance he heard Patrick yelling, heard the shriek of the lifeguard's whistle. And then he was under the water, hearing nothing, but seeing Ian's back a few feet from his reach. The water all around him was

grabbing, and holding him in a frantic stillness. Finally, he reached out and grabbed Ian, who kicked and fought, pulling them both under. Then Jonathan lifted his son above his head, kicked as hard as he could, and at last air, being pulled into lightness from the water thick as cement. He stared at Ian, held him beneath one arm.

"Keep your head up, son." With his free arm he moved them slowly toward the beach. Ian kept trying to speak around his coughing, but Jonathan shushed him, saying "Don't talk, honey. It's fine," and continued to swim. Ian gave him a look that startled Jonathan for a moment, a look of perplexity. Something horrible occurred to Jonathan: was his son surprised Jonathan had lifted him from the water, had fought to keep him from drowning? Ian kept speaking, but to Jonathan the words were indistinguishable, like noise from behind a closed door.

Jonathan lay Ian on the beach and stared at him, pressed on his torso with both palms, crying, "Ian" over and over.

"Stop!" Ian snapped. "What are you doing?" The perplexed look was combined with annoyance.

"Can you breathe?" Jonathan asked. "We've got to get all the water out." He seemed to be breathing fine, but still Jonathan pressed.

"Dad, Dad," Ian said, rolling onto his side. "I'm fine."

"You went under."

"I was trying to see if I could see a fish!" Ian said, glaring at him. "I wasn't drowning. God, it wasn't even that deep."

"We need to be safe," Jonathan said. He glanced at a woman standing nearby, said, "Call an ambulance!"

"Dad," Ian repeated, his voice soft.

"Jonathan," Patrick said, kneeling next to him. "Listen to your son. He's speaking. He's breathing. He's fine."

"Oh, God," Jonathan said, and leaned against Patrick, then fell into him.

"I'm fine." Ian sat up and wrapped his arms around Jonathan's neck. "See? I'm all right, I swear."

Jonathan placed his hands on Ian's bony shoulders, pushed the tangled hair from Ian's face and stared down at him. He pressed his lips to Ian's eyelids, his forehead. Jonathan glanced around at the twenty or so people encompassing them. He knew it must be a sight: these men and this boy, this man and these boys. And they sat there, twelve limbs and three torsos entwined, crisscrossing one another.



## the Robins, Reverend Father, the Robins

*"they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns..."*

the robins are migrating *cheer-up, cheer-up*  
they perch they hop they fly frantic they are red breast legion

the narrator explains the subtropical insectual abundance  
the theory of third geologic era Mesozoic roots

in the trees outside my window, on the crisp lawn  
till a kid on a bike scatters the roosts to shotgun flight

he describes the great migrations  
winter and breeding ranges, mating for and not for life  
multiple blue or mottled eggs

he mixes instinct and ritual, biomass and biomass  
consumed, numbers populations, declines & resurgences  
and, as with many small birds, 80% annual morbidity

in the trees outside my window, on the crisp lawn  
I still hope to walk out among them as the old reverends implied  
the priests who always sat too close: soap and scotch and sanctity  
as they murmured to a jailbait me  
how like unto St. Francis I seemed

priests of the parish always welcome in our home  
priests, brothers, laity of the diocese as well

there is no one to explain what separates a pervert  
in a restroom stall from one in a confessional  
I struggle to understand their knees rubbing against mine  
and: *do you touch yourself?*  
their hands lingering on my thighs,  
and: *who do you think of when you do?*  
their smiles contorted to pain filled leers  
and: *tell me, show me, how does that feel?*

as they target me, groom me, gift me  
and: *you know I am as Christ on earth*  
sending boys they've already had to test me  
and: *what you do for me, you do for God*

hours in their arms for my spiritual formation

beyond reason, Assisi sprouts to fate  
I find myself, alone, in a desolate meadow  
whispering with flocks of imaginary birds

## The White Album

I'm listening to Beatles as afternoon light sifts through stalwart off-white vertical blinds, a dim reflection on the apartment's white walls. A white refrigerator breaks through multi-track caterwauls that eerily echo blues once plucked from ivories and guitars by not-so-white hands. Then, there is the white mother who raised me, a clear imprint of my face when I put down my pen and look

into the mirror mounted in my white bathroom. I wash my face and hands, amble to the kitchen's white tiles where I open the white refrigerator. Stare at the soy milk and heavy whipping cream, among orbs of eggs, then close. I combine marshmallows, graham crackers, chocolate to create a forced integration that most people enjoy. Consume with white teeth. Savor, crunch. I open a window.

A flashback recalls John, Paul, George and Ringo. claiming shaggy rebellions to swoons of white girls collapsing, caught before crashing into white crosswalks and curbs. Young women imagining white thighs parted for a white eruption arching into white constellations. They fathom nostalgia of a white bedroom curtain's drift in the window the next morning, wearing nothing but a pop star's white shirt. It is white-collar labor to hone such images when I grew up later among Tops rolling papers, crisp white squares like larger lined pages of a notebook turned into portal.

As the double album moves from the first disc to another, the white dough of realization rises fast because I've been listening to the white album all my life, thrown back into my sight insistent as sunlight thrown against crisp snow, omnipresent. It never has to imagine anything outside itself. Yet each note borrows from my honeysuckle, white petals crushed. Each song shoves its way

into my ears with voices deeper, older, and paler  
than mine, filled with a milk that clouds the music  
of everyone's sky, including its own.

## Minted

*For Sandra Bland*

When your life drags in front of you,  
raw meat on a rope along the ground,  
you are less concerned about the dirt.

There is no camera that can protect.  
Any daily routine becomes rattled  
by doubt and the swift officer's hold

that ensures you will never come  
home.. Pressed cuff of your suit  
and straight coif fold like bones

thrown to the ground, oxygen  
flattened from your lungs. Fault  
is sharply pressed between slats

that used to be your life, adamant  
in its value, minted in video footage.  
You thanked a person recording

your last living appearance, your final  
moment of persistent breath choked,  
women disappear, and churches burn.

## Sage and Shields

*for Shameeka Dream*

On Baltimore's North Street,  
smudging the officers' line  
with a smoldering sage,  
No riot erupted in your face.

A white line of gentle smoke  
that your scarf pointed toward  
like a compass to cleansing.

You walked one end  
of the line to the other  
and embodied breeze.

Black, green, yellow  
bracelets on wrists—  
land, light, and skin  
remembered.

Your lids lowered  
in prayers that every  
head under helmet

and shield finds  
indecipherable.  
Hair pulled back.

Water in your left  
hand, another way  
to cleanse and honor

the dead. Officer shields  
held up so high that each  
man stood unknowing.

You summoned  
another type of army  
that they will answer to.

## Runaway Truck Ramp

I was in the hospital's chapel when he came in, said, "Excuse me, thought this was the smoking room." I would have left had I not been crying, a million crumpled tissues spilling out of my lap.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded but he insisted on getting me a cup of water, which I downed.

"I can go..." He sat next to me on the wooden pew, right in front of Mary cradling baby Jesus. I looked up at him to see him clearly. He was one of those exceedingly pretty boys whose features I've sometimes envied for their blemish-free complexions, heavy eyelashes, perfect cheekbones, and a cupid's bow so perfect it can land them a modeling contract. My mom called them "angel faces." Mom had a bit of a manly face, but when I was younger and hadn't yet learned which face supposedly belonged to which gender, I thought Mom was a beautiful woman. She remains beautiful, if only to me.

"My mother just died." I wiped my cheeks with the back of my hands. "Oh God, just saying it sounds so dreadful."

"I'm so sorry."

From the way his voice had softened, I could tell that he was sorry and wasn't just saying it because it was the polite thing to say. I told him Mom had an unexpected stroke a year ago that had left her all but dead. I was in my sophomore year at college, and I'd taken an extended leave so that I could be by Mom's side even if I was reduced to nothing more than a voice, not that the doctors were sure she was registering even that.

"One year coma-ridden." I tried to focus on Mary's gown that was chipped by her little toe. "But once we bury her there's no hope of ever seeing her again."

"Mothers are special." He crossed his long, denim-clad legs. "Even if you don't love them, you love them. In my religion, heaven is said to lie beneath a mother's feet, meaning that you have to respect and love and care for your mother above all else, even above your father, which, honestly, is quite an interesting perspective the older I'm getting, since I would like for both parents to be respected equally."

I did not tell him about my Dad. I did not tell him that my Dad had betrayed my Mom.



"Which religion?" I asked. Mom would have liked to know.

"Islam."

"Moslem, right?"

"Muslim—Moose-Limb. Except the Moose is not so drawn out."

"Moo-slim."

"Good try," he said, smiling kindly.

"Are you Indian?" I squinted. "I love Indian food. Samosas are my thing."

"They're your thing?"

"I had a friend from India back in grade school. Radeeka's Mom would make these little samosas full of potatoes. My Mom said she'd never met a more well-mannered girl than Radeeka."

"It's pronounced Raah-dhi-kaa."

"She used to say Ra-dee-ka and I'm sure she knows how to pronounce her own name."

"Sure," he said, shrugging. "By the way, I'm not from India. I'm from Pakistan."

"Packistan?"

"Paaa-kiss-thaan. It's actually a country next to India. They used to be one."

"My mother's book club read a book set in India. A murder mystery in the Taj Mahal."

"Meh-hell."

"Maa-huhl. My Mom started her neighborhood book club. Books through which they could visit different countries. My Mom didn't like planes, but she wanted to travel. So this was her way." I was babbling. I didn't care. I didn't want to be alone. I pointed to the novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, sitting on the pew beside me. "It was the latest book club pick. Japan. The book club continued without her. Did I mention she started it? I'm an only child."

He rubbed his thumbs together, as if in deep contemplation, then said, "Me too. Only child."

"Today I hate being an only child."

He sighed. "In an event like this, you're so alone with your memories that you feel as if memory is all, and yet it is nothing at all."

"Yes," I said. "That's how I feel—memory is an anchor but it's also setting me adrift."

"Smoke?" he held a pack between his long fingers.

I looked around the chapel, sure we couldn't smoke in here.

"Under the circumstances," I said, lighting up, "my Mom would say, God won't mind."

I wasn't much of a smoker, but I hoped this smoke would calm me. Mom had never smoked. She walked an hour every day. She ate low-fat. She was healthy. The doctors had no idea why this had happened.

Shit happens, Dad said when he came to pick me up from the airport and we hugged each other, trying to get comfortable in the space of two where, previously, our hugs had been a triumvirate of him, me, Mom. Mom and I used to hug a lot, though. Mom was a hugger. She'd adjust my earrings and fix my hair even when nothing needed fixing or adjusting. Shit happens, Dad said. I'd smelled Bitch's drugstore perfume on him even then, but hadn't yet registered it for what it was.

A tear splotched my skirt.

"I don't even know why I'm crying," I said. "I've been preparing for this day ever since the coma."

"My mother passed away seven years ago. I still cry. Mothers die. We have that in common no matter where we are or who we are."

A drop of calm entered me at his reminder that I was not alone.

"How did your mother pass away?" I asked into the paper cup he'd placed between us.

"Cancer. Aggressive." He took a long drag. The subsequent smoke clouded his face. "What was worse is that she forbade my father, my relatives from telling me she was dying. I'd come out here, to Denver, for college, and had recently graduated, taken a job that had begun sponsoring my green card. Look," he said suddenly squatting in front of me, his lovely eyes looking into mine. "I won't say I'm over my mother's passing or that you'll get over your mother's. All I'm saying is that you'll get through it. I can promise you that, okay, you'll get through it with time."

I dropped the cigarette butt into the cup of water, where it gave a last hiss before dying. "By the way," —I extended my hand— "I'm Michelle."

"Sulaiman."

His fingers were long and slim and warm, and I held on a moment longer than I should have just because this was the first person I'd told about Mom's death, and that made contact special. After a second, I let go.

"Nice to meet you, Sulemon."

"Sool-ai-maan."

"Sool-aye-man."

"Just call me Sully. No problem."

"Does it bother you having to change your name so it isn't mispronounced?"

"Bother no, feel sorry yes," —Sully paused, glancing at the altar— "because there are so many names Americans cannot pronounce."

We should have never met again, Sully and I, except that I'd left *Memoirs of a Geisha* in the chapel and the front page was inscribed with my name and address. Sully, being a conscientious individual, decided to return it, though it took him a month to arrive at Dad's house where I'd moved in after Mom's coma.

"Thank you so much," I said. I'd been kicking myself at having lost the copy of the book that was the last link Mom and I would share.

"You're welcome." Sully handed me the book. "I would have come sooner but I resigned from my job and have been busy with interviews. I did get a chance to read it, though. I thought it was a true story of a geisha until I got to the end and realized it was fiction written by a white guy."

I hugged the book and invited Sully in.

"Arthur Golden must have done a ton of research," Sully said, as he followed me past the small drawing room and into the kitchen overlooking the den, "in order to channel a voice not of his own culture."

"I was more taken by the way he writes from a female perspective. I couldn't tell a guy had written it."

"I think culture is harder." He settled on a bar stool, his long legs dangling on either side, thighs spread wide.

"Anyone can study a culture." I offered him a soda. "But how do you get into the heart of the opposite gender?"

"I truly disagree." He opened the can.

"What if a Japanese male had written the novel?" I said. "It would still be a challenge to channel a woman!"

"Maybe more authentic, though?"

I squinted in confusion. "Isn't every voice authentic?"

Sully glanced at me, then busied himself by taking a sip. He looked taller, much taller than he had in the chapel that day, and he seemed to have gained a little bit of weight. It suited him. He had a slight stubble and a deeper tan and I couldn't help but think how exotic and handsome he looked here in Mom's kitchen, with its birch table and chairs and white linoleum counters flowing over with appliances, and the fridge

whose door still held reminders of dates Mom had made: a mammogram appointment, a note to return Blockbuster films, the Book Club reading list a year old. I wouldn't let Dad take Mom's reminders off the fridge.

Although during my year at college I'd dated plenty, and, during Mom's coma had hooked up with a guy here or there, I had not brought anyone home, and so, when Dad and Bitch stepped in with leftovers from their Saturday morning breakfast out, Dad looked at me quizzically as he politely shook Sully's hand. Bitch was beaming. As if this was some sign for her that I was getting over Mom. As if that meant I was one step closer to getting into her.

"We were about to leave," I said. To Sully's credit, he played along and he said goodbye to Dad and Bitch and we left the house.

"Sorry about that," I said to Sully in a low voice once we began walking down the drive and toward his car. "You can drop me off at a friend's house."

"Or-,"— Sully's sleek silver watch caught the sunshine— "would you like to have an early lunch?"

I nodded eagerly, a little too eagerly I suppose, as I got into Sully's spacious car with temperature-controlled seats. His hair gleamed in the mid-morning sunshine. I wished I'd thought to let down my ponytail, change my T-shirt, put on some lip gloss. I glanced at him again. Angel-faced. There was no other word.

He moved a sheaf of printed papers with red pen scribbles all over them from the passenger seat to the back.

"Are you taking a class?" I asked.

"I'm a writer. In my spare time, I mean. It's a story I'm working on."

"Me too! I'm a writer too!"

When I was young, Mom enrolled me in a writing camp. It was free and she insisted. I had expected to hate it; instead I loved it and had been scribbling something or the other since then. I told him that, since Mom's coma, I'd filled enough journals to exhaust a landfill.

"I've published," he said. "A couple of things in journals back home. Short stories mainly."

"Cool." I glanced back at the papers.

"I'm actually working on a short story collection right now."

"What's it about?"

"This and that."

Though he didn't ask me what I might be working on, I told him I was working on a mother-daughter memoir.

"That's interesting."

Perhaps I imagined his indifferent tone. As soon as I said it, I wished I hadn't. It did sound awfully predictable. Even *this and that* seemed to have more gravitas.

"Maybe I will try my hand at a short story collection too," I said in a small voice.

"I dream of writing a novel someday," he said. "No. Scratch that. I *will* write a novel some day." He sounded so sure of himself. "I will write it. It will get published. It will do well. Very well."

I'd allowed Mom to read some of my scribbles and she'd said I had talent. She would have been thrilled if I'd told her I planned to write a novel whether or not I planned for it to do well. She would have been so proud of me. Perhaps it was time to get serious. About everything in my life. For starters, I needed to get away from Dad and Bitch.

Sully drove to a pub nearby. We ordered beers. I had not been out like this since Mom's passing, even though my best friend from high school, Erin, who was attending the community college in town, had been trying to get me to leave the house for some fun. But sometimes—often—being with Erin was hard. In the beginning I wanted to be with her because she may as well have been another daughter to Mom, but the fact was, Erin's mom was vibrantly alive. But Sully and I had a motherless life in common.

Suddenly I was really hungry for the first time after a long time, and we ordered loaded nachos. Sully took out a pack of cigarettes and we lit up. I felt I owed Sully an explanation for the way I'd fled my house. I told him how Dad had decided, three months into Mom's coma, that she was never going to wake up and had begun to date Bitch. That's what I hated Dad for the most, not that he had fallen for someone else but because he made Mom dead even before she was dead.

"What about your Dad?" I asked. "Remarried?"

"No."

I felt a stab in my gut.

"My parents had a happy, peaceful marriage, but my father says once is enough."

This time, a stab of joy. How good could a marriage have been if the relationship did not want to be repeated? An ache spread through me. Dad could not repeat what he had with Mom. He could not. Surely.

"What is your father's girlfriend's name?"

"Who cares?" I said.

"Your father cares," Sully said gently.

I ashed into the black plastic ashtray. "Nancy," I said softly. "Her name is Nancy. My mother's name is Sarah. She liked that she was named after the biblical Sarah, Abraham's wife, mother of Isaac and mother of our nation." A waiter came to replace our ashtray with a fresh one. "What's your mother's name?"

Sully glanced at me for a long second before replying. "Hajra."

"What does it mean?"

"Hajra was also Abraham's wife, and the mother of Ismail, and therefore also the mother of a nation."

"You mean Hagar?"

"In Islam, Hagar is Hajra and Abraham is Ibrahim."

"Oh my God." I stared at him. "That is so cool. Here we are, the descendants of two nations, on a journey to the same destination."

"And what's this destination?" Sully said.

"Happiness, I suppose," I said. "The pursuit of it."

"You are a romantic." Sully smiled tenderly. "Did you just think of your mother?"

"How did you know?"

"Your face," he said. "Breathe. Slow, deep breaths." He leaned over the table and squeezed my hands. "That's what my fiancée tells me to do."

It was the first time I noticed the gold band on his ring finger. It had to have always been there. Encircling his finger in a tight hold. I caught my breath as best as I could before I said,

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." He let go of my hands.

"What's her name?"

"Reema."

"Pretty name."

"Thanks."

"So." I stared at the refried beans. "How long have you been engaged?"

"Since the year I left for America. My mother was insistent. Apparently being engaged is supposed to save you from all the—"—he made quotation marks— "bad American girls."

"Bad!"

Sully smiled. "You Americans need to stop exporting *Baywatch* and soap operas like *The Bold and the Beautiful*. In my country, if you don't know any better, that's what America is: one big orgy."

"You can't believe what you see on TV."

"But people do. Don't they?"

"Soaps are stupid anyway. And what idiot watches *Baywatch*?"

Sully shrugged. "My fiancée is addicted."

"Doesn't sound very bright." After a moment I said, "That was not nice. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Sully said. "She's not very bright."

"Why did you fall in love then?"

"Who said I fell in love?"

"She's...your fiancée."

"It's an arranged engagement. My mother's wish."

Sully glanced at his watch. He whistled. "It was great hanging out with you, Michelle, but I've got to get back home. I've got some people coming to look at my things in the morning."

