

ABSTRACT

BLEACH ME

As an African-American child growing up in the South, I have lived and moved among white society for so long that I wear them as a second coat, a second skin even. Growing up, white wasn't just a language to learn, it was a whole dominant culture to embrace while living in an opposing and arguably reactionary culture. This collection of essays is centered on identity; questioning, defining, and engaging with an intentionally misplaced identity. Identity-- affecting, reshaping, abusing, and refocusing that identity-- is always "what's at stake," when one transverses their history and others histories and stories. This collection, then, is centered on the ideas of "code switching" and "double consciousness," taking the theories to a space where they've become an actual identity, have become the only stable sense of self I own. Because this collection is, at its core, about ownership, about owning your own problems, bridging and integrating your own experiences within a collective and intentional creating and understanding your individual-self outside the collective.

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BLEACH ME

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	1
BLACK BUFFER.....	4
THE BLEACHER GIRLS.....	7
INDEPENDENT SHADOW	18
FIRST CLASS	29
FAN(ANTICS).....	39
LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER	45
LIST, LETTERS, AND NOTES: A MARRIAGE.....	56
FORGED LINKS.....	69
ON BEING A CHAIR.....	81
ON BEING A SHOE: A MEDITATION.....	84
CONSEQUENCES OF APRIL.....	93
PAYING FOR A PLOT	109
DRESSING FOR THE HOSPITAL.....	119
HIS EYES.....	129

PREFACE

I've lived years without a true sense of identity. I am a chameleon. I have successfully skirted the ultimatum to define who you are from both black and white society. I slipped quietly into groups, movements, cultures, and classrooms, adapting to whatever role I needed to play. Life, as of now, is about survival, living only in shutter speeds and picture frames, living in moments. My chameleon self is an expression of survival, which by the end of the collection, I find I do well. At the age of twenty-five I listen more than I should. You would think by this age I'd have gathered enough intel. on life to wing my way into adult conversations and argue theories and reshape our political atmosphere behind a classroom desk. I do, in fact, speak my mind on occasion, but there is always a double filter present. Most times I am content to sit back and observe and learn and take pieces of others and reshape those parts to fit me. Sometimes I feel as if I were a schizophrenic Marionette Doll, just waiting to see who will pull my strings and what talk I'd talk and thoughts I'd think. And at other times I feel like a new age robot, becoming sentient as I gathered these survival tools from my own stories and observations, from the stories of my family, from social interactions and reactions with varying strands of stimuli, stringing the experiences together in an evolving collage of "me," whatever that being develops into.

As an African-American child growing up in the South, I have lived and moved among white society for so long that I wear them as a second coat, a second skin even. Growing up, white wasn't just a language to learn, it was a whole dominant culture to embrace while living in an opposing and arguably reactionary culture. The older women of my culture, as they