"Your things?"

He rolled his eyes playfully. "I'm going to be driving to California. Bay Area. New job. Offer came yesterday. I was packing and wanted to get your book to you without any more delay."

"How long does it take to drive to California?"

"Three days or so."

"When are you leaving?"

"In a week."

So it's Tuesday morning. Bright, sunny, crisp. I pick Sully up. He takes a look at the large moving trailer attached to my used car and claps. I glance at his one bag and clap back. He wants to travel light, fine; I want to take my life along. Mom was part of that life and I wanted to leave behind nothing.

"Surprise," I told him a few days ago, "I'm moving to California too."

"Crazy, crazy American woman!" Sully's face splintered into a big smile. He'd thought I was crazy enough to have asked him if I could come with him. Dad was severely unhappy at my plan to drive to California with Sully ("*Honey, you barely know the guy*") but I wanted—needed—to get away from the constant reminder of Dad and Bitch. Dad's face tightened when I said this. Finally Dad made me promise that we would

go in my car. Since Sully had been planning to sell his car in California anyway, Sully had, instead, sold it in Denver.

We stop for gas and munchies. I get cheese dip, ruffled potato chips, and a Dr Pepper. Sully indulges in a carton of cigarettes and a bag of assorted mints. He insists on paying for everything. By the time we hit the interstate the car is smelling minty clean.

"So, I've been meaning to ask you, where's the romance in an arranged marriage." I open up my ruffled potato chips and dill dip. "It's amazing to me how you're so comfortable spending your life with someone you don't love."

"Love is overrated."

"How can you say that?"

"I think compatibility is more important. I prefer *like* over *love*. In fact, I respect like over love."

This upsets me. Dad had said something similar. *I loved your mother. I don't love Nancy. But I like her. I like her very much. Can you allow me that, Michelle?*

I turn up the radio dial and try to find a station, but there is nothing I like. I take a Tori Amos cassette out of my backpack and put it into the slot, settle back as the opening bars of a piano to the song "Silent All These Years" flood the car and I sing along to the opening lyrics.

"You've got a nice voice," Sully says.

"Thanks." I turn the volume down. I can't stop myself from probing. "What's she like? Reema?"

"My Mom really loved her." Sully rolls the window down and lights a cigarette. The wind ruffles his hair. I hope my loose hair in all its mouse-brown glory is looking just as good windswept. I hope my tinted gloss has not come off.

"And you?"

"She's a kind girl. Doesn't yell at the servants. Doesn't like food going to waste. Doesn't like to see animals mistreated. She reads every book I recommend. He laughs. "Lately, she's recording her favorite passages on tape and mailing them to me. She's into baking. She's learning to bake an orange chiffon cake."

"A chef too? Wow!" It comes out derisively. I flush.

Sully smiles indulgently. "Why do you women always put each other down?"

"I'm not putting her down." I like that he defended her. I don't like that he defended her. "Actually," I say quietly, "she sounds awesome."

"What do you like in a guy?"



"Shit!" I say as we pass a dead, mangled animal in the road.

"Yeah?"

"No, I mean, did you see that road kill. I couldn't even tell what it was."

Sully looks back for a moment but we've left it far behind, whichever creature had been lying there in the middle of the road, a fat, furry carcass, all jumbled up. Something about the animal, the way it just lay there, helpless, dead, beyond help, like in a coma, as others drove past going on with their lives. Just passing by.

"It just makes me so sad," I say. "A hit and run no one cares about."

"I read an article about taxidermists in L.A. collecting road kill to be used for film props. Hopefully, it won't go to waste."

"Thanks," I say after a second. "That actually makes me feel better."

I don't tell him that I liked in a man what I'd seen in him: a reminder that even carcasses can be put to use, and so can glasses of water, and books, and writing-with-a-plan, and sewing himself, and his swan-wing fingers, his profile smooth curve after curve, not like some men with protruding foreheads, huge noses, or receding chins.

After the carcass we drive in silence, broken, occasionally, by a comment or two about how flat the landscape is. I wonder how much Sully would care if Reema died. Or would he just care because she was the girl his mother had chosen for him? For a second, I feel as if, in some weird way, Mom has chosen Sully for me because, had she not died, I might not have met him.

"Do you believe in fate?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "According to my culture, one's birth, death and, apparently, marriage are foreordained. The choices in-between are all free will."

"I can see birth and death, but marriage is totally free will."

"Not where I'm from." He grins.

We banter for a while and, in the pockets of silence, listen to Tori Amos until Sully switches off the tape and says he can't stand Amos's depression any longer. He replaces it with tape from a "back home" band. I listen to the pop melody, to the male singer's soft crooning, to the happy harmony. I pick up the plastic cassette cover: four guys wearing jeans and leather jackets.

"They're Pakistani?"

"Yup. Junaid. Shezad. Salman. Rohail."

"Don't ask me to pronounce their names." When Sully laughs appreciatively at my joke, I can't wait to tell Mom that a cute guy thinks I'm funny. I swallow my pain in my throat and say, "They're so handsome."

"Pakistani guys can be that."

I tap on one of the guys. "He looks white."

"Pakistanis come in all hues."

"So do Americans. We have that in common too. As well as being only children of mothers named after the mothers of nations. As well as mothers who are gone."

"We do. All of that."

I gaze at the cover. The group's name is Vital Signs. "How come they have an English name?"

"English is one of Pakistan's official languages. We used to be a British colony. Like you Americans."

"What language are they sing in?"

"Urdu. It's Pakistani's national language. English is an official language."

"Oh." I like that this band has an English name even if they sing in Urdu. It is a comforting fusion, a cheerful reminder that languages can be learned and that the distances between people are only as vast as they want them to be.

"Reema loves them. She sent me this album."

I bit my thumbnail and drew blood. I looked at the guys on the cover and wondered if they were also engaged to girls their mothers loved but they themselves were not too sure of. The fact he shared more tongues with Reema than me upset me. I wondered if being able to communicate in two languages strengthened or weakened a relationship.

"How come your English accent is so good?" I ask.

"It's an upper-class accent back home." Sully looks pained. "Also, if you wanted to make good with the British colonists you learned English, but once the colonists left, the Pakistani upper classes continued to distinguish themselves with English and differentiate themselves from the hoi polloi through accents."

"Hoi pollio."

"We're a class-ridden country." Sully shrugs. "It works out for those from the right class."

"Such as yourself?"

"My family used to have money but now we're Broke Nawabs, meaning pedigree rich, but penny poor. That's why I'm here. To make my fortune. Before heading back. That's why I needed a green card."

We don't speak much for a while. I want to say that I don't care about accents or pedigrees or things like that. I wonder what a girl like Reema cares about?

After seven hours of non-stop driving, we stop at a Best Western.

"Two rooms, please," Sully says, smiling at the desk clerk, an elderly woman with a unibrow. We grab burgers and fries from the diner next door, and return to eat them in Sully's room while we watch *The Newlywed Game*. Sully and I agree that the newlyweds do not know each other too well. He does not mention Reema. Neither do I. On TV the host is asking a husband if he's ever let his wife pick up the tab when they were dating. He says, No, but he wouldn't have minded it once in a while. The audience bursts into laughter.

"It's really unfair for guys to have to pay all the time," I say.

"It's custom," Sully says. "Back home, women are not expected to pay even if they can pay."

"And what if the guy can't pay?"

"Loser."

"That's harsh."

Sully flinches and gives a grim smile. "There's winners. There's losers. That's life, baby. Life is unfair."

"Life's a bitch." My eyes fill up. "I don't want life to be a bitch."

Sully scoots over to me and takes my hand. I lay my head on his shoulder and he strokes my hair. I shut my eyes. When I open them next, Sully is curled up on the couch, his head in my lap. I rise gently and drag the quilt off the bed and put it over him. I turn off the lights and, in the sliver of moon from the window, he looks truly angelic. I leave his room and enter mine.

We breakfast on burgers at the diner because Sully says it might be the rule but it is not the law in America that breakfast has to be cereal or eggs. I'm up for adventure so, okay, I order a burger, but also coffee and pancakes. I go to the pay phone to make a quick phone call to Dad to let him know I'm still alive. I call Erin and tell her that Sully is *the one*. She sighs and reminds me that in *Not Without My Daughter* Sally Field's character also fell for a Middle Eastern *the one* and if I could please remember the kidnapping, etc...that followed. He's not Middle Eastern, I say, he's South Asian. She says, same difference, and I tell her that that's like saying the crazy white husband from *Sleeping with the Enemy* is every white guy. She tells me not to be dumb. *You* don't be dumb, I say. Old friends can be a problem, I think as I hang up.

When the check comes, I grab it and say it's on me. Sully tries to argue about why he cannot let that be. Suddenly I'm begging to be allowed to pay "Please, please," and he frowns as he gives me permission, adding benevolently, that he's only going to indulge me this one time. As I begin to calculate the exact tip, Sully takes out a wad of dollars and plonks them on the table.

"Tip is on me," he says.

"But that's way too much," I say.

"I can afford it."

"That's not the point."

"It is for me. These people work hard. A few extra dollars won't kill me."

My heart swells until I can barely contain it. I want to lean over and kiss him to death. But I'm shy, and then there's the small matter of the ring on his finger. As we leave the diner for the parking lot, Sully adds,

"And also I might be the only brown person the waitress ever waits on, and so I must leave a good impression. He shrugs as he holds the car door open for me. "We are nothing if not mini-cultural ambassadors 24/7."

I climb into the passenger seat, my heart deflating a little at this premeditated national narrative-building.

Sully gets into the car behind the wheel. I twine my hands around the headrest, yawn and stretch. He whistles, looking at my straining shirt and denim skirt riding up over the tan lines on my thighs.

"Hey," I say, whacking him on his upper arm. "What would Reema say!"

"That I'm engaged to her but not blind. Anyway what she doesn't know won't hurt her. Ignorance is bliss."

I whack him again, allowing my fingers to caress his forearm for a moment too long, and think that what he's saying is right: Ms. Reema won't know. Ignorance *is* bliss. Immediately I feel sick. Mom was ignorant the whole time about Dad's newfound bliss. I clasp my hands in my lap.

Sully switches Vital Signs on again.

"Hey," I say as a song comes on, "Is that 'Red Red Wine'? My parents loved the UB40 song and this tune is identical."

"Homage."

"Is that authentic?" I tease him.

"Isn't every homage authentic?" He winks back.

I start belting out the original song until this one is drowned out. I'm swaying from side to side. I look heavenwards and know that if Mom is looking down at me, she's happy. A car passes by and honks at us. The family inside waves to me. I wave back as if waving is going out of style. I'm feeling happy. Restless, but happy.

"Have you always been so uninhibited?" Sully's voice is pinched.

"Have you always had a stick up your ass?" I ask.

Sully flushes. "I was giving you a compliment."

"It didn't sound like one." After I second, I said, "So Reema would not sing out loud?"

"Reema is so demure I'm going to ravish her behind and she won't know why the hell she's not getting pregnant."

"Sully!" I punch his arm. "That is *so* rude."

But he's laughing, and I laugh too because, of course, he's joking, joking about demure being so important, and behinds, and all the American girls, two a week if possible, he's going to have sunny side up. But between the laughter there's a savageness that speaks of a fiancée being blind and deaf because what she can't see or isn't told never happened.

"You're not very demure," I say, "are you?"

"I'm a man." He grunts like a caveman.

We're still laughing when we enter Utah. Still laughing when flatlands turn greener and greener and the bushes turn into trees, laughing when we stop at a gas station to use the unisex restroom, separately, the seat piss-splattered, despite a urinal, and stinking. Laughing as he buys turkey-cheddar sandwiches for us, laughing, coming out to the car surrounded by seagulls, five, ten, fifteen large creatures pecking the tarmac, the others swooping so close they could land on my hair. Shrieking I rush into the car, glad the windows are up, and, for a second imagine myself a damsel in distress and Sully a gallant prince.

"See," Sully says through the crack in the window, "you are demure after all, just like a girl should be."

"Oh fuck you," I say. "I just happened to have watched this film called *The Birds* at an age I should not have watched it."

"That was a horror film. This is life and they just want to be fed."

He walks amidst them boldly. I think of Mom lying in that hospital bed on linen we'd brought her from home, a fusion of who she once was and who she had become in

sickness and in health and, before I surrender to a full-blown panic attack, I open the car door and walk tall among the birds.

Sully grabs me and twirls me round and round and round and the gulls flap faster and faster. I start to croon the Tori Amos song and, when he joins me, I caress his lips. I hadn't planned to. Or maybe I had. He does not push me away. His lips stay against my fingers. The gulls begin to take flight, a great flutter as if they are late to another party. We break free. But I can feel the press of his lips and I know that he can feel the press of my fingertips and I know something unspoken has been understood.

We laugh and get back into the car and we laugh some more. We are still laughing when we get to Salt Lake City. Laughing as we drive on sprawling spider leg flyovers and guess which exit to take. Laughing when we take a wrong one, and laughing when we take the right one and get to Holiday Inn.

We park, enter the lobby. There are rooms available. Sully asks for one room, and we laugh. We are giddy over nothing in particular and everything in general, over demure and bold and everything in between, but when we get to the room the curtains are drawn and the bed beckons. For a second, I feel bad for a fiancée waiting for orange chiffon cakes to rise, and then decide that she's not my problem, she's his, and that I can take her place and, because I won't be busy baking, will make sure no one takes mine. We find ourselves naked, on the bed, in it, off it, back on, and now he's on, I'm off, my knees pinned against the rough carpet and when I look up for a moment, in the mirror adjacent to us, I see Sully's head cradled in his hands, eyes shut, mouth pursed, and I finish it off, *swallow, swallow*, he orders, and so I do, and then come up and say,

"My turn,"

and sit up, brusquely, when he says,

"No, no, I can't do that."

And he doesn't. He gags at the thought of it.

"I know it's not fair," he says. "I know and I'm sorry. It's just so...unclean."

"Then why did you let me? You told me to swallow."

He looks at me as if that was my choice, which it was, I suppose, but then I'd thought he was going to reciprocate like every other guy I'd been with. Sully looks at me as if that's what I get for being uninhibited, for not being demure, or maybe I'm reading too much into this thick shame that is welling up in my throat.

"I didn't think you'd expect me to reciprocate," he says.

"Why would you think that?"

"No one else ever has ever expected me to," he says.

"Well you lucked out, then. What if your wife expects you to?"

"She won't."

"You don't know that for sure."

"She won't," he repeats, "but if she does, and I have to, well, then I will."

I stare at him.

"I'm really sorry."

His angel face looks genuinely apologetic. So he's never gone down before. Not a crime. And there's time to change that. I start to laugh.

"Don't laugh at me," he snaps.

"I'm not laughing *at you!*" I lean over to kiss him.

He rears back. "Umm...can you wash your mouth first?"

The shame I'd thought was gone comes back in a great spurt. I can understand that he might be hesitant about oral sex, but kissing me? I feel so dirty.

"You might not have commanded me to give you a blow job—"

He flinches.

"—but you *did* tell me to swallow. It's you in my mouth, asshole, and now you can't kiss me."

When I leave to get a different room, he doesn't follow.

The next morning, we drive out of Utah with the radio on at the first audible frequency. The DJ is announcing a contest to win free Bette Midler concert tickets. It's my day to drive and I drive upon a straight highway with a lake on both sides, which increasingly becomes whiter and whiter until finally the lakes are nothing but vast stretches of salt, which I'd swear was snow if I didn't know better.

"I am really sorry," Sully says. His arms are crossed, his hands tucked into his armpits. He looks tired. As if he hasn't slept. "What can I do to make up?"

I don't answer him. I've never felt so *used* before but I'm not sure why I'm feeling this way. The radio station is coming on garbled. I turn it off. Sully turns on his tape. "Red Red Wine" spills throughout the car. Today it's not sounding so hot. Today the band does not sound like the epitome of fusion, but like copy cats. My chest begins to hurt. What am I going to do in San Fran? What sort of an idiot was I to have packed up with no planning? Why had I thought I had the goods to make Sully fall in *like* with me? When the hell had like become more important than love? Was I insane? Was I just a crazy American?

I switch off Vital Signs, eject the cassette, and toss it into the back seat.

Sully sighs.

I want silence. I want peace. I want my Mom.

When we get to Reno I ask for separate rooms but it is Sully who shakes his head, says "Just wait" and as soon as we enter the suite in La Quinta Inn, tumbles me onto the queen-size bed.

"Are you sure?" His ferocity alarms me. "Are you sure?"

Without an answer he dives down; he's clueless. Twice he gags, but before I can say anything he takes a deep breath and is back to jabbing away. I'm getting a bit sore. I wonder if helping him out would be the complete opposite of demure. His fingers uselessly clutch the beige bedspread on either side of me.

I grimace and wait, because of course he'll get better. He's a novice and there is no such thing as a natural. But for now I fake and do a great job because he comes up beaming, gasping for air, and I lean over to kiss him, to let him know I appreciate what he's done. He shoves me aside and hurtles into the bathroom and I can hear him gargle. He gargles for a while.

When he comes out, we share a cigarette. I keep smiling and he keeps saying "What? What?" and not looking me in the eye. After the smoke, I spread him out on the bed. I'm sitting on top of him, stretching, triumphant, my fingers locked, arms thrown back, proud, arching my lower back, breasts and belly button- one smart, continuous treble clef.

"I thought you were only going to do that with your wife," I say.

He says, quite matter of fact, "I was practicing."

I lower my arms, slide off him, try to still my trembling. It stings—*practice*. It stings. I. Am. A. Cheap. Trashy. Whore. For. Someone. Who. Will. Marry. A. Virgin. And. Do. Her. Backside. Until. He. Decides. To. Flip. Her. Over.

"Hey," Sully says, sitting up on one elbow, "what's wrong? I was just kidding."

I bury my head in my knees.

"Wasn't I any good?" Sully says. "Is that it?"

I look up. It comes out, moments later, because I can't keep it in, no matter how humiliating. "I didn't like being *practiced* upon."

"I told you I was kidding."

"*You* were playing mind games. *You* were being a jerk."

Sully stares at me. He lights a cigarette and smokes it silently. When he's done, he sticks the butt in a Dr. Pepper can. The room smells of wet smoke, a maggot-infested carcass slowly burning.



"You were playing mind games, Michelle, when you taunted me about only doing it with my wife."

Now I stare at him.

"We're supposed to be having fun, right?" Sully waves at the motel room. In the dim lamp light his fingers look like old, discolored wooden chopsticks. "This is hardly love."

"Believe me," I say, my heart constricting, "I would not fall in love with you even if you paid me. I might be just a practice session for you, and Orange Chiffon the real deal, but you don't have to tell me that. You don't have to call a fuck a fuck."

"It's not just...a fuck...We're friends."

Friends. I wish he'd said that I was the real deal and that Orange Chiffon would have to go. I wish he wasn't so handsome. I wish he'd stop smiling like that. I wish I didn't feel trapped between languages that I could understand one minute but were undecipherable the next. Like. Love. Weren't they supposed to be the same thing? Mom would have translated for me. Mom would have picked the alphabets apart. Mom would have restored a word order that made sense.

In Reno and not going to a casino. I feign sleep while Sully gets ready for a night on the town and leaves. I go to the in-room phone to call Dad. There's a small black address book lying face down by the phone. I turn it around. It is open to R. An international area code followed by her number. What sort of a man does not remember his fiancée's telephone number by heart? When did he call her? While I was taking a shower? What did he say to her? I wonder what language they'd spoken in. English. The language they took for their own, although if they were going to malign colonists shouldn't the language have been the first thing gone? Hypocrites. I rip out the page. I decide not to call Dad. I talk to God. I talk to Mom for much longer. For the first time, I'm relieved she's gone so she will never know how disappointed I am in myself.

I despise Sully for making me glad that she's gone.

I want to get a separate room—this room doesn't even have a couch— but there is a Bette Midler concert going on and, apparently, we are lucky to get any room at all.

When Sully comes back from his night on the town, I am watching a *Beverly Hills 90210* rerun. He crawls in next to me and when his fingers creep up my knee I stiffen, swat them away, and turn my back to him. What does he know about me: that I like

cheese dip with ruffled potato chips, that I only drink Dr. Pepper, that my mother is dead, that my father had an affair. What do I know about him: nothing I care to recall.

Sully's voice cuts through my thoughts. "Do you mind if I change the channel?"

I don't answer. After a second, he flips through channels, finally settling on Leno. I hear Leno taking digs at Kevin Eubanks, mocking Donald Trump, and then making a fool out of a couple in the audience on account of them dressed in identical overalls, T-shirts, and hats. Sully's tickled. The bed's shaking. He's laughing like his life depends on it. He's laughing and I wish we'd respect ourselves, us Americans—all of us and each other—and quit thinking that pointing out our mistakes is healthy and will endear us to the world, because here is this man come for an American education and planning to stay for an American job and making room in his plans to fuck an American girl or two per week, but first confuse her about demure or not demure, confuse this naïve American who thinks she's bold and brave and going about the world on her own terms.

When I leave, he's in deep sleep, his eyelids jerking in the way that used to scare the life out of me when I was a kid. I leave between the middle of the night and the early morning. I wonder what he'll think with me gone, my car gone, and I hope he knows that this is me screwing him up his butt. I leave the check for the room to him. He'll appreciate that.

I returned to Denver. Dad couldn't get out of me what had happened, and neither could Nancy. When I told Erin, I could see she was longing to say "I told you so" but she settled for reminding me that she knew he wasn't *the one*. After a month of feeling like misery, I returned to college and to my life pre-Mom as best I could. Those two days I'd spent with Sully seemed unreal at times but at other times, when I saw an angel-face around campus, or passed by an international student with a similar clipped English accent, those two days would become all too real. I thought about him often, those first few days, weeks, months, and it kept coming down to "practice, practice, practice".

I called Reema one day. I surprised myself. Just fished out the scrap of paper from my bag and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Is this Reema?"

"Speaking."

Her voice was nothing special.

"Who is this?" she asked.

Who was I?

"This is the girl that...umm, look I just wanted to tell you, one woman to another, that your fiancé, Sully, Soolaimon, he's...he's cheating on you."

There's a sharp intake of breath.

"Who is this? How do you know this? Why are you calling me?"

"We drove to California together. We had sex."

I felt like shit but also relieved to have done the right thing.

"Why are you calling me?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

"You had sex with Sully. So what? That's what men do with girls they are not going to marry. Girls they marry, they respect too much to treat this way."

In her elite accent she sounded as if she was an expert on BBC, explaining some universal truth that had escaped me, or perhaps she was reminding herself.

"I expected as much when he left for America. But, once we are married, the leash is no longer loose and it will be a different story. And, listen, don't dare call me again, bitch."

Then she hung up on me. *Bitch*. I hung my head in shame.

I tore up the paper with her phone number lest temptation to get the last word, the last hang-up, proved too much. There was only so much humiliation I could take. *Practice Respect Bitch* began to go hand-in-hand. Both man and woman had left me tongue tied. I should never have called her. I did not tell Erin. I knew what she would say. She would say I'd been trying to be a bitch and Reema had out-bitched me. She would say I was a cheater, in my own right. She would also say it was a bad episode but not the end of the world.

I told the therapist I was seeing that it was more than the end of the world. It was as if I was trapped in a never-ending conversation I hadn't known I was having, in a language I could not speak. I began to frequent ethnic restaurants, engaging with the wait staff in order to hear non-English speakers speak English the way, according to me, they should: halting and with risible accents. I would always leave a massive tip so they would know exactly how benevolent an American could be. It took me forever before I could listen to Tori again. I chose not to sing along. I asked the therapist to decode what world Reema was living in and what world I was living in and whether I was the bitch or

she was the bitch. The therapist told me to push these matters into a cabinet, right into a corner at the back, and move forward, onward, to let go.

I tried.

One day, as I was browsing through a new stock of journals at the bookstore, I came across an anthology someone had discarded atop the leather-covered red journals. *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*. I turned the book around and spoke the contributors' names to myself, not caring if I bungled them. There was no one to reprimand me. To correct me. To laugh at me. To frown at me. I could pronounce them as I pleased in whichever accent I pleased. And I did:

Alvarez. Codrescu. Cofer. Danticat. Duarte.

Ho. Jin. Lam. Lim.

Manrique. Mukherjee.

Ortiz. Palkeel. Rachlin. Uchido. Upadhyay.

I bought the book. I read it slowly over the next many weeks, a sentence here, a paragraph there, coming to the end of one story, beginning the next, reading again and again the notes the writers had written about their relationship with the English language, how they learned it, why they learned, why it was a good and valid language to know.

I felt as if Mom had somehow guided this book to end up in the wrong place in the bookstore just so that I would find it. Mom had translated for me. She had picked the alphabets apart. In restoring a word order that made sense, my mother was trying to restore me to myself.

I reread *Memoirs of a Geisha*, pushing through, not letting any memory mar the pages, and slowly, slowly, the bruise of *practice respect bitch* began to fade like all insults, hurts, wounds do— slowly, slowly, slowly.

I started to read foreign voices, foreign stories, until I started to lose interest in them because they began to sound, simply, like humans stuck in the same old bullshit merely in another place. Alvarez to Upadhyay. So ordinary.

By the time I graduated and began working in dental insurance and, two years later, met Daniel, a dentist, Sully was barely a story I cared to tell anyone. Except that I did tell Daniel, and afterwards he told me how he was going to kick the shit out of the road trip asshole if he ever got his hands on him. Mom would have liked Daniel. He was angel-faced enough, and gave me hugs that I sank into. He thought I was pretty beautiful too and he was forever telling me, in his corn-fed accent, that he loved me.

Daniel and I married one autumn day. Once our twin daughters came along, a couple of years later, we decided that we were the sort of parents who wanted one parent to be at home. Daniel's dental practice took off. Ten years later, I was a full-time mom who shopped at farmers' markets, lunched at the club, and indulged our Dalmatian, Bundt, with long hikes in hilly parks. I do write, yes, I contribute regularly to our community newsletter, usually about the benefits of keeping a journal, and I had a story about a lost dog published in the *Four Walls*, a journal that sent me one complimentary copy. And then there was my writing group. I was the member of a close-knit writers' group, and we'd been meeting at *Tattered Cover* book-store every Sunday evening for the past ten years.

This Sunday night, after workshop was over, we lingered over our goodbyes until, finally, one of us broke free and headed toward the doors. I was on my way out of the giant independent bookstore when I saw the poster. There was no trick of the light upon the eye. I recognized him. And—how could I have missed it—his novel was stacked in a tower as tall as me. I stared at it. It was like going on a perfectly normal journey, only to run over an animal going on its way, too, and then leaving it there.

It took me a while, but finally I snatched up a copy. The title: *Crazy*. The cover: night time, a motel, a car with a trailer. A very important author had blurbed that Sully's novel was the "most important debut of the year."

The most important debut of the year was about a female foreign student from Pakistan and a white guy, their chance meeting that leads to a cross-country trip, and love—or something like it—and hate too, definitely hate.

My chest constricted. My novel was about a guy who leaves a girl asleep and car-less in a motel after she inadvertently says something terribly offensive to him, but here was my book, my idea, *my life* stolen right from under me, and I was still incomplete and he was all done.

When I returned home, the twins were in their pajamas and, though they should have been in bed, they were still watching TV with Daniel's arms around them. I yelled at the girls. I yelled at Daniel. I would have yelled anyway at this laxity of bedtime rules, Sully's novel or no Sully's novel. Once the girls had escaped upstairs and banged their door shut, Daniel turned to me with a concerned look.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Another bad workshop?"

For years now, I had been trying to get started on a memoir about my mother but I just couldn't find a way in. Every time I thought I had something it would end up being about Dad, about men who loved you and then betrayed you, about my own

betrayal of my father, I guess; I would try to find my mother in there and, when I couldn't, I would tear up the words.

"No," I said to Daniel. "It wasn't a bad workshop. It was a nothing workshop."

I accepted the glass of wine Daniel handed me as we snuggled on the oversized couch to watch *ER*. Then there was always sex on Sunday night to keep ignited the eternal flame as well as combat Monday blues. This Sunday night, though, I was not the wonder woman I usually was in bed and, after faking, I stared up at the ceiling while Daniel snored away. The fact was nothing had made me feel guiltier than the fact that I'd told Sully that I hated Dad. I felt that in confessing to Sully I had somehow betrayed Dad, because the fact also was that I had not hated my Dad at all. I had been angry and disappointed, and anger and disappointment are not hate. There Sully had been loving his father no matter how much sex the man had, while there I'd been maligning my father when all he'd wanted was a person to hold because Mom had held him so well. I imagined Sully's reading the next evening. At the podium. The audience filling row upon row of foldable chairs. The congratulations. The clapping. I jumped out of bed. I was not going to let his life derail my life.

Mom, I called out, help me. Daniel turned in his sleep and hugged me.

It took me a while to decide what to wear. Daniel was not thrilled about me going out two nights in a row but I told him this was important. This was the guy I'd gone on that road trip with fifteen years ago.

"*Road trip asshole?*" Daniel said.

I nodded.

"I'm coming too."

I said yes, then no, then yes, and then finally settled on no. I wanted to face this alone. Daniel kissed me and held me close and told me to take my time with whatever it was I needed to do. I left home knowing that pizza was going to be ordered yet again and that the twins would not keep their bedtime and that I'd return to find Daniel and the girls dozing in front of the TV. It didn't matter. Sometimes predictable was good. Sometimes predictable was preferable. Sometimes, predictable was another word for happy.

When I got to the *Tattered Cover*, I loitered in the car, pretending to fix my lipstick. Last time I ran away from Sully, and eventually, from life as I'd envisioned it, I'd turned into a runaway truck up a dead-end ramp, at an incomplete stop. But the past cannot be tucked into a cabinet behind the files of one's present. A snide remark, a

betrayal, a mistake, an unrequited love, an insult: these are the one-night stands that can determine the future of the rest of our nights.

I reached for his novel. He had dedicated it to his mother: *To my late mother, who always put my well-being before hers*. I turn to the bio. He had been to Bread Loaf. He had studied with hotshots. He had won grants and fellowships. I had applied to all these and been turned down. The last line said that he lived with his wife, the acclaimed poet Rebecca Adelgren, and their two sons in Lahore Pakistan. I blinked. Rebecca. No matter which accent I employed, I could not translate-interpret-transcribe-twist-or-turn Reema into Rebecca or Rebecca into Reema. I flipped to the acknowledgments: Rebecca Adelgren. Their sons' names were Adam and Harris. Then I saw the next sentence, as if it were seeking out my eyes: *To hotel rooms and crazy Americans*.

For a moment I returned to the suffocating expanse of a car, to sun streaming in through the windows, to flatlands, to music keeping us busy, even as Sully tells me about the real cost of his green card. I return to a glass of water, to being twirled round in a storm of gulls, to having my handheld, to a guarantee that it was just a matter of time and I would survive my mother's death. And then I was hurt. I was humiliated. I had thought we were equals. But I saw now that it was not race but an even older division that had come between us: man-woman.

I stood at the back of the bookstore, half hidden in the crowd of people come to hear his talk. I had not seen him for the last fifteen years and, the last time I had, I'd fled. He had stolen my story. There was that. But that wasn't the only theft. I'd stolen from him too. It was his story too. Our story. His. Mine. I looked at him closely and I saw that the man whose angel-faced beauty had devastated me more than a decade ago was now just a short, skinny, half-balding guy. He was not the devil. There was nothing to be scared of. I straightened my shoulders. I took a breath. I took a deep, deep breath. -- When Sully began to read, I shut my eyes and concentrated on his accent. Ordinary, really, and extraordinary, the descendants of two nations on a journey to the same destination, the place between like and love. The see-saw of like and love: the beginning of my memoir came to me then. Dad was there, so was Mom, and there I was balancing, going up and down, up and down, my parents hanging onto to me from either side.

## **RSI**

You've spent your life dodging them –

the noose  
the gun  
the needle

– hiding them in family trees.

You've told yourself  
that your blood is missing  
that DNA and make crazy  
jokes but really it's a sham  
produced to play (VOLUME 10)  
when your moth gets too close to the family flame, when the doubts and self-  
recriminations untangle themselves from their twin helices, climb down the ladder and  
sit themselves on your chest so the only thing you're able to do is shuffle the deck until  
your cuticles bleed, listen to the riff of card on card, watch the water burning, minerals  
in thin flakes lining the bottom of the dry pot, popping like jumping beans as they peel  
themselves from the scorch of sulphurous gas, until your friends start showing up on  
your doorstep and refuse to leave, handing you a bottle of beer and two sandwiches  
when you finally answer the door because neither you nor the dog have eaten in two  
days.

They tell you you're not crazy,  
that everyone gets laid out by stress  
once in awhile, that you are smart  
and funny and generous  
and all you really need is a little  
self-confidence and an off  
button for those voices on loop  
telling you that you aren't enough –  
and you start to believe.



You soak the teapot in vinegar.  
Take the dog for a walk

because even he's been depressed.  
You breathe fresh air, eat live foods like carrots  
and peaches and parsley and watch the sun set  
and the moon rise and breathe more and laugh  
and open the windows to let everything in.

## And I say to you DON'T

*for the Charleston Nine*

Don't let your father's voice  
some 30 years quiet  
shout down those who grieve today

The noose is no different than the .45

"Savages" all the time raping?

NO

It is not thus  
It has never been thus  
only US as

the real savages (U.S.) fly  
their beloved southern cross over state buildings –  
foxes in the hen houses  
gekking at their prey

*I can't* you say

*I would*

*but I cant*

(don't you mean you won't?)

*bear the cross for my brothers and sisters*

It pains me that I don't lay down  
my lily white hide for

Clementa

Sharonda

Myra

Tywanza

Ethel

Cynthia

Daniel

DePayne

and  
Suzie

I do not fear their god,  
take their savior as my own

but I would give my breath for theirs,  
look hard into eyes clouded  
with the hate of a dozen generations  
and say  
*take me instead*

## Drop Your Head, Friend

Or the refs will flag you. Drop your head, or the collision will get you hurt, and if you are hurt, you will not be drafted, and if you are not drafted, you will not get paid, friend.

Play with enthusiasm. Throw yourself into this game with passion and intensity. Prove yourself. Make us proud. Earn the name of the school on your chest. Earn the education we are gifting you. Less than optimal effort is not acceptable, and you should know this by now. You are a man, and you should behave accordingly.

Do not take that car or that laptop or that money that is being offered, friend. You are a student, and you should take pride in being the best of the best at this amateur level. Can't you see that these benefits hurt you more than they help? Can't you see why they are so very unethical? You *chose* to be an amateur, friend.

Ignore the opposing fans on social media, friend. Yes, we know the names they call you, but you must know that if you respond you are only validating what they say. Only a *thug* talks trash to a fan on Twitter. Only a no good *thug* would dare to respond to people who are just passionate about their teams, and you are not a *thug*, friend, so long as you follow this rule.

We understand that your mother is ill. This is a shame, friend, so if you choose to transfer closer to home we will only make you sit out a single year. After that time, when you find yourself on the field at your new school, you must show intensity and focus, because the fans will be suspicious of you now. They will fear that you are a quitter, and so you must be doubly dedicated to your new school. Tell our cameras how happy you are to be here, how happy you are to have a second chance.

Follow these rules and you will be a pillar upholding our fine sport. You will find yourself on television. Children wearing your jersey will bring you balls to sign, and you will sign them unless of course you are offered compensation for signing your own name on this merchandise, in which case you will not sign them, you will decline. Please decline with a smile. If you smile wide enough, friend, we will do you the favor of using your face in our advertisements.

Give us all the receipts, friend. We are so very disappointed that you kept that loaner car longer than you should have. As a result, you have compromised your eligibility. This is a shame, that you have chosen to be so callous and unethical, but we

will forgive you if you cooperate and provide all the paperwork we require and then sit the designated games until you are properly chastened. We would not want your draft grade to be hurt, would we?

We are the gatekeepers, friend, and we are so very hungry. Give us everything. We will widen our jaws to fit each morsel, and in return, we will give you your future. In return, we will give you the life that you have carved for yourself. But first, friend, there is still some meat on this bone.

## Beliefs

For the longest I've believed any man  
I meet will want to hurt me eventually.  
I remember walking into this office,  
lights off, with more than enough daylight  
to see the red paisley rug at the center,  
under the brown high back executive chair  
catty cornered by the bookcase.

I remember wanting  
to believe something else.  
He was an academic. I'd heard  
from everyone who studied under him  
the brilliant therapist he'd make,  
and better for me to work up to the real thing.

I sat, talking around the incident  
that provoked my suspicion,  
though never disclosing it  
while he stared and listened, the details  
hollowing out his eyes. He never moved  
his feet, even as the fit of his suit  
pulled harder around him  
as if his body underneath was changing.

I could see the clenching of his hand  
on the arm of his chair.  
He kept silent, less opening his mouth  
to ask information I wasn't offering,  
and I think I knew at that point  
what I'd given was exciting to him.

Maybe it would've paid to stay,  
to learn what about the encounter, as an adult,  
would make it different, able to see  
each button of his shirt unfastening,  
the belt undone, the buckle fallen next to his pants,

and the bulge bust open, the appendage stiff  
after unraveling, the rest of him sitting pink  
and white, a landscape for an early yield of wheat  
stalked across his entire body.

## First Kiss

He was training me to be revolutionary.  
We spent late nights watching Al Jazeera  
and eating hummus, me learning from him  
what news without bias watched like,

and an appreciation for chickpeas mashed down  
to a paste. We were like brothers. We  
did the things TV brothers did, things  
I'd never done, striking out in the night,

getting high in shadows outside cones  
of orange light from streetlamps, daytrips to Wal-Mart.  
He was the only person I'd known who could see a path  
stretched straight out in front of him,

and I would've gone blindly even knowing I didn't believe.  
*You and I could never date*, he said. That was a given.  
He had a girlfriend I thought was good for him and it would never  
otherwise be something I wanted. He'd said that in response

to some of the things I did. What a strange complaint,  
I thought, the kind brothers would never make.  
He was always saying he was an atheist,  
that the cure for AIDS would have to uproot itself

from African soil in a syringe for him to believe,  
and I didn't know then why that would be so important  
to one whose beliefs required no faith.  
We were at lunch one day talking about statistics

and world religions. He told me that of the world's many,  
there was a good chance my faith was misplaced,  
that he'd laugh after all to see me in a hell  
with him. I think he must've been scared.



I was able to avoid him for years after that until my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday. I was drunk when I ran into him. I somehow admitted I was happy to see him all over again, regardless. He took my hand and kissed it.

He pulled me in, cupped my face, and I watched his face come through night, the alcohol, and the next morning on the heels of every step of my long walk home before settling on my lips. That first kiss was one I thought I'd keep,

it was important I reserve one thing to be intimate, but trading it in made it all make sense. He'd asked me once if I ever considered dating men. He didn't know how close he was to hearing the story, how I never really consider

dating anyone, let alone with any kind of preference. I would've told him I might've called that man a dad or a friend at an age when I hadn't yet or just learned how to spell them. If I could share that story with anyone.

## **Sonnet of Questions**

Do you remember those conversations  
in grade school? The ones about sex?

Between cigarettes in the bathroom, by the lockers,  
under the pullout bleachers in the gym?

Was everyone asked that question?  
Why did it really matter back then?

Do you remember what you said?  
Was it a simple answer?

Do you remember the stakes?  
How big of a slut? How much of a man?

How far did he  
need to go? How long?

What did I do to make it the first time?  
And was I four or five?

## **Prayer**

Our Mother Father God  
Do not forgive them this time  
For they know what they do.  
They have done it before  
Before the Christian Era  
Even unto now in this century  
New but filled with pain  
From rugged crosses to poplar trees  
From nooses to blazing fires  
From Calvary to Charleston  
Do not forgive for we have not  
Been delivered from evil  
We have not been saved.  
And Yours is the Power  
To end crucifixions  
Or have you bequeathed  
The power to us?  
Amen.

## **Tocolytic: On Pregnancy, Premature Birth, and the Female Body**

In the hospital, they give me what one of the nurses calls “flu in a bag.”

The description fits. Magnesium sulfate, or mag, truly makes me feel awful. I’m seasick, and I can’t eat solid food, and my hospital room has no window, and my baby might be in danger.

They give me the mag to stop my 14-week-early contractions, which it does, but they can’t keep me on it for more than a couple of days. The side effects are too harrowing.

It’s okay, apparently, to force flu-like symptoms on a pregnant woman, as long as you don’t do it for too long.

Mag is not approved by the FDA to prevent premature birth. None of the medicines my doctors prescribe or hospital bed rest, which they put me on for good measure, is proven to prevent premature birth. Everything works a little, or maybe it’s all a big placebo effect. But nothing works for long, and after a night when I am wracked with pain, it turns out I have been contracting, and the baby is coming so soon my husband will not make it to the hospital around the Capital Beltway during the morning rush.

At 28 weeks pregnant, I have not yet attended birthing classes. (The class descriptions tell you not to sign up too soon, so you won’t forget what you learned.) During my labor, one of the nurses gets frustrated because I am freaking out—“Stop screaming and breathe!” she says—but another nurse takes over and tells me what to do.

Later I will think it was better my husband wasn’t with me. He would not want to see me that way—panicked, contorted, pain-wracked, a mess.

When he arrives in the delivery room—where I’ve been staying for several days because the doctors were afraid this would happen—the room is quiet and clean and I am lying calmly. The baby, who has no name because we haven’t decided on one yet, has been whisked away to the NICU.

This is the way it will be for two months, until he comes home. We have a baby. But we also don’t have a baby.

Even now, I hate pregnant women. When I was pregnant (there would be a second pregnancy and a second premature birth), I kind of sort of hated myself.

I see a pregnant woman's belly and I project on it an ease, an idyll that probably doesn't exist for anyone, anywhere. That pregnant lady has what it was hard for me to get and hard for me to keep. She has the ultimate female body and identity in the eyes of this society (many societies). Beautiful glowing, growing mother-to-be.

I want what I imagine she has, but I also reject it, the way my body, in a certain insensitive way of viewing things, rejected pregnancy.

I don't like to talk about pregnancy. What is there to talk about? I don't like to ask about due dates – I never got closer to mine than seven weeks. I don't want to hear about morning sickness, which may actually be a protective factor against miscarriage, a sign of a healthy pregnancy. I don't want to risk scaring anyone with my tales of mag and bed rest and emergency births and babies in incubators.

I don't want to hear a woman nearing her due date say she is just so "ready for this baby to be out of me."

I don't like to talk about what it took to get pregnant. Conception, when I add up the waiting for both pregnancies, was forty months of rejection. If I tell you that the first time, I finally got pregnant without intervention after three failed intrauterine inseminations, you may think how wonderful it was that I got pregnant "naturally." It will mean something about my husband and I, something positive, that we were able to conceive "on our own" after all our struggles.

If I tell you about the IUIs, the shots, the blood draws, the bazillion fertility clinic appointments, scheduled as early in the morning as possible so no one at work would notice, and I leave out the phone calls from nurses to tell us things had not worked out that month—you may think that things always turn out okay, thank God for modern medicine.

If I leave it all out, the whole saga, you may think I got pregnant just like that.

A gay male acquaintance once told me he and his partner wanted children. Whether through adoption or an egg donor, it was going to be hard, he implied. Whereas for straight people, he said, all it took was a bottle of wine and some candles.

People just don't know, I thought. "It's not easy for *everyone*," I said.

But it's supposed to be—that's what people think. They assume female bodies are made to get pregnant, made to breed. People talk about the moment or the night or place they conceived a child, the song they were making love to, as though conception were instantaneous, as though fertilization were not a process.

And if the female body fails to get pregnant easily—or fails to stay pregnant—the body's owner may feel shame. She may feel her body doesn't know its function in the world. She may envy every body that seems to function according to plan.

I believe, a little bit, in the evil eye, or rather in *'ayn al-hasud*—the eye of the envious. It can happen unintentionally. You look at somebody's possession: her beautiful house, her beautiful child, her pregnant belly. And you envy it. You covet it, and you forget to invoke God's name to ward off evil (the Islamic custom of saying *Ma sha' Allah*).

Through your envy, you take the thing away from her. The house is foreclosed. The child gets sick. The pregnancy fails.

When I was trying to get pregnant, I became kind of sort of convinced that maybe someone, unaware of what she was doing, put the eye on me and that was why I couldn't get pregnant.

About infertility and the possibility of never having a child, I felt dejected, pessimistic, isolated, devoid of hope, inconsolable. But I readily and without anger accepted the idea that I had been "cursed" by envy. I accepted it even though I knew it wasn't true. It was just easier to blame the eye than to blame my own body.

When I leave the hospital after my son's birth, he stays behind. My house seems empty: no bassinet in our room, no baby in the bassinet. No diaper changing and breastfeeding and rocking and comforting and bouncing till our knees ache. In our e-mail birth announcement, my husband and I leave out the sentence everyone always includes: "Mom and baby are home and doing fine."

At night, I wake up every three hours to pump breast milk and listen to the lonesome call of freight trains from several miles away.

In the NICU, my husband and I can only hold our son when the nurses let us. At first, he's so small and fragile he can only be held once a day, so we have to take turns holding him, trying not to tangle his tubes and wires.

I'm stressed out, eating chocolate instead of regular food. Seeing me eat a truffle, my sister-in-law tells me to avoid caffeine because I'm breastfeeding, and I am not pleased at the advice. People, even NICU nurses who should perhaps know better, comment on my appearance. "You don't look like you just had a baby," they say.

I am meant to take as a compliment the perception that my body is not the body of a mother.

We're expected to want an unmotherly body once pregnancy ends. To drop the baby weight, like Kim Kardashian or Halle Berry, to leave the mark of pregnancy behind once we have a baby in our arms to prove our motherhood.

But I don't have the baby in my arms. And I don't want the compliment.

One day, I see a woman in the produce section of my grocery store pushing a cart with an infant carrier in it. She is wearing baggy clothes and walking a little bit slowly; she is, I am sure, a very new mom with her newborn.

I think about following her. I want to know what it's like to be her. A mother recognized, acknowledged.

I will have to wait. It is not yet my time.

## Black Boy Speaks of Apologies

without apology you name me riot  
mumble about my ingratitude  
I have seen your helping hands  
the history they are capable of

you recoil from me like nightfall  
you grin like an exit wound  
you a smoldering bouquet of demands  
the "blood bellowing out"  
becomes an "avalanche of roses"  
something beautiful, dying  
and  
    still yours.

I seen this magic before  
my body an aching song  
that you hum without permission  
the boy becomes a memory  
I become the boy

Sorry: prefix to the body half-buried  
subconscious surrender  
demands a soft mouth  
a tongue starved thin with retreat  
makes my jaw the gate that betrayed the city

your guilt: a bright miracle  
I'm just a shadow stealing shape  
from where you are not  
unstitching a silence  
with music or a plea for mercy  
Your guilt: moon to my night sky  
demanding the center but I am vast  
without you



A question: what happens  
when the world knows you best  
as the soil they knock off their boots?

## And Then Grief Became the Winter

and February became a parade of tight  
throats and all the bottles went from  
brown to empty while the wind slaked  
its thirst for exposed skin until  
we just started figuring the sun was  
a myth because we'd seen so many  
rising and falling again  
that surely this was just another name  
we had not forgotten yet February was  
a broken mirror a mass of bodies  
the white noise of everywhere  
was fists in pockets and everything  
brown emptying suddenly  
I had too many hands debatably  
too many names and everywhere  
was slaking its thirst for exposed skin  
and the room had been emptying  
for as long as any of us could  
remember and I started playing  
at Prometheus kept smuggling  
different names with me all of them  
brown fit to slake my thirst or  
remind me what the sun tasted like

## Biracial Ghazal: Why Everything Ends in Blood

And what language exists with no word for blood?  
What gets across the legend as quickly as blood?

Where I am from there are no words for my shade  
Only nicknames approximations for the blood

*Blacktino Lanegro Halfbreed Mutt Progress  
dangerous failed garden bouquet of hunted blood*

I am a burden in every mouth my name is a minefield  
people forget what I am exactly but I end in blood

*Two tone sacrament Where the soil meets the sky  
but never the horizon child with the invisible blood*

Like a sunrise I am considered most beautiful when  
I am disappearing stitching a gown of my blood

*Child with too many tongues gone twice over  
aftermath a failed experiment of the blood*

People ask *what are you* and I have no house  
I bite my tongue into copper search my blood

For a key for a name that is not a translation for  
*Once there was a war here is what we did with the blood*

## And I Wasn't Planning To Live Very Long Anyway

But that's not new  
ask anybody  
and they'll tell you

It's nothing personal  
or even about desire  
but I'm only a body  
of water, barely enough

for a cloud at this rate  
I was not built for stay  
say my name and tell me  
you don't taste fog  
or something that fades

in the light like a memory  
yes I have dreams  
all day I sit and name  
every impossible thing  
after my own pulse  
I am fluent in lonely miracles

Nobody criticizes the river  
for racing toward where  
everything is its color  
everybody wants to go home  
If I know anything it's that

I mean look at me  
I'm only a guest  
in my own breath  
ask anyone in this country

And they'll tell you  
just how well  
the sky knows my name

## Freedom Vol. 2

The moon is a gaudy retreat  
the night ebbs into more night  
but none of that really matters

All I know is Beyoncé holds this note  
that clings to me so long  
it must think it is my mother  
and now I'm everything's son

My shadow looking all types of cocky  
I cast a swaggering body onto the pavement  
My Shadow stay looking  
at the ground like "Fight me"  
Say *I violent*

*I violet*

*I stain*

*all the glass*

I church of the bulletproof

Whatever you gotta holler  
to make your peace with  
how the light is sweeter  
for passing through me

I can't lose  
when I'm like this  
a song like a soft riot  
boasting through me  
my body rippling  
in front of me  
I make a good sky  
I'm a small thing  
as far as gods go

but look at my shadow  
and say I didn't put the moon to good use?

## We Gon' Be

We gon' be the light  
We gon' be loud  
We gon be what survived  
What outlasts the metal  
and watches our joy  
give body to the shadow

We make pretty shadows  
We make the light  
jealous of our good joy  
When we make the block loud  
Sear meat upon metal  
let the smoke sing that we survived

"And we survived"  
Best ending for a fable of shadows  
I placed the metal  
beneath my tongue once no light  
escapes when the grief is this loud  
I barely have a body who got room for Joy?

But still there was joy  
Still I have survived  
We laughed loud  
through the winter to keep off the shadows  
a veil blooming off the tongue into the light  
so the new fable is how we conquered the metal

We all have an uncle whose mouth adopted metal  
a gleaming jaw spilling with joy  
So we danced in the light

we became the stories that survived  
the cookout stretches into shadows  
The horizon no less loud

Think of the cousin who burns things and names them loud  
Think of the first metal  
to make you feel beautiful the first time you admire your shadow  
and name it mirror that is joy  
Think of what survived  
even now as it becomes the light

Put the needle on some music that survived  
let the metal sing a loud song for a body of shadows  
define joy as we stand exactly where the light wants to be.



## Wince: George & Trayvon

After George Zimmerman murdered Trayvon Martin, a friend asked what I wanted to see come from that case. *Wince* grew from that conversation. Later, I realized that I didn't just write for Trayvon, but for all the others – so many – executed by police and vigilantes. So this is for Sgt. Manuel Loggins Jr., Ramarley Graham, Noel Polanco, Kenneth Chamberlain, Alonzo Ashley, Kenneth Harding, Raheim Brown, Reginald Doucet, Derrick Jones, Danroy Henry, Aiyana Stanley-Jones (baby you were 7 and they killed you with a motherfucking grenade), Steven Eugene Washington, Aaron Campbell, Kiwane Carrington, Victor Steen, Shem Walker, Oscar Grant, Tarika Wilson, DeAunta Terrel Farrow, Kathryn Johnston, Sean Bell, Henry Glover, Ronald Madison, James Brisette, Timothy Stansbury, Alberta Spruill, Ousmane Zongo, Orlando Barlow, Timothy Thomas, Prince Jones, Ronald Beasley, Earl Murray, Patrick Dorsmond, Malcolm Ferguson, Amadou Diallo, Kendra James, Rodney King, Elanor Bumpers, Emmet Till, the 4000 lynching victims we know about and the thousands more whose lives mattered even if we don't know their names.

I want to see Trayvon Martin alive and well. I want to see Trayvon Martin do an interview on The Today Show and reveal this whole thing is a reality-TV-show hoax. I want to see Trayvon Martin cutting class and making B's and C's and getting the lecture about *applying himself* and the lecture about *setting goals* and the one about *potential* and the other one about *priorities*. I want to see Trayvon Martin blow off his parents because old people don't know anything. I want to see Trayvon Martin make cradle-robbing jokes about the girl he asks to the Krop Senior High School prom, maybe a girl like my daughter, just four months older than Trayvon but old enough to make jokes. I want to see Trayvon Martin show up at my door in a rented tux and a pencil mustache that just barely made it with the help of his mom's mascara brush. I want to see Trayvon Martin light up when he sees his dolled-up date—maybe not my daughter but maybe—appear in her dress. I want to see Trayvon Martin put a corsage on her arm, and watch her put a boutonniere in his lapel, knowing they only do the flower ceremony for the photos and they'll ditch the greenery as soon as they walk out the door. I want to see Trayvon Martin bringing my daughter home in the wee hours and want to see my own face in the mirror, resisting the urge to knock his lights out, but she's fine and he's fine and I've been up all night pacing the floors, afraid their car has landed in a ditch but afraid to call the cops because cops mistake black children for paper targets. I want to see Trayvon Martin recognize that I'm proud of him. I want to see Trayvon Martin fall a

little in love with his prom date and her fall a little in love with him, except 18-year-olds don't fall a little in love, they fall hard and fast and gloriously and *there will never be anyone like you* and *I'll never love anyone else* and *where were you* and *whose number is that* and *how could you* and the whole relationship over in six hot weeks. I want to see Trayvon Martin rematched with his prom date at the Class of 2013 reunion for before-and-after pictures and a second dance more awkward than the first. Except I can't see what I want to see. I'll have to settle for what's left.

I want to see Trayvon Martin completely ignore the 2012 elections since he can't vote until 2013. I want to see Trayvon Martin register for Selective Service. I want to see Trayvon Martin buy his first car. I want to see Trayvon Martin take the SAT and the ACT and fill out college applications. I want to see Trayvon Martin on the roster for my literature section. I want to see Trayvon Martin take off his headphones and stop texting in class. I want to see Trayvon Martin in my office so I can ask *What grade do you want in my class* and hear him say *I'll settle for a C but I want a B+ or an A* so I can say *Let's figure out what you need to do because you have potential, you have so much potential but you've probably heard that before*. I want to see Trayvon Martin get turned on by Zora Neale Hurston, by Ralph Ellison, by Kurt Vonnegut, by Emerson, Hughes, Eliot, O'Connor, Faulkner, by a Sonia Sanchez reading required because these kids may never have another chance to see Sonia Sanchez. I want to see Trayvon Martin paint his face in school colors. I want to see Trayvon Martin working out at the gym because he's still so skinny. I want to see Trayvon Martin pledge a fraternity and dance in a step show. I want to see Trayvon Martin get pissed off in class and speak his mind. I want to see Trayvon Martin major in engineering or music or psychology or whatever he wants, have a career, make money, buy a house, survive a health scare, switch jobs, retire, un-retire, but still have a soft spot for Sonia Sanchez. Except I can't see what I want to see. I'll have to settle for what's left.

I want to see Trayvon Martin at his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner tell the story about the Skittles for the millionth time. I want to see Trayvon Martin and his wife, probably not my daughter but who knows, who knows you know but there's potential there, I saw it on Prom Night. I want to see Mrs. Martin smile wistfully at Mr. Martin and see their kids roll their eyes. I want to see Trayvon Martin describe how a nutcase chased him when he was 17, how the dude shot at him but the bag of Skittles deflected the bullet harmlessly and before then he was kinda headed down the wrong path, hanging out with guys that never amounted to much, but he got a second chance at life and had to make the most of it so he ran all the way to his girlfriend's house and apologized and declared he would ask her to marry him after they both graduated from college. I want to see Trayvon Martin's grandkids videotape the story and post it online, because granddad Martin is the shiznit, for the video to go viral, for pundits to start arguing about the

physics of Skittles and claim this is all just a socialist hoax to take away our guns. I want to see Trayvon Martin buy stock in Mars, Inc. after they change the Skittles slogan from "Taste the Rainbow" to "Makes You Bulletproof." I want to see Trayvon Martin get his 15 minutes of fame as the old man marketing a line of hoodies with his face on the front and stylized Skittles on the back. Except I can't see what I want to see. I'll have to settle for what's left.

Not George Zimmerman's arrest. Not George Zimmerman's trial. Not Black Panther posers collecting a bounty, not wannabe Nazis patrolling the streets, not grainy footage of a jailhouse beatdown. Not a made-for-TV reenactment of a 140-pound boy approaching a man my size and shoving his head into the pavement, although that would be some cool ninja-ass shit. Not the pundits, protests, petitions, press conferences or presidential candidates. Not Spike Lee making an ass of himself on Twitter. Not congressmen getting kicked off the House floor. Not the resignation of the Sanford police chief and an investigation into witness tampering. Not an elegant essay comparing Trayvon Martin to Emmett Till on *The Huffington Post* and reposted on *TheGrio*. I want to see Trayvon Martin reflected in George Zimmerman. I want to see a sharp shard of that boy inescapably lodged in the eyes of his killer. I want to see George Zimmerman wince every time he blinks. I want to see the lens of George Zimmerman's soul permanently skewed towards what could have been. I want to see that sharp shard close up. I want to see Trayvon's last moment, when his short life flashed before George's eyes and revealed everything Trayvon ever meant to see and do and love. If I can find that small reflection of humanity in George Zimmerman, if anything of Trayvon landed in George, I will settle for what's left. Because I'll have to.

...and Romain Brisbon, Tamir Rice, Akai Gurley, Kajime Powell, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Michael Brown, John Crawford III, Tyree Woodson, Eric Garner, Victor White III, Yvette Smith, McKenzie Cochran, Jordan Baker, Andy Lopez, Miriam Carey, Jonathan Ferrell, Carlos Alcis, Larry Eugene Jackson, Jr., Deion Fludd, Kimani Gray, Johnnie Kamahi Warren, Malissa Williams, Timothy Russell, Reynaldo Cuevas, Chavis Carter, Shantel Davis, Sharmel Edwards, Tamon Robinson, Ervin Jefferson, Kendrick McDade, Rekia Boyd, Shereese Francis, Wendell Allen, Nehemiah Dillard, Dante Price, Raymond Allen, Barrington Williams, Kyam Livingston, Ernest Satterwhite, Dontre Hamilton, Levar Jones, Charly "Africa" Leundeu Keunang, Naeschylus Vizanant, Tony Robinson, Anthony Hill, Walter Scott, Tanisha Anderson, Shelly Frey, Darnisha Harris, Aleshia Thomas, Shantel Davis, I can't keep up, Jamar Clark, India Kager, Christian Taylor, Sam Dubose, Icarus Randolph, Freddie Gray, Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, College Hill Seventh Day Adventist Church, Briar Creek Baptist, God's Power Church of Christ, The Emmanuel Nine (Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, The Hon. Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons,

Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson), Sandra Bland, Sandra Bland, (say her name) Sandra Bland, and and every goddamn day and

## An Equation to Tell Your Mother Your Boyfriend is Black

(A Nonfiction excerpt)

1. If I dated (a black man)

Then that does not mean I only date (black men)

The rules of multiplication do not adhere to romantic relationships, past and present. It is the result of the events and experiences that determine whether or not the current relationship is lasting, whether or not it is the one. But my friends seem to think differently. One of my guy friends' asked me if the man I am dating has a big dick, if he was the eggplant to my fried rice. I asked my guy friend how big his eggplant was.

2. If I (lie)(and don't get caught)

Then my mother will not be hurt.

If I (lie)(and get caught)

Then perhaps she will remember that I don't lie all the time, and that the truth is an additive inverse. Perhaps this will cancel each other out and there would not be an effect.

3. I'm not sure where the racism comes from but she is not the only mother who cares that her Thai daughter is dating a Tanzanian man. To her and her friends who were born and bred in Thailand's high society, where ladies who lunch carry Hermés bags with their handles wrapped with matching scarves as to not ruin the leather, even a dark skinned Thai man is too lowly for them to marry. It doesn't matter what ethnicity the man is really, just the color of his skin.

4. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes says, "I must resemble whom I love... I want to be the other, I want the other to be me, as if we were united, enclosed within the same sack of skin." To my mother, my tamarind-colored limbs make me look like the maid's daughter. She asks me why I like to swim at noon, when the sun is at its brightest, and I tell her that the water is warmest then.

5. Dear Reader,  
You can see how my black boyfriend's skin needs to be thinned out to properly blend into the family portrait my mother would want to hang on her living room wall.
6. In 2015, I was still in graduate school studying to be a writer. Fritz was reading at the coffee shop I frequented. He bought me a mocha without whipped cream. We went to dinners at restaurants with French names I cannot pronounce and sometimes we held hands. Most of the time, we stayed in bed and talked about puppies on YouTube videos and potential drink combinations. I still have yet to try a Manhattan.
7. I wondered why I kept telling the same lies and expecting different results. "No, I don't have a boyfriend," I would say.
8. In Eileen Myles' *An American Poem*, she says, "I've spent the better half of my adult life trying to sweep my early years under the carpet and have a life that was just mine and independent of the historic fate of my family." I agreed with her: "Can you imagine what it was like to be one of them?"
9. Everyone has a (home face) and a (public face.)  
In a world where we are made out of shapes, I wonder where they meet,  
If my (home face) was square, and my (public face) was a circle,  
and my (home face) could fit into my (public face)  
the corners of the square would still scratch the circumference,  
no matter how wide the diameter of the circle became.  
The square would rattle inside it.
10. On my first date with Fritz, I learned that girls have said, "I've never dated a black guy like you before," and "You're so articulate!" and "You're too big for me," and "Do you really ride a motorcycle?" and "Do you like hip-hop?" and "Can you dance?"
11. I write so that my mother can one day read me. She's not dead, nor illiterate. We just happen to speak two different languages: Me, English. Her, Thai. Me, a

pomegranate tree. Her, Ceberus.

12. Sometimes I rattled against the circle that held me. Gold or not, she holds me.
13. This is her nightmare: Walking into a classroom staring at rows and rows of children with their heads bowed over books. They are writing. She stands by the door, her schoolbag empty, her shoes unpolished, and unable to remember the homework she's supposed to hand in. Her teacher, a stern faced man with grey hair, sends her back outside to stand on one leg with a ruler in her mouth.
14. My mother never finished high school.
15. My mother never finished high school but she can multiply without a calculator. She adds hundreds of checks to divvy out salaries to her employees. She adds the cost of hotels, the cost of flights, the cost of tours, and calculates our income from the margins. She adds two lies to make the truth.
16. My mother calculates my worth like this: Twenty-eight. Single. Clean, light skin, like the women featured in the Pond's Flawless White beauty facial foam commercial. The cleanser washes dirt and soot off your face, leaving you pure and white. "White men are better than Thai men," she would say. "White men would never cheat on you." I didn't know how to tell her that any man can cheat.
17. On our first date, Fritz asked me if I've ever dated another one like him before and I stuttered. I didn't want him to think that he was all I dated, and he looked curiously at me with his large black eyes, and no, I have not dated him – a gentleman – before.
18. I was twenty-seven when my last boyfriend came in me and stained the bed sheets under our bodies. I didn't know what else to do but push out what was left of him, small splats on the sheets, and wipe it off. He laughed and said, "You said I couldn't come in you but I did."
19. He was also black, but not a gentleman.

20. "Race is a sexual factor for many individuals even if you can't control who turns them on," said OKCupid's Christian Rudder, in *Dataclysm*.
21. Love is a factor for many individuals because you can't control whom you fall for.
22. The compulsion to date one that is not of your own kind is a sophisticated city-girl compulsion. That is what I tell my mother. "If you wanted me to date just Thai men, we should have stayed in Thailand," I said in one of our many disagreements. She turned red, her face hot like a clay mold.
23. Born and raised in Bangkok, my mother has never lived more than a thirty-mile radius from her mother's house.
24. The relationship between my mother and I is the only one I have with a parent. My father ran away with his younger mistress four years ago and my mother has been unable to love since. This is why she holds onto me so dearly, the little pomegranate she bore from the dead soil of her broken marriage.
25. My mother loves me more than what I can bring home to our table. She simply wants a man to take care of me, unlike my father. When I tell her about Fritz, the handsome Tanzanian product designer, she asks: "What kind of people are Tanzanians?"
26. Dear Mom, so what if he's black?  
We have been dating for one year and I want you to meet him.
27. In 2014, the OKCupid trends for dating revealed that:
1. Non-black men applied a penalty to black women
  2. Black men showed little racial preference either way
  3. All women preferred men of their own race
  4. Asian women think black men are 14% below the average
28. "People prefer dating someone of their own race," Christian Rudder wrote.



29. But I prefer masturbating to someone not of my own race.
30. "Behind the Green Door" (1972) was one of the first pornographic films to feature sex between a white actress and a black actor.
31. "I've met a handful of girls who thought their families would be more OK with finding out they did porn than finding out they did interracial porn. It's a hard concept to swallow in 2013," Aurora Snow, a porn star, says in an interview.
32. Even equations exist in porn.
33. Most common phrases in an interracial porn scene:
1. Fuck me with your big black cock
  2. Do you like my sweet white pussy?
  3. Stretch out my little tight pussy?
  4. Fuck me like an animal.
  5. Breed me.
34. I'm surprised there's even a variation to the requests.
35. These are some of the requests I make in bed: Fuck me now. Fuck me from behind. Fuck me hard. Never once do I allude to the color of the man, but perhaps I tell him how big his cock is so that it's still hard.
36. Jane Jacobs writes about the joy of living in cities in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." She argues that politics that separate parts of the city for its own "uses" (i.e. residential, industrial, commercial") destroy communities and innovative economies by creating isolated, unnatural urban spaces.
37. It creates sameness.

38. "But homogeneity or close similarity among uses, in real life, poses very puzzling esthetic problems," Jane Jacobs says.

39. I think we are cyborgs and underneath our skins, I wonder if we are made out of metal? Of molten gold that has to be contained by different colored containers of flesh?

40. My mother asked me if I was mentally ill for not wanting to date my own kind. "What is my own kind, Mom?" I asked. "Didn't you tell me that all Thai men were cheaters?"

41. There is (me) in (me)n.

42. A little bit of me gets sanded after every relationship, good or bad, Barthes says, "I keep myself from loving you."  
The square always forces itself inside the circle,  
as if the curved line offers some form of protection,  
some form of comfort,  
some form of place.

43. "Society will never accept your relationship," she said to me, after I asked her what she thought of if I hypothetically dated a black man.

44. She seems to draw the line between what is black and what is right.

45. How to convince my mother that Fritz was suitable for me:

1. His parents are still together.
2. He makes over 120,000 dollars a year.
3. He doesn't have children.
4. He doesn't have a wife or mistress.
5. He owns his own house and car.
6. He has two graduate degrees in Mechanical Engineering and Product Design.
7. He keeps his hair neat and tidy.

46. How Fritz convinced me he was suitable:
1. He gave me all the blankets when we slept together.
  2. He shared food with me at the restaurants, serving my plate first.
  3. He kissed me on the forehead when I came home stressed.
  4. He kissed my sex before he made love to me.
  5. He leaves hidden post-its on my laptop wishing me a good day.
  6. He bought me books when he travelled.
  7. He told me I was just enough for him.
47. My mother has no opinion on whom my brother chooses to date. Well, she's bound to have many opinions about the woman my brother chooses to marry, but for the past twenty-eight years, my brother could bring home a blue woman and my mother wouldn't even bat an eyelid.
48. How do you check a list that changes over time?
49. Perhaps she feared that if I married Fritz, her grandson would be born a Minotaur.
50. I start to write on a piece of paper, "Dear Mom, he's Black."
51. I started to list my relationships from when I was thirteen to twenty-seven. In my calculations, I have dated tall men; short men; young and old men; red heads and blondes and brunettes; religious men; a man who hushed me when I spoke; a man who snored too-loudly; a man who asked me to spit in his face; a man who liked to sniff my dirty underwear; another writer old enough to be my father; and a server at a four-star restaurant. I have dated over a hundred men and I will date over a hundred more.
52. Is there something wrong with Black men who date Asian women?
53. During World War II, Japanese prostitutes were treated better by African-Americans than White-Americans.

54. According to African-American female G.I.'s: "Some of these fools from the backwoods, who perhaps never had a girl in their lives, think they are living great with a little straight-haired girl fawning all over them. Some of them spend all their earnings on their girls and their families while their own relatives back home are suffering."
55. Black women look at me curiously and I wonder if they are thinking the same thing.
56. Fritz is from Moshi, a small town at the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro where they farm bananas. He tells me about how the banana is a fruit that derives from one gene. "It's the same gene they use to grow more and more bananas," he says to me while I rest my head on his stomach. We are in bed, watching YouTube videos again. "Then there was this fungus in 2013 that almost took out all the bananas in the world because they are all the same."
57. I imagine the plantations he describes, stamped with the monotony and repetition of sameness. You can move through a field of yellow, and in moving you have gotten nowhere. North is the same as south, or east or west.
58. There are different kinds of Black men, and Fritz happens to fall under the mixed Austrian, English-educated, soccer-playing kind. But living in those countries didn't make him any lighter. Being part Austrian didn't give him straighter hair, whiter skin, or lighter eyes.
59. I couldn't care less if he was blue. As long as I peeled back his skin to see gold. My mother's words do not corrode my feelings for him.
60. There are different kinds of Asian women, and I happen to fall under the International School-graduated, British-Accented, My-Parents-are-Rich in America kind.
61. I may have gone to an International School but I am not a banana.

62. If you are born in Bangkok, but ethnically Chinese,  
You're genetics make you lighter  
You are immediately worth more than someone who isn't as light  
According to advertisements on facial creams and cleansers  
According to my mother.
63. "When I take him from the tournament to the country club, some of them reject us," said Kutilda, Tiger Woods' mother. "I said, Tiger. It's their problem. It's their ignorance. You cannot control other people's actions or their minds, you can only control yours. And be proud of who you are."
64. Famous Blasian celebrities with proud parents: Chanel Iman, Ne-Yo, Kelis, Naomi Campbell, Tyson Beckford, Amerie, Sean Paul, Will Demps, Rae Dawn Chong, Cassie, Kimora Lee Simmons, Karreuche Tran, Jhene Aiko and my future baby.
65. When do we claim Tiger Woods?
66. When will my mother claim me?
67. Confucius believed that marriage lies within the foundation of government, that is marriage has transformed strangers into families and societies together.
68. Perhaps I am the asshole that doesn't consider what would happen to joining two very different families and cultures together. I wish I were the daughter that cared, that rolled over when her mother asked her to love the person that was picked.
69. There's an awful moment when you try to fit a square into a circle.
70. Children of interracial marriages will likely marry interracially as well – or have no qualms about it – partly because they have examples about how being varied works. Many researchers who pointed out that it was native Thai women who freely consorted with foreigners (god, not Thai-Chinese women) due to the fact that they were not bound by the same Confucian traditions as the Chinese.

71. I thought Confucius was a nice guy.
72. In my high school, the mixed kids were called *luk kreungs*. Halflings. As though they had a choice about being fifty percent one color and fifty percent the other. As though they controlled exactly fifty percent of one trait to be cut and pasted onto their faces.
73. What is the true meaning being your DNA? What can you control versus what can't you control?
74. I was adopted.
75. I was legally my mother's brother's child. My mom is technically my Aunt by blood.
76. I have thalassemia. I told Fritz after we had been dating for six months. He needed to know just in case we wanted to make babies. "The situation is not so dire," I said. "I got this from my birth mother." He looked at me worried, and only when I kissed him did he stop squeezing my hand. My hemoglobin is a square that swims with circles.
77. My hemoglobin beta looks like a confetti of blue, orange, green, and yellow ribbons. There are no reds. No blacks. No yellows.
78. Mosquitos don't bite me. My mother claims it is because my blood is bad. I say it is a gene that makes me immune to bullshit.
79. As if I had any choice about the blood in me, the family that raised me, the family that made me.
80. When your (birth parents) meet your (parents)  
Do you have quadruple the responsibility to reunite the broken parts?  
What are the rules for manipulating each set of parents?  
Which set of parents gets the capital "P"?

81. Can the law of inverses be used to discover the value of my blood? As my mother has calculated my worth?

82. You can cut and paste my looks to Build-An-Thai-Chinese-Daughter:

Black hair

Brown eyes

(Snip snip)

Broad shoulders

Thick thighs

Wide face

A voice that is raspy in the morning and soft in the afternoon.

83. Infertility is the main reason parents seek to adopt children. But my mother still wanted me because I was blood.

84. Is there an equation that is tried and true, that is proven to be correct, to be less harsh, to tell your mother that your boyfriend is black?

## The Murder of Crows

There are no crows in Austin, it seems. The grackles have chased them away. They have stolen the scraps of food in their tiny claws and their long, pointed beaks. They have taken the place of the crows at the dumpsters and picnic tables and supermarkets. They have replaced the ominous flocks of crows lurking in the trees or perching on power lines. The grackles have taken their spot on the branches, on the telephone poles, chirping and chattering away, filling the sky with noise. This city is not my home. My home is seventeen hundred miles away where cornfields whisper in the wind, fresh snowfalls blanket the world in silence, and booms of thunder shake the pictures on the walls. My home is crow caws announcing the dawn and carrying the world into night and, despite my fear of them, they are what I miss most.

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The crow that I am most familiar with is the American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). This is the one whose noise I long to hear. But there are forty-something other species of crows known to us and twenty-something other species that only exist in the fossil record. The family *Corvidae* contains crows, ravens, rooks, jackdaws, magpies, treepies, choughs, and nutcrackers, a group that's often called the "crow family." But the group of *true* crows (genus *Corvus*), the group I refer to when I use 'crow,' consists only of ravens, crows, jackdaws, and rooks. You call a group of rooks a *parliament*, a group of jackdaws a *clattering*. You call a group of crows a *murder*, a group of ravens an *unkindness*.

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Some say a crow saved Saint Benedict of Nursia, said to be the father of the European monastic tradition. Benedict and the crow had formed a kind of relationship. Each night, the crow would arrive at dinnertime, like clockwork, and Benedict would feed it bread. One night, Benedict's bread had been poisoned. Some say the crow snatched the piece of poisoned bread of its own volition, somehow able to detect the poison, and flew far away to discard it, later returning for his usual piece of bread. Others say Benedict grew wise to the plot and told the crow to take the poisoned bread far away. Benedict lived



and his religious traditions survived, with the crow to thank. They also appear in Hinduism, Judaism, Islam. They are integral to Japanese, Greek, Korean, Celtic, American Indian mythology. Depending on where you ask, the crow is a clever trickster or a wise messenger or a devourer of the dead or a ferryman for lost souls. In Australia, among the Aboriginals, the crow brought man fire. In Africa, crows are seen as guides, messengers, and protector spirits, the bringers of good news and fortune. In Norse mythology, Odin's ravens Huginn and Muninn feed him information from all over the world while his two wolves, Geri and Freki, served as his hunters and defenders.

\*\*\*

Call-and-response as a musical pattern started in Africa though it was used in other settings long before its use in music. Put simply, it is a back-and-forth exchange that usually takes place between a single leader and the chorus. The call-and-response pattern is also often found in African American churches as the congregation shouts back its "Amen!" and its "Yes Lord!" and its "Praise Jesus!" Crows and ravens use call-and-response too. A researcher by the name of Daniel Stahler discovered that ravens in the Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding areas had formed a sort of symbiotic relationship with the wolves present. The ravens would find a fresh kill and send out their throaty cry to alert the wolves to the area so that they could tear open the flesh and devour the animal's innards. The wolves and ravens would eat together, the wolves scaring others away from their feast. Eagles were the most common intruder, one the crows tried to chase away. The eagles were too powerful. The crows had no way to fight them off forever.

\*\*\*

Jim Crow laws were enacted in the last quarter of the 19th century for the whites to further separate themselves from the Negro. They were a successor to the Black Codes that came to an official end in 1866, though they were around long after that. However, the term "Jim Crow" did not make a legitimate appearance until 1904 when it appeared in the Dictionary of American English and the term "Jim Crow" itself came into existence in the first third of the 19th century when a comedian by the name of Thomas Dartmouth Rice/T.D. Rice performed a song and dance, "Jump Jim Crow," in blackface. This performance led to the rise of minstrel shows. The inspiration for the song was said

to have been the dance of a crippled African slave—origins unknown, some say Cincinnati, some say St. Louis—whose name was Jim Cuff or Jim Crow. But this is legend. Perhaps Jim Crow refers to the fact that blacks were called, pejoratively, crows in the mid-1700s. 'Crow' is also a nickname for the crowbar, which can also be called a 'Jimmy,' commonly used in burglaries and car thefts.

\*\*\*

No known animal has mastered the use of hooked tools except for the New Caledonian crow. This particular species of crow has performed many surprisingly complex tasks using tools with an intelligence and adaptability surpassing that of primates. But their intelligence goes beyond the use and modification of tools. They have also been observed using humans to get their food. They will wait for a red light at an intersection and place particularly tough nuts in front of the cars to be cracked open. The crows then wait at the crosswalk like pedestrians, moving only when the walk sign is lit to collect the available seeds. They have adapted to us, not with us.

\*\*\*

There is a scene in Disney's *Dumbo* where a group of five crows mock Dumbo and his ears and, in this scene, all of the crows are dressed and speak in an exaggerated stereotype of Southern antebellum blacks. The crows refer to each other as 'brother,' 'th' sounds are turned into 'd' sounds. "What's cookin' 'round here, what's the good news," the lead crow says. "Well hush my beak," he exclaims. This lead crow's name is Jim Crow, though this name is hidden, found only in the movie's script. The crows burst into song in a manner reminiscent of the black vaudeville tradition and, later in the scene, sing scat. Their most repeated lyric throughout the scene is, "But I been done seen 'bout everything / when I see a elephant fly" The rat is referred to as "Reverend Rodent" who tells Jim Crow to "fly up a tree where you belong."

\*\*\*

Some of the lyrics of "Jump Jim Crow" are as follows:

*Come, listen all you gals and boys, Ise just from Tuckyhoe;  
I'm goin, to sing a little song, My name's Jim Crow.*

*CHORUS [after every verse]*

*Weel about and turn about and do jis so,  
Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.*

*And den I go to Orleans, An, feel so full of flight;  
Dey put me in de Calaboose, An, keep me dere all night.*

*And oder day I hit a man, De man was mighty fat  
I hit so hard I nockt him in To an old cockt hat.*

There were other verses written for the song. Some were more outright in their mockery and appropriation of blackness. But there were some that were quite the opposite, such as this abolition-driven verse from 1832, written and performed by T.D. Rice himself, perhaps in an attempt to express the crowd's fears of the agitated Negro hunger for freedom or, perhaps, to lure in blacks with empty promises of brotherhood.

*Should dey get to fighting,  
Perhaps de blacks will rise,  
For deir wish for freedon,  
Is shining in deir eyes.*

*And if de blacks should get free,  
I guess dey'll see some bigger,  
An I shall consider it,  
A bold stroke for de nigger.*

*I'm for freedom,  
An for Union altogether,  
Although I'm a black man,  
De white is call'd my broder.*

\*\*\*

During her hunt to catalog Southern folklore, Zora Neale Hurston stumbled across the Crow Dance, a song she heard in Jacksonville, Florida. She describes it before performing it, saying, "...the crow in some ways seems to be sacred in Africa. But what they're talking about is what we know in the United States as the buzzard." Both the buzzard and crow are carrion birds, both consort together, and in The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, it is said, "Buzzards are viewed as being lazy and opportunistic...Because of his overall undesirability, Buzzard tends to be viewed as an asocial entity unwelcome in good company."

\*\*\*

George Moran and Charles Mack were two of the most popular blackface performers in the 1920s and 1930s. Their act was known as "Two Black Crows" or "The Black Crows." The two characters assumed two of the most typical minstrel identities, with Mack playing a covetous straight man while Moran was a slow, lazy buffoon. They were heard on the radio, seen on Broadway, starred in films. Here's one of their jokes:

**MACK:** Wish I had an ice-cold watermelon.

**MORAN:** Oh lawdy. Me too.

**MACK:** Wish I had a thousand ice-cold watermelons.

**MORAN:** Glory be. I bet if you had a thousand ice-cold watermelons, you'd give me one.

**MACK:** No, no siree! If you are too lazy to wish for your own watermelons, you ain't gonna get none of mine.

George Moran and Charles Mack appeared in many vaudeville acts with the comedian W.C. Fields, most notably in Ziegfield's Follies in 1920. Another prominent minstrel duo, Bert Williams and George Walker, also appeared in Ziegfield's Follies. Williams and Walker's act was known as "Two Real Coons" and, though they were black, they would use burnt cork to darken their skin further for the delight of their audiences. In 1911, Walker died of syphilis, the disease ravaging his body and mind, and was buried in his Midwestern hometown, Lawrence, Kansas. After Walker's death, Williams performed in a later iteration of Ziegfield's Follies in a bird suit with rear plumage and legs similar to that of a rooster or a crow.

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**Sept. 13, 1933: *The New York Amsterdam News*, "Blue Eagle and Jim-Crow," Kelly Miller**

"From the earliest times the eagle has been regarded as a noble bird—vigorous of wing, strong of beak and talons, piercing of eye and dauntless of courage. The eagle has been adopted as the symbol of many a state. The Roman eagle symbolized the courage and valor of that mighty empire. This same bird symbolizes the freedom of the American spirit and is stamped upon our Almighty Dollar...Today we have jim-crow schools, jim-crow churches, jim-crow cars, jim-crow sections of the city, and, in a word, jim-crowism stamps every feature of life where the two races operate separately...Jim-crow is a ghastly, gaunt, ungainly bird, which befouls the aims and ideals of the American eagle. His spirit is cowardly; his croak is gruesome. Jim-crow and the eagle are mortal enemies. They cannot thrive in the same atmosphere...the NRA [National Recovery Administration] must be operated without regard to race, creed, or color...Jim-crow stands defiantly athwart the Blue Eagle's path and stubbornly disputes the right of way. Blue Eagle must triumph or jim-crow must give way or be forced out of the way."

Forgotten in Miller's article is the fourth option, the one that was chosen: a partnership between Blue Eagle and Jim Crow. The two birds joined together to strengthen each other. As part of the deal, Jim Crow began working behind the scenes while Blue Eagle used its image of honor and valor to mask its predatory instincts and its partnership with its darker cousin.

\*\*\*

Michelle Alexander, author of the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* argues that the American prison system has been designed as a system of social control applied disproportionately to African Americans in ways that mirror or even surpass the restrictions placed on blacks during Jim Crow and the days of segregation. She writes, "In some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men. And in major cities wracked by the drug war, as many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives." She struggled for some time to accept the idea of the prison system

as social control and talks about her growing frustrations with the ACLU inattention to prison reform before returning to her point. She writes, "Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity...are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it."

\*\*\*

Crow hunting season in Iowa occurs from October 15th to November 30th and again from January 14th to March 31st. There is no limit how many you can kill. In Texas, crows "...may be controlled without a federal or state depredation permit when found committing or about to commit depredations on ornamental or shade trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife, or when concentrated in numbers and in a manner that constitutes a health hazard or other nuisance." This is true in most states; crows that 'cause problems' can be killed with impunity. Crows are not protected, not from anyone who considers them a nuisance or a threat.

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Jordan Davis was killed for being a nuisance on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012. Michael Dunn was angered by loud music coming from Davis' vehicle and claimed that Davis made him fear for his life, that the young boy brandished a shotgun from inside the vehicle, and this is what made Dunn fire on him. No gun was ever found. Since long before the case, I've turned my music down when I am in a nice (white) neighborhood, when I am near police, when there is any chance that I might be seen as a nuisance. There was justice for Jordan Davis, for this boy with my name. Dunn was sentenced to life without parole. But there has been no justice for so many others, killed because they were considered, however loosely, a nuisance or a threat.

\*\*\*

I lower the volume of my headphones to listen for footsteps from the black men I just passed and I walk a little faster. I cross the street, away from them, and my muscles

loosen. When I realize what I am doing, what my body is doing, I am filled with shame, anger, self-loathing. I have fallen for the lie we've been sold that blackness means danger. I have noticed women clutch their purse as I walk past them. I have noticed men walk a little faster when I am around them at night. It always frustrates me. Yet, here I am doing the same thing. Here I am, quickening my step past black men, away from men in jeans, jerseys, hooded sweatshirts, Nike sneakers, away from men that look like me.

\*\*\*

The Tuskegee Institute's 1959 Lynch Report reported 4,733 deaths by lynching between 1882 and 1959. I'm certain this number has increased in the past fifty-five years, though there are few statistics on deaths by lynching over the last half of the century. But on August 29<sup>th</sup> of this year, a teenager by the name of Lennon Lacy was found hanging from a swing set in Bladenboro, North Carolina. His death was ruled a suicide despite the presence of contusions on his head, a pair of shoes, a couple sizes too small, on his feet that his parents had never seen before, and the complete absence of mental illness in Lacy's background. There was little mention of Bladenboro's long history of racial tension nor of the abuses, insults, and jeers Lacy had already received from residents of the town because of his relationship with an older white woman. Days after his death, his grave was defiled.

\*\*\*

Crows are notoriously difficult to scare off. Scarecrows, contrary to their name, have never been that effective. Using the bodies of dead crows, however, has proved quite effective. Some farmers would hang them from trees. One farmer, William Oles of Colebrook, was written about in the October 28, 1911 issue of *The Chicago Defender*, because of how he dealt with his crow problem. "*William Oles...has a large field of corn which has been ravaged for months by crows...he came upon this idea: He would soak some of the corn in whisky and place it in the corn patch...The next morning...He found eight large crows staggering around the field and simulating the human voice as closely as nature would permit. He says he heard one of the crows singing.*" Then Oles put the crows in cages, lectured them on the wrongs of their behavior, executed them, and left their bodies to rot in the fields.

\*\*\*

Michael Brown was shot dead and left on the ground for four and a half hours. The shooter was Darren Wilson, a police officer in a town fifteen minutes from my grandmother's house, a town. Brown was shot dead and the details are unclear. It is unclear whether Brown assaulted Wilson and made him fear for his life enough to fire on the teenager instead of employing other non-lethal methods. It is known, from Wilson's Grand Jury testimony, that he likened Brown to the wrestler Hulk Hogan, in terms of his strength, that he likened Brown to a demon. It is known that Wilson states that he shot "it," referring to Brown, now considered a non-person by Wilson. On the night the grand jury was to decide whether or not to indict Wilson, Brown's family asked protesters for four and a half minutes of silence—an echo of the four and a half hours his body lay in the street, unacknowledged by the police—after the verdict was announced, out of respect. Wilson was not indicted and, in some places, silence was given. In most places, noise prevailed. Years of black boys being shot and their killers escaping unscathed, years of hearing the media-spun lie that black violence was an epidemic sweeping our nation, years of pain and loss and heartbreak became too much for some to bear and anger filled the skies.

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What is there to say about these deaths? About Trayvon Martin, whose death I've run out of words for. About Eric Garner, killed by an illegal chokehold for selling cigarettes while his killers go unpunished. About Victor White III, who managed to, after being searched and handcuffed, produce a pistol that was allegedly behind his back the whole time and, through moves a contortionist would envy, put the gun against the front of his chest and shot himself dead. What is there to say?

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All our crows are dying. The deaths come under different names. The deaths present with different causes: suicide, murder, addiction, police brutality. Over half a million crows sit, caged, unheard, unseen, and they are dying one day at a time. Those that



are free are hunted, shot down, shot on the street, shot on their land. They are not protected, not by any treaty, not by any act. All our crows are dying.

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I am envious of crows and of their flight. I fly in some of my dreams. Like the one in which I am a crow cutting through the air, one among hundreds of thousands unchained, unburdened. Like the one in which I am a raven sitting on a rock in the desert enjoying the stillness, the peace of it all, unrestricted by civilization and its systems, its rules. In these dreams, I am filled with joy. I hope to be one of them someday later, some life later. I hope to be a creature of flight so that I can leave the earth beneath my feet, the earth that my ancestors were forced onto, the earth filled with their sweat and blood, the earth that holds the bodies of all of those we have lost.

\*\*\*

Near the second house I lived in, the one that holds my memories of blood and bruises, the one my father lives in alone now, there is a trail that winds and cuts for miles through West Des Moines and Des Moines, Iowa. I walked this trail often to escape my father's abuses and the beatings from my brother. I had three favorite spots on the trail where I could relax and let my thoughts wander. The third only became a favorite after I found the crows. A field next to the trail had been cleared for upcoming development and all that remained of its original form was a lone tree stump. As I neared the newly cleared field, I heard the heavy flapping of wings and a constant stream of caws. There were hundreds all flying in and settling on nearby branches of nearby trees, looking like black leaves. And then, as if someone pressed a mute button on the scene, they fell silent. One crow hopped down from his perch and made his way to the middle of the field, disappearing behind the stump. Several minutes passed in silence. And then, by some unknown signal, the field erupted with caws and the crows filled the sky and flew away. I walked to the center of the clearing to see what they had gathered around: a young crow, wings shattered, neck broken, in a crumpled heap.

## Shotgun

A white house with latticed porch,  
two steps, a concrete walk, equal  
plots of grass on either side  
and in the center of each,  
like bullseyes, two stunted ash  
swallowed in morning glories  
that never bloom.

A gravel drive worn to dirt,  
garage detached and leaning  
toward the creek,  
the stockade fence a rotting  
smile, three broken teeth  
helpless against  
the neighbor's Panjas.

Shotgun they called it,  
where the front door opens  
on a long hall straight back,  
room to room to room,  
to a two-step drop  
into a maze of trash  
you thread through to find

a way out,  
though once you've escaped,  
there are only more  
houses like yours, yards  
with the same clutter,  
on streets that go nowhere  
fast.

## Identity of an Operation

Only three days after the accident they cleared the trees and repaved the road, spilling tar and hot oil as though having a smooth surface would change what had already happened. I wanted to see if they'd gotten around to fixing the guardrail, which was another way of saying I wanted stand where I did each October, far enough back from the steep jut of witch-toothed rocks to be steady but close enough that I could see the break in the bare-topped pines where the car must have been.

North of the Parkway was the nicer part of town where I lived, the view of the other side blocked by tidy Victorian houses in colors that offended no one and lawns silent of anything other than seasonal items – patriotic pinwheels, fall pumpkins, sprinklers in spring, snow like decaying flesh, graying and soft.

Julia lived on the South side, in the condos thrown together a decade ago when people had money. They were now half-vacant, built for commuters that never showed up. The condos and trailer park backed up on the new outdoor shops, which was still a strip mall, but with stone walkways and music piped in over speakers that you couldn't quite locate. Some storefronts were dark, for lease, one unlocked and the sight of some parties until the parent company found out and boarded up the doors and windows. In the cluster of stores that were open, filled with tepid shoppers, was a place that sold home stuff, mugs, floral notebooks, antiques that may or may not be authentic. My mother called it a lifestyle store, which sounded half like she resented it and half as though she wished she owned the items on offer. The clothing was awkward, not just because I never belonged in any of it.

Everyone who worked dressed like purposefully awkward librarians, with dark framed glasses and perky dresses and two-tone shoes, costumes of people they'd never be unless that got out of Mason. Julia worked there and I'd seen her when my father pulled me inside to find a tea mug for my mother, who spent her time researching how to be a supportive parent while drinking copious amounts of vanilla rooibos tea, dealing with insurance bills, and tutoring wealthy kids in math in other time zones on-line.

Julia had dark blonde hair but dyed the top part black so it looked sort of like an animal was sitting on top of her head. I could see her leaning on the steering wheel as she parked next to a dumpster, away from the rock where most South Mason kids gathered on Friday nights. I'd switched to North Mason by then but she wouldn't have

recognized me anyway probably so I didn't say hi when I walked past her and the clumps of other, cooler or drunk couples huddled or dispersing in the woods around the Miller's Rock and its archival graffiti that detailed decades of sex and misery in Mason.

Most of the people I knew had fathers or uncles or aunts laid off from Consolidated Paper, and the fact that I had two parents with jobs was enough to get me tossed in a dumpster, let alone everything else, but if anyone knew who I was, they also knew my sister and maybe that counted for enough tragedy.

I passed Brian Bento, twice-senior, thick in the shoulders and prone to seeing what happens to skulls when met with blunt objects – bowling balls, the pavement. He ignored me. This was a victory that prickled up my legs, through my crotch, and into my grandfather's army jacket where the rest of me was. He looked at me once as though deciding something and in order to appear bored which appeared unthreatened, I did math in my head the way I'd learned at home. The transitive property of equality. If  $a=b$  and  $b=c$ , then  $a=c$ . Brian took a step toward me. I wouldn't have time to unlock my car, get in, and drive away so I stood there. It's not all transitive. If Team A beats Team B with a lunch tray and Team B kicks Team C with a steel-toed boot it doesn't necessarily mean Team A will also kick the shit out of Team C. Especially if I am Team C and drop out of school for a term and come back changed and switch schools.

Brian lost interest in me when Julia stepped out of her car, two-toned hair loose on her back, and he gave me a nod when I followed Julia away from Miller's Rock like we'd planned on meeting there, which we didn't because I'd only admired her from behind the register counter, ached for her if I thought about her which I tried not to, even on the long drive to Baltimore.

Before the trip to I'd been one thing, now I was someone else, as though I arrived here at this moment with this spidery-limbed girl who for some reason didn't seem to be running away from me but asking me to follow her, up the road and over the ditch side toward the rocks that lined the parkway.

Julia walked like she was taking orders and I followed. "You don't have to do try and keep up with me," she said.

"I don't mind," I said. It was possible she was meeting someone in the woods and I could see multiple stories unfolding in the dark; she'd be meeting someone and have sex with them right in front of me, her back ragged on the moss-slumped rocks or she'd get high alone or strip off bit by bit until I had to cover her with my body to keep her warm.

She stepped onto the wide rock face that sloped to the drop of trees.

"Just so you know," she said with the car keys ringed around her thumb, "I liked you before."

She gestured her hand in a swirling motion as though who I'd been before had gotten caught up in the mini tornado and dropped into the parkway woods behind us. On the rock face where Julia stood was a small plaque. In the 80s there'd been an accident, some boy driving with a beer bottle between his legs, the glass embedded in his thighs when he crashed. "His dad was the undertaker," Julia said. "Can you imagine? Having to pick up your own kid?"

I shook my head. "My sister's dead," I told her. "She died here."

In spite of that – or maybe because of, I didn't really know yet – my parents had arranged for the surgery, brought me down by car, me leaning my pillow against the window as we discarded one town after another until we got to the Suite Hotel next to the hospital.

Julia looked around for another plaque, a cross, a sign, but I shook my head.

"They didn't put anything."

"And?" She looked at me like I wasn't saying anything.

"You were telling me something." I paused. "About me."

"Oh, right." She raised her eyebrows. "I liked you before, too. When you were..." Empty set. Null set. The set with no elements. It can be symbolized by {} or  $\emptyset$ .

"In my birth body?" I offered.

That's what they'd told me I could say if it ever came up, if I ever figured out how to *build my narrative*. That's what the counselor called it, like I could craft a story about how I'd been born and what I knew was true and what I needed to have happen. Like how at first I removed the photos my parents had tip-toeing up the stairway walls, but then I thought how my parents went from two daughters to none in the course of a couple years, and how I wanted to have other pictures to fill the spaces on the walls but just couldn't.

My counselor thought this was a good thing. That I'd put the pictures back up while my parents slept. In one of them, Kate's shiny forehead distracts from my terrible blouse, which I had tried to un-blouse by cutting the sleeves which had in turn made Mom overly loud and laughy which defeated my father and nothing could be done about any of it – not even the pressed powder Mom dabbed on Kate.

How was it possible, my father had asked with his face in the fridge even though he didn't want anything inside. I told them while we still had funeral casseroles in there. Once my father had asked my mother, how can you think of math at a time like this? It

was his own mother's funeral and my mother worked out the seating and programs aloud. But I got it. "It's the math of my life," I told them and maybe even then I thought a little of Julia. An example of an intransitive relation is: if *B* is the daughter of *A*, and *C* is the daughter of *B*, then *C* is not the daughter of *A*; and of a non-transitive relation: if *A* loves *B*, and *B* loves *C*, then *A* *may* or *may not* love *C*, especially if *C* was formerly the daughter but is now the son and *B* is dead. That was the math of my life.

I told Julia all this because it was dark and because there was nothing else to say except how sad she looked and gorgeous, how I'd wanted one thing for so long and now I wanted her. "Anyway, that's the kind of narrative that I have now."

"My narrative ends in a question mark," Julia said. Without me realizing it, she led us past the bluff to the road edge where the guardrail was still broken.

"Each year I come and check," I said and kicked it. "But they haven't."

I wanted to ask Julia about her question mark but I was used to being a question mark myself so I didn't. Julia wore only a jean jacket, faded blue with a drawing of a tree on the back, a willow maybe, with the leaves all dripping bright pink and purple. I imagine her sitting cross-legged on her bedroom floor, markers clattered next to her. "Are you cold?"

Julia shrugged, straddling the guardrail. "You don't remember me, do you?"

Down below us someone screamed and then laughed. It was close enough that we both looked but the zombie sounds of teenagers breaking curfew were faceless. "I remember you."

I faced forward, hoping she didn't move any further toward the cliff. She'd been a big kid, the sturdy kind grown-ups made reference to – she's like her grandpa! Shame there's no girls' football! What do you expect with three brothers? – but now was average all over except for her shoulders which seemed small in the cold air and her cheeks which were still full and her breasts, which were legendary at school. How was it that a part I'd loathed on my old body, discarded with desperation and relief, was so appealing on someone else? Julia's narrative body made mine twitch.

"Not really," Julia told me as she started in where the rail had been crushed by my sister's car. Her shoes on old leaves made her footsteps muffled and damp. "Probably you remember the coffee cup incident and that's it."

Had I known she was poor? We all did, I guess. But because I wasn't I had no way of knowing all the details that went with it. Did I offer her part of my three-cheese sandwich on days when she stood near my table probably hungry but not saying so? In my memory, yes. But Dara Atkins must've known how bad Julia had it and to prove it,

started a coffee club. In the mornings, Dara and her group would take turns bringing Starbucks for everyone. Two recycled compostable trays with milky coffee.

"I thought you were kind of brilliant with the coffee thing," I told her. I didn't know her then. After Halloween in elementary school when a group of us watched The Blob and everyone was yelling except for me, I'd pulled her out of the family room into the grimy light on the front porch. How can you be scared of something without a face? I'd asked her. And we'd hugged. Just once. And I hadn't spoken to her again until a couple months ago behind the cash register counter when my dad went to get my mom the tea mug.

"I thought everyone knew about that story," she said. She moved away from me, halfway down the cliff on the rocks and dirt the city packed back together after the car careened nose to earth and then spun, landing finally in the cluster of pine and elms with the wheels up like some insect unable to right itself. "Isn't that how it works? Dara told someone who told someone and now everyone knows everything?"

"I guess I don't know all of it. Are you sure you want to go down there?" I asked her. From here, the streetlamp light began to fade, shadowing the tree on her jacket.

"Oh, yeah? What part do you know? The part where I stole those free drink coupons?"

I shook my head, aware of my bare ears. My hair had been the first thing – even before I said anything. Barbershop, nine dollars, and a walk home where I caught a window-shop version of myself I almost didn't mind. "Didn't you use the same cup over and over again or something?"

I followed Julia down the path that led to my sister's chest getting crushed. "We probably shouldn't do this," I said but kept going. Out of respect for Kate, who would only ever be seventeen – and my own safety, I knew I should stop. I'd noticed that I was taking better care of myself now. Driving slower. Working out. I'd stopped smoking. "You want to head back?" I stopped with a palm gripping an unrooted dead tree.

Julia stayed where she was. "I had it figured out, right? What you did was go in and ask for a cup of water. If they gave plastic you'd be all oh, paper is better for the environment, etcetera. And so you get a free large cup of water with a lid. Then you go home and make shitty coffee from a can and put it in the Starbucks cup, even using their milk if you didn't have any at home."

She turned to face me, swaying, and I could see it clearly: her falling backward, me running away from her bloodied head, or worse, cradling her brokenness in my lap until someone came and either blamed me for the accident or praised me for staying or

just stared like they'd seen me somewhere – my sister's face or my old self, both of us dead. Was that what happened? You became two things at once? My mother had a poem above her computer, the paper hung unevenly as though she hadn't intended to keep it up forever but had grown accustomed to seeing it there, to reading the lines about winter and the nothing that is still something. Zero, she'd explained like a lullaby, is still something. The nothing that is.

"Zero isn't positive or negative," I told Julia then and she stopped. "It just is. Two things at once."

She didn't fall or careen ragdoll style from the edge. She took a step toward me. "You think just faking my way through a latte would be the subject of such infamy? You know there's more?"

There weren't a lot of girls I knew who used words like infamy, and it just made me want Julia more. "Maybe?"

"And it never occurred to you that maybe the reason you haven't seen me in a long time had anything to do with it?"

Had I been so focused on my own narrative that I hadn't thought of hers? Wasn't that what my mother had said with the family portraits, that I wasn't the only one in them? That I needed to remember the other people, whole selves connecting and disconnecting all the time? Julia moved closer, her hair illuminated by the gross half-moon and the sticky glow from the streetlights far below us. "I went away." She paused. "They called me the blow monster."

Down the jagged hill from us were the stub ends of the trees Kate's car landed on and the mall parking lot, spaces no one used, the part of the lot where the town kept piles of salt for de-icing the roads. Once, after a big snowfall, I'd gone with Kate, walking in the lot, climbing the piles of excess snow the ploughs had dropped there. Eventually, the lot was too peaked with drifts and they'd had to cart the snow to Bay's Bridge and dump it in. Kate and I watched the clumps fall and cling together, landing with a sullen splash. Each pile bobbed there for a minute before either sinking or slowly heading out to sea. Which pile made it, why was one denser than the other, surviving instead of melting?

"Listen, Julia, you don't have to explain," I told her part because I wanted her to know she really didn't have to but also because I wasn't sure I want to know.

"No, it's fine." She looked at me to make sure I was looking at her. "It's my narrative, right? Don't we all have some shitty thing or some ditch from the past we've crawled out of?" She sighed. "It was only ten days, you know? They don't teach blowjob



math in school, but it's not, like, so many. It's not like I did it every time I went to Starbucks. Just most times."

Multiplication rule: given the probabilities of two independent events the probability that both events occur is found by multiplying the probabilities of each event. Julia goes to Starbucks. Julia gives blowjobs to all the guys who work at Starbucks in order to get free trays of coffee once Dara realizes that Julia is faking the coffee. Denote events  $A$  and  $B$  and the probabilities of Julia both going to Starbucks and blowing the guys in the bathroom with the hand dryer as noise cover or out back by the clang and din of recycling by  $P(A)$  and  $P(B)$ . Then  $P(A \text{ and } B) = P(A) \times P(B)$ .

I reached out and fidgeted with Julia's jacket until I got one of her hands. Her fingers were long and ringed, even the thumb, various rubber bracelets snaked her wrist.

"Where'd you go? When you were away, I mean," I said.

"One of those crisis places. Like you read about. It wasn't covered by insurance. Talk about debt."

The settlement from Kate's crash paid for my top surgery so I knew about debt I would never pay off.

Julia looked at my eyes, which I realized were the same eyes she'd looked into on my porch when we were kids and I was hugging her because of the faceless blob movie. "It was...bleak. There was one thing, though."

"One thing is good," I told her. Would I be able to keep touching her? Would my body do what I wanted it to or would probability and statistics get in the way? Was I changed or not – identity of an operation, my mother had whispered to me as I lay there, waiting to be wheeled in. The quantity which, when combined with another quantity using an operation, leaves the quantity unchanged. "Give me an example," I told her, my mouth mossy from not eating or drinking after midnight. My mother put her face near mine, the words liquid and hushed. "The additive identity is 0 since  $x + 0 = 0 + x = x$  for any number  $x$ . The multiplicative identity is 1 since  $x \cdot 1 = 1 \cdot x = x$  for any number  $x$ . It stays the same. It stays."

"Keeping one good thing in mind when everything else sucks ass. You have to. That's what Grace, my counselor said," I told Julia. "She says if you have to erase it all it doesn't count. But it all counts. So you have to find this one thing from it."

I thought about Kate's shiny forehead in the family picture. About how clever Julia was to reuse a coffee cup in the first place. How my hands were also still the same hands that I had before, the same ones holding Julia's.

Julia held my forearm like she was in the water and I was a dock, hard and

unfamiliar. "It was sort of near the desert. We had to...you have to go on solo missions they call them but really they just abandon you there. But here's the thing. Epiphyllum Oxypetalum."

I raised my eyebrows at her.

"Dutchman's-Pipe Cactus." She dropped my arm and mimed how big the thing was. "Huge. It's a kind of cactus flower. But they can be twenty feet tall."

She paused and reached for my hands again, coming closer so that when she spoke I could feel the words on my face not just hear them. "It only blooms for one or two days. Can you imagine? All that for twenty-four hours of glory."

"Or forty-eight," I told her.

I felt my mouth going toward hers, diving off a cliff for which there was no guardrail and realized that I was the one moving that part of me. She pressed herself against me and I held her there with someone else's laughter ricocheting around us.

When the papers wrote about the accident, I remember how everyone described it. They'd never seen anything like it. That's what they kept saying for weeks. Such a heavy thing, up and off the ground, flying.

## How to recover from the Pathology of Marriage

Remember that the body has no real way of distinguishing panic  
from a real or perceived threat  
that it has no linear notion of time  
holds fear at a cellular level & will recruit resources  
of protection long after the danger disappears  
silence is a weapon but so are words  
the way causation creates facts  
the way fear changes the way the world appears  
heavy water dampening escape routes in your  
flooded days, you can't reason patience  
can't eclipse horror of what comes next  
a backdrop of disasters called living, body held  
in a state of contracted gestures  
waiting for the blow till every decision  
is a trickery of how could you let this happen  
wanting a path to protection, but inside  
impossible to exorcise the tight knot  
pulling under, look to climb into  
your voice: there are so many ways to kill  
a person so no one ever sees the damage  
survival is a slight of hand, know hurting  
till you are shattered, replace the toxic blood, pint by pint  
extinction a foregone conclusion  
take on a mind that won't be quiet  
when you find how easy it is to hate yourself  
don't fall for this last attempt of swallowing  
you whole: it's right now you're lost  
not forever and the world holds  
and the hold of the world on you is love

## I. Bacon Burning in Belvedere

*Her bacon burned. She  
Hastened to hide it in the step-on can, and  
Drew more strips from the meat case.*  
—Gwendolyn Brooks, 1960

I smell bacon burning  
On my morning walk  
And wonder about  
The scene inside

An old lady who has forgotten?  
A new mother who hasn't the time?  
A new neighbor who does or does not feel  
At home  
in Belvedere

I've talked with all of them, my neighbors  
in this mixed  
Neighborhood,

Where I must face my own  
Vanity about privilege  
Face the revulsion toward the idea that  
My good opinions and  
Correct ideals are enough  
How they trap one  
Into not seeing  
What's there.

Someone once said we would all be more riled  
about the news  
Of unarmed young black boys dying at the hands of cops  
If we all lived together – as neighbors,  
Side by side.

I am proud of my neighborhood,  
Working class, professional class,  
We live here together  
Laugh together, walk together, work together, & gossip

Side by side

University profs  
African Americans  
Lawyers  
Puerto Ricans  
Retirees  
First generation Poles  
(and me, third generation)  
Cooks, plumbers  
Photographers

It is not enough.

The burning bacon wafting  
Around the corner  
reminds me of  
Brooks's bacon burning – the one mother whose bacon burns while  
the other's son hangs

How much these things have changed

And how little

I've burned bacon,  
and I wonder  
If it isn't a metaphor sprung up before me

"Are you happy here?" I ask  
And the new neighbor says  
"I was told 'welcome to the neighborhood

"'At least you are not black.'"

The bacon smell brings with it nausea now  
As I walk along with my dogs  
They can smell it too  
Someone's breakfast burning

I think of Brooks, how she  
Questions what it means to turn a blind eye  
Or, even, to tell a lie  
in the old Jim Crow south  
In this New England suburb  
In Belvedere where I live

Racism hugs the corners, creeps into our kitchens, out into the yards  
Spreading itself in the most violent of acts, in speech:  
"At least you're not black," someone said.

I want to vomit on the street, to see  
The bacon  
Covered in bile, wrapped in  
Someone else's hate

Up it all comes now  
From the depths of my soul.

While the neighbor  
Up the block burns bacon,  
Another must certainly  
live in fear.

II.

### **The lady in line behind me likes my list**

How might people would imagine me  
If they saw  
my list  
alone  
still stuck to an emptied cart  
Menu planning on the left, required ingredients on the right?

The lady in line behind me likes my list.

We compare notes about Sundays: meal planning, cleaning, shopping –  
Her friend makes all the meals in one day, reheats a new one every evening

We talk too briefly about  
Balancing jobs and sports and arts programs, homework, PTA

Our carts extend end to end like a passenger train  
We squeeze to meet between them.  
I think of the Pullman's exhibit at the train museum – about the porters and the union  
About what divides us, what  
Paradoxically,  
Binds us:  
the legacy of her ancestors  
and mine

with her 11 yr old beside her, she  
is my mirror image  
The only difference  
skin

In her son's face I see  
My son's

I read the  
Same annoyance  
with having to help with Sunday shopping  
The shared desire to play video games, juggle a soccer ball  
The silent approval over sneakers

I want to pick up the microphone at the abandoned customer service desk  
and shout

*one of every three black boys born  
in America  
today  
can expect to go to prison in his lifetime.*

Security would not arrest me  
For this outburst –  
white mom with her middle class groceries,  
a list detailing what it takes to make  
beef stew, burgers, lime chicken

The police,  
they have  
their own list:

Dark hoodie  
Veiled eyes  
Black skin

Our lists are the same, our sons the same age  
Schedules— the same, carts loaded—the same:  
A bit off balance, overflowing

But then,  
on her shoulders,  
I see it, the difference:

The invisible freight of a worry  
I'll never share

The vision of her son five years hence

The list the cops have in hand  
Looking for a suspect in black

The question lined upon her face:  
Will my son make it one more day,  
Survive what they call "suspect"  
If only to be able to shout:

*One out of every three of us!*  
And drop the mic down on the floor?



### III. **Some Time in the Rain**

There is something about  
kids walking  
in hordes  
in the rain.

One by one they line up  
on a dirt road  
loaded with their packs,  
water bottles, slickers.

It is a vision of  
marching refugees,  
Vietnam soldiers,  
The Mexican border,  
Kids redirected to  
death camps.

But today,  
it is only soccer:  
Middleclass boys from along the east coast  
almost late for a tournament  
because of traffic.

Many of them know nothing of the  
Holocaust except Anne Frank;  
Know nothing of hunger  
of limblessness  
of fear.  
They have  
no sense of going to bed  
on a pallet or cot  
drenched, nor of  
draining blisters except those  
caused by new cleats, wet socks.

My child is safe.  
Why do I see through him only  
vulnerability?

When the boy sticks his head  
in the oven to check on  
chocolate chip cookies:  
Is he going to get gassed, I wonder.

And, too, I wonder  
when the exterminator  
does not want to bomb the sun room where  
The flying ants have settled in.  
They land in swarms on the boy's hands when he plays.  
They tickle his ears and his hair.

The man with the poison and my son  
Both look at me  
incredulously,  
as if to say:

"How dare you think to exterminate?"

Genocide is here, in my house.

It is the day that Malala Yousafzai  
Has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

When she met the 2012 Nobel winner,  
She asked him to stop the drone strikes on  
Pakistan.

To this day, they go on and on.

All around us, the rain is acid;  
Protesters turn child refugees away at the borders  
tell them to return to the drug  
lords from which they flee.  
Bombs turn schools into hollowed out tombs;  
Ebola, addiction, guns spread indefinitely  
Reach into the horizon, conquer the new generation

With a grim future, still.

The soccer players hoofing it  
To the tournament game are fine.  
The Connecticut boy who rests his head in the gas oven  
will live to eat more cookies.

Even the flying ants will have their day; we simply must wait for the weather to turn so  
they can find a new home.

But what about the other kids—  
on the other side of town,  
of the country  
of the world?

No one is helping.

And you people wonder why—  
Wherever I look—

I see genocide.

## Indian Morphology

Chusca (choo-ska) – Buzzard

Aunt Ruby calls me over and points at birds  
circling over the creek. She tells me something is dead  
or will die soon.

Pichicuate (peachy-coo-atay) – Water Moccasin

I can't swim in the creek,  
so I jump in the Atlantic and swim all the way to Spain.  
I have some grievances.

Jicote (heco-tay) – Wasp

Remember when I was allergic to their sting? Remember when I fell  
on that nest and they stuck me nine times? Dad, you told me  
not to go to sleep cause I might die.  
You've called me *Jicotalito* ever since.

Cuate (koo-watay) – Twin

We avenge our fathers and uncles through baseball games. And when we  
win, brothers, which we always do, we become the sun and the moon.  
This is always the beginning of a new age.

Nixtamal (neex-tamal) – Boiled Corn

Gods used to hide in the rows behind the house and wait  
for me to fall asleep. Then, they would sneak into my room,  
reach out their husk covered hands, and touch my dreams,  
in which I'm holding a dagger.

Cacahuate (kaka-hoo-atay) – Peanut

Sometimes the peanut butter and the jelly came mixed  
in the same jar. You told me the peanut was magical.  
It was our buffalo.

Chichimec (meco/a) (chee-chee-mec) – Indian Pejorative

You put mud and cobwebs on our scrapes.  
You made fish hooks out of beer cans.  
You made us chew boiled sweet gum tree for toothaches.  
You taught us that cedar kept away the fleas.  
We told other kids we didn't know you.

Chichi (chee-chee) – Mother's Milk

Two fight over a six-pack  
of Old Milwaukee. One stabs the other  
in the back. The stabbed one keeps drinking  
with the knife still in his back  
until he bleeds out.

Cuacha (kwaa-cha) – Shit

Hey cousin, we used to steal bicycles from white kids  
and ride them all the way to the next town.  
They were our ponies.  
And we had many.

Chonche (chaan-chee) – Slave

In Choctaw it meant "wild bird."  
In Caddo it meant "bondage."  
In Choctaw-Apache it meant 200 years of hiding and blending in.  
We don't speak the language, but we know  
what it means when we see buzzards.

## Quetzalcoatl in Louisiana

was discovered in the woods along a deer trail  
    (stretched the width of the 6 foot path).  
They threw beer cans at it from the truck cab

while mocking its indigo plumage, its bird caw language.  
    They loaded their Winchester repeating rifles  
and turned the front wheels to grind it into the earth.

They could not identify its species.  
    Could be cottonmouth, copperhead, sun god,  
or some other kind of river swimmer.

So they readied their dragging chains  
    and, just to be sure, called in the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment.  
It opened its mouth to speak, but swallowed the woods around them.

So, they flooded its homelands and bought  
    the lake front property so they could charge it to live there,  
then plucked out its feathers and turned them into their dreamcatchers.

They crushed its head with a rock to save their children  
    from skin so dangerous, so dark,  
but two more heads grew in its place.

And when the old dragon opened its mouths,  
    crazy with its own venom,  
it tore out its own heart as an offering.

## **Tie it Up and Make it Look Pretty**

As guest curator for a small African diaspora museum in San Francisco, I conceived the theme, selected the artworks, and chose the title for a joint exhibition with a much larger and well-funded modern museum, also in San Francisco. The exhibition was the last in a series of joint exhibitions between the larger museum and other museums in the Bay Area. The concept of portraiture was in my mind. With the approval of the larger museum, I curated all of the works in the show from their collection and when I had the available works in front of me, something happened, many of them although non-figurative portraits, in my mind were in fact a type of portrait, not because they were works created to represent likenesses, but because they were objects and scenes I assembled to signify a presence rather than an invisibility.

I began my assemblage process, constructing galleries out of computer paper and placing the printed thumbnail images of the artworks onto my paper gallery walls. I was now in the zone of storytelling, creating a three-dimensional picture book to weave a story about what portraits can be and what they can tell us. Moving along, I was pleased with what I had come up with and what I was discovering. For me, it was all about what I was seeing before my eyes and I was delighted to sink my teeth into the research on the works and write extended labels. For this, I needed to speak with the many living artists whose works fell in the "nonfigurative type of portrait category" in the show. I was fully prepared to listen to their narratives about the works so as I honed in on the idea of a traditional portrait that wasn't there I was eager to speak with as many artists as I could about my idea of expanding the concept of portraiture. But, I ran into a roadblock. The larger museum didn't want me to contact the artists, at least not until the final labels were approved. When would they be approved so I could contact the artists? As it turned out, very late in the exhibition process--a day before the show opened.

When I voiced my frustration to the co-curator about restricting my contact with artists in the exhibition she patronizingly told me "rest assured" she and her team from the larger museum would take care of everything. I railed against this but was shut down by the director of the smaller museum for following a curatorial process that was common practice. With no support from either museum, my husband said, Liz, what does Mom say, "tie it up and make it look pretty." He was speaking of my ninety-year-old mother who has probably heard more than she has ever wanted to hear about my ups and downs as a curator. When I'd tell her about a particularly challenging episode, she'd say, "Tie it up and make it look pretty." She meant, when you've done all you can do, said all you can say, been all you can be in the context of your work, you have to step back and

reevaluate the situation to save yourself. You have to essentially let go because you don't own it. It belongs to someone else and you are just passing through.

Although I am an art historian and curator, I was an artist first and my artist training and instincts immediately kicked in—it was time to flip the switch to get through this ordeal with my sanity intact. In early fall of 2014, in my curator mind, I realized that I was just passing through an exhibition that was not going to open until the following spring, so as an artist/curator, I committed to wearing “the mask” fulfilling my tasks as a co-curator on the exhibition, with a smile. In doing so, the words of a dear artist friend rolled around in my mind “Lizzetta, you have to change postures in mid-stream sometimes,” he said. Armed with the words of wisdom from my mother and my artist friend, I secretly ceased defining myself solely as a co-curator of the exhibition and I adopted the posture of performance artist, donning my mask to create a work of performance in “getting along” for the sake of the exhibition. My performance was to “tie it up and make it look pretty,” while all along wearing the mask. And it was pretty—a fabulous collection of engaging and inspiring works that I wanted visitors to connect with, to see themselves, their families, their neighborhoods, and their cultural presence in the galleries. I wanted them to ponder how they define themselves through representational imagery but also through things, their belongings, their spaces, and their stories of their invisibility yet their presence in the world. My conversations with the living artists in the show would have been helpful in communicating these ideas, but that was not to be. Instead, my curatorial position for this show recalled the emotions of poet Countee Cullen in his poem “Incident,” a poem I learned long ago. He recounted his childhood “riding in old Baltimore, heart-filled, head-filled with glee” until a “Baltimorean” child poked out his tongue and called him “Nigger.” Cullen was there a full summer taking in the sights and sounds but said, that’s all that he remembered.

Of course, I wasn't called the “N” word but I felt the same disappointment that Cullen voiced in his poem about a finite time in his life and “Of all the things that happened there,” with my co-curating the exhibition and curating the stellar artworks into that exhibition, the unfulfilled process was “all that I remember.” In wearing the mask, another poem rang out in my mind: “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Wearing the mask has its negative consequences. You can feel like someone has put both hands around your neck, squeezing until you can't breathe, you tell yourself to calm down and exhale then you think, did they really think I was just going to lay down and die? After the show opened, I thought of my wounded curatorial process, my dream deferred? What happens to a dream deferred? Wrote Langston Hughes in his poem “Harlem.” “Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” or “Does it explode?” I also thought, perhaps dramatically, of Claude McKay's poem “If We Must Die”: how can I handle this



because I know that when “pressed against the wall” I must fight back. I spoke up about the limits on my curatorial process and for speaking out, I was publically “thrown under the bus” by both museums.

So, after a long career of curating, I wondered again, how do I deal with this? My answer was to write and to read the words of visual artists, writers, and poets. They sustain me. I was, however, surprised that I received most solace when reciting the poems out loud as if to confirm their words in my mind. The words and heartfelt observations and feelings are as prescient today as they were I was younger and I suspect as when they were written. The thing about poetry, as many have said, it “says the unsayable” making it possible to find yourself in someone else’s poem. Incidents like limiting my curatorial practice encouraged me to seek safe haven in others’ words. I found myself in Langston Hughes’ poem “As I Grew Older.”

As I stood a fork in the road, the recent past, and the future, I put a time limit on how long I would dwell in the negativity under the bus. I decided to shatter the darkness behind me, to break the shadow, to crawl out from under that bus and head toward a brighter future of “a thousand whirling dreams” and into the sun.

## Manual for Still Hunting White-tailed Deer in a Gated Community

*found poem for Trayvon Martin*

Deer hunting in Florida is as old as recorded history. Actions delineated here are designed to ensure public desires

for recreation. As deer populations grow, so does popularity of hunting for recreation. The exploitation of deer increases

during this period. "Still Hunting" is characterized by stalking or concealing oneself and waiting for quarry. The practice

of hunting at feeding stations was legalized, enhancing opportunities for still hunters to locate and harvest.

In vehicles while coordinating movements with cell phones, hunters hunt larger blocks, sit next to trees or hide in bushes.

The newly formed Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission recognizes the need for public hunting

lands, so Florida's acres are open to public hunting, the vast majority open to deer hunting. To provide landowners with tools

and flexibility to control deer numbers, the Commission implemented a deer depredation program. Overpopulation

is the most pressing challenge. Deer in Florida are considerably smaller. In Florida, whitetails are known to have various types of trauma,

and are a species of wildlife whose over-abundance degrades its own habitat as well as the habitats of others. Delaying

harvest of bucks until maturity carries rewards: more bucks in subsequent years and seeing bucks is a key component

of hunter satisfaction. Seminole County is infested with white-tailed deer, so legislation approved deer eradication

throughout south Florida. Managing hunter satisfaction enhances overall recreational experiences. The Commission began

the comprehensive surveillance program to occur at two levels: passive and active. Passive involves observation and culling

of free-ranging deer that demonstrate abnormal behavior (suspect or target animals). Active includes random investigating

of hunter-harvested deer. The challenge will be to provide an array of opportunities that deer harvest will continue

as a necessary and desirable practice for many years. Whether a hunter prefers to harvest only mature bucks, or chooses

to harvest any deer within range is a value judgment. It is considered the most popular game in Florida.

## Southern Girl Hymn

I come from below  
the bedazzled belt  
of the Mason Dixon  
line, from a place where  
the Florida boot should be  
seen as Jim Crow's stiletto.  
I come from women who rule  
Blues men that carry guitar picks  
as pacifiers & rub out cigarette  
butts like blunts of sage with  
the same circuitous notion that  
a wedding ring does not make  
them monuments or placeholders  
on pot shelves. I come from  
women with swollen hands  
who create to spite a Parkinson's  
trimmer & rogue memory, the sugar,  
girdled hips & red velvet laughter  
luring insulin the way cat-4 hurricanes  
sepia a skyline, snap its shawl  
to whip pecan trees, & rustle  
ratchet wind chimes on wooden  
front porches. Where I come from,  
my South sounds like pejorative stereo-  
types like the clanging of my mother's  
aluminum cake pans, like Trayvon Martin's  
thank-you-ma'am-drawl at checkout  
and Paula Deen's braised remark  
to Hollis Johnson, an employee  
she asked to join her onstage, noting  
that he's "as black as the chalkboard"  
behind her. I come from magnolias &

dogwoods, strawberries & wild onions,  
stalks of corn fields & wild acre  
peas, pecan trees & cotton emancipations  
of reneged forty-acre deeds—a place under  
a horizon of fickle rainstorms,  
where snow only pleads for raincoats,  
Grandma Lacie's crocheted hats,  
and a red-thumbed mitten.

I come from secrets too  
big to be heard--A noise so  
loud angels swoop and dive  
from heaven, where *you gotta be  
able to either sing "The Battle Hymn  
of The Republic" or "Dixie."*

## Black Writer

*after Tony Hoagland*

Historically, it's a partition we've been contrived of  
since constitutions.

It's been perceived that our persona eats multiple servings of well-seasoned turnip greens  
and that we receive welfare checks at the first of every month.

Nevertheless, we *like* being identified as Black, as writers.

Has this made it more difficult for us to publish?  
Rhetorically, So.

But we can't "get tired" *until* we publish in White-  
Only magazines!

When I visit the trite, scanty shelves of the African American Literature section of the bookstore,  
how do I feel?

I know that more of us write, write about more than just being that.

Political Scandals, intrepid divorces, dying parents;

I know Black readers too need to see their lives reflected on the page—  
(re) memory and vinyl; the fear of vanishing.

*The job of the artist is not to leave you where she found you.*  
this art requires gentrification.

Subsequently, you will start to feel like the rite of blanket clichés  
are all you'll ever right in this world.

And gradually,  
throughout the picketing for  
contentions coloring who you are  
you deflect it, it adumbrates you

to write righter and righter.

## Like There's No Tomarrow

I always used to spell tomorrow  
with an a : t-o-m-a-r-r-o-w, and I

wrote it that way, the o stretched  
out, up through the nose into

the marrow of finger bones, blunt,  
calloused. The raw meat of a firm

handshake. A man's word instead  
of lawyer talk. No libel, except

*tomarrow its li'ble to rain.* And all  
of the tomorrows came back red

on my papers, but I never could  
remember that tomorrow didn't

have a tail in the middle because  
all my teachers said tomarrow, like

me. But I always knew that  
me and the teachers were different

from trashy white people who said *them*  
*apples* and pointed with cigarette

butts smoking. Saying *this here*, nails  
yellow, fingering name badges, while

I wrote a blog in high school on Open  
Diary.com. And knew vocabulary was  
critical to my elevation. That's why  
it's called higher education. I thought,

*I'm not like y'all. Forget you. I'm going  
to college.* Exasperated, (I used a big

word) I wrote online. *Tomarrow I'm  
out of here.* And Anonymous, some

commenter I didn't even know wrote,  
*what's wrong with you? You must be*

*some kind of redneck hillbilly  
to actually spell tomorrow that way.*



## As the Crow Flies

Carl, as we drove through the Ozarks  
I watched the mist ghosting down the ridge and wondered  
if I would live long enough to see all those trees  
taken down, and I am afraid the answer is yes.

We were only a few miles from where the police  
killed that boy, and it struck me like a strap across the back  
that I might have to explain which one, how some small  
menace could crack the façade of our guilty city  
and history recycle itself filthy as poisoned ground water.

I'm not sure what it means that we never have these conversations,  
the messy discussions where one misplaced opinion  
can change the way you see a person sure as the sharp end of a paring knife,  
but I know that while we are born to a litany of possible dooms,  
the sun still rises and sets and in between stretch  
long days we must try to live through and consider what has been  
given us and what is left for us to choose.

Carl, I want to know why some men are born  
with a need to fill or empty all the spaces,  
but never the capacity to leave things as they found them.

Carl, I want to know why all this fucking and still  
no baby, just softened middles and thinning hair,  
the bodies of two men pressing up against oblivion.

## Artificial Cloud

If the steel is left untreated the air will corrode  
the planes before they ever reach the tower.

Moral: time eats what it cannot forget.

The last century was marrow,  
now I live in a hollow bone.

I turn the bacon like an obsessive,  
I can't keep my head out of the oven,  
but nothing burns hot as Greenwood

on a Saturday night.

Inspiration is a nonrenewable resource.

In busted boomtown everything runs on electric,  
at night the transformers buzz like low flying planes.

*Move on.*

*Move on.*

Take down all the tall buildings so there is nothing left that scares us,  
just a parking lot stretching north from midtown.

Leave no inscription to commemorate where the skyline crested,  
just a memory we can skate across from Riverside

to where the buskers gathered on Brady,  
where we danced to their music because sometimes  
a body just needs to move.

## **Mask of Mother**

Today the pre-schoolers paraded in costumes, each one held onto a rope,  
on the rope were dozens of tiny loops, deathly knots, for each row of pre-schooler  
fingers. They were all something different, and something the same,  
no one was exactly who they claimed, no one was themselves.  
They are learning early to trade identities for other people's candy.  
The parents, trailing in the street to catch up to their small accessories,  
their prized accoutrements, each with a screen instead of eyes  
on their lovely, lovely loves. What comes next, now that the cherades are closing,  
what happens in the rooms when the parents are not there,  
what do the parents plot when the child is asleep.

I have been wearing the mask of "Mother," and no one has asked me to strip it.  
I do adjust it in occasional terror, who am I to shape a mustard seed,  
I cannot even file my nails in precise direction.  
My girl's hand shoots up, "Mommy!" she cries, I am adorned in banana costume  
because my greatest teaching is to not fear ridiculousness,  
her other hand looped in a noose. I didn't catch who was leading the feet and feet  
of rope and bodies, the four-year-old astronauts and princesses and firefighters.  
On the one day a year I am invited to trade myself in, to bury the self  
I have grown up with, I want to live alone. I want to remember myself  
before the well-adjusted masks, before the nooses I exchange with my sisters.

## Detroit Sings Lullabies but has a Vicious Backhand

Detroit is making a comeback. That's what everyone is saying, hell every year at the Super Bowl some famous celebrity is spouting that line while driving a luxury vehicle. "Imported from Detroit," they proudly proclaim as they drive through a dark Detroit, lit only by the most flattering of light.

I too was imported from Detroit built from my mother's overeager ovaries and my father's fatuitous sperm, neither of which could produce what they really wanted.

In a way Detroit is the same, a parent with high expectations of engineers, molding steel like Ford to make their fortune. Instead they got artists, children who scar with aerosol cans, painting the Virgin Mary with exposed breasts on the sides of museums. It's a bitter disappointment to Detroit but artists don't come from the realization of the American dream but the reality of its death.

My grandmother regales me with stories about the way Detroit used to be, where I see crippling despair leaking from cracks in the sidewalk she sees rose hued marks of character. When I express my distaste she looks at me from old eyes and asks, "Why can't you ever be satisfied?" Of course this is also the woman who has one ear cocked at all times in case her blubberous husband needs his ass wiped or a sandwich. I refuse to do that, to dance on egg shells for a man I only tied myself to because he was "honest."

There are honest people all up and down West Grand Blvd. street preachers who scream their hell-fire and brimstone into the air so when you breathe in its 90% sulfur. "You're going to hell," they tell me whenever I'm in range. I can't tell them they're wrong, my grandmother says the same thing because I wasn't baptized. I'm the only one of my family not to take the swan dive into a pool of water blessed by a man who wears dresses willingly but won't marry the trannies that strut down eight mile and who decides who can love who.

"Love" can be found easily in Detroit, for some it's the ten dollar and a condom kind, for others it's the kind of burden you have to wear around your neck like an albatross, or the tattoos of the gangs that kill in the name of the "family."

I don't know much about the origins of family. My great grandfather, an immigrant and a bastard took our real surname to the grave. No Ellis Island mix-up, just a cruel man whose son wanted to be an artist. He beat that out of him.

Detroit kicks it's artists while their down. Cuffs them, cages them, kills them with drugs and poor education, keeps them angry and illiterate so they can call beauty crime and expression vandalism. It's a sick cyclical trap.

Sticky webs cover my grandmother's porch, flies struggling for freedom and I wonder for the millionth time whether or not my grandmother keeps them there for

company. I want to tell her to run to sprint as fast as her slim legs can carry her to the life she could have had.

Everywhere you look Detroit asks what could have been.

It sneers, "Where did I go wrong?"

It grinds cigarettes into sidewalks and declares, "I did my best"

It turns its back and says, "Learn to swim or you will drown,"

Detroit builds resiliency. Some would say it builds survivors which sounds noble but parasites are survivors too.

My grandmother has survived fifty years of marriage but does that mean she lived? She read books about travel but never left a two block radius unless it was to grocery shop. She takes "happy pills" but there are grooves carved into her face that aren't from smiling. My grandmother is a husk, a shell, a ghost of the woman she was.

Detroit is littered with ghosts. They peer out the broken windows of Dubois St and they croon Motown hits from overgrown shrubbery. They helplessly watch with sad, liquid brown puppy eyes as Detroit does unspeakable things to its children. Ghosts dance around the gardens of Bell Isle and sprint down alleys, beg on street corners. They are trapped wherever a stray bullet kisses them.

I never saw my grandparents kiss, not once in my twenty-three years. There wasn't an ounce of physical affection just vows and a piece of paper that declared my grandmother a Mrs. as in Mister's as in belonging to the Mister.

Detroit has broken all of its vows, to its people, to its culture, to everyone that loved it. In a thousand different ways it has created fissures that are now gaping potholes that can never quite be fixed and will never be exactly the same. It is the expiration of all expectation.

My grandfather died two months ago, cancer and years of hate turning his body from formidable to pathetic. I was the only one who could look at him without crying. My own father wept for a man who had used meaty fists to discipline and my grandmother sobbed for a husband who had broken her soul. I took turns handing out tissues. When the funeral workers came to take him away my grandmother gripped my hand, "what will I do now?" she tearfully whispered. I had a thousand responses but I swallowed them back down, I have cruelty in me but I want to be different so I just kissed the top of her head and pressed her tiny frame into mine. It was the only thing I could do for her, in all her grief I couldn't find an ounce for myself. They laid a flag over his corpse because he was a veteran, as if being in the military makes you a good man and when they took him down the front steps I saw a neighbor stand and salute.

Detroit is making a comeback, bullshit I say, what is dead should stay dead.

## **Where Every Boy Is Known and Loved**

The classroom had no windows and every day one of the boys would close the door. Another hit the lights. In the darkness, they surrounded me, wanting to become men. In their eyes, I was nothing but the closest thing they could get their hands on.

My name dripped from their lips.

The blonde boy broke the circle, moving to the front of the classroom where I sat. He turned to face me. He leaned against the wooden desk where the teacher always sat. He spread his legs. He slowly unbuttoned the white shirt he always wore. His pupils never left my body. Then he cupped one hand six inches in front of his crotch, moving his hips back and forth, as though holding my head where it should have been.

From him my name came loudest. I hated the way he made it sound—as though I serviced him. As though I was only there for his pleasure. As though he had every right to do whatever he wanted with me. He thought my very existence gave him permission: my skin, my voice, my softness.

I also loved the way he said my name.

Other hands, as pale as his, crawled toward me. They climbed my legs and arms, petting me, poking me, stroking me—telling me I wanted it, telling me they owned me. There were only so many hands I could swat away; but they swarmed me, telling me to let it happen.

I also loved the way their hands felt—good, and right. I liked the strength and power in the way they touched me, the skin at their fingertips, at times translucent, going pink when they pressed against me. I feared them knowing this.

Sometimes they howled like wolves or barked like dogs. They dropped to the floor and humped the brown carpet until they tired themselves, gasping for me, growling and chanting my name. I froze, staring at them—victim to their power. Enamored of it.

Some days, the teacher would sit with me during free periods at a table in the upper commons grading papers, silently by my side. I wondered what he knew, whom he felt obligated to protect.

Because before class he would knock on the door, announcing his arrival, pausing, giving the boys time to scramble to their seats. They posed, waiting as though they'd been born like that, sitting in those seats, their eyes on the blackboard, pens poised for note-taking. Once we were silent, he entered the room. By then I was invisible, just another boy with eyes on the blackboard. The teacher waited, silent, in the dark. Then, with his right hand, he flipped the light switch. He walked to his desk and took his seat. He pulled a book from his briefcase. He licked his finger, opened the book, and said, "Alright, boys. Let's begin."

## Contributors

Originally from Los Angeles, **Drew Attana** spent over a decade kicking around the West Coast, getting into trouble from Tijuana to Portland, before heading to Cajun Country. His fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry has appeared in *Pathos Literary Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, *Drunk Monkeys Magazine*, *Yellow Chair Review* and is forthcoming in *Apeiron Review*, *Common Ground Review* and *Cargo Literary Review*. He is currently living and writing in Lafayette, Louisiana.

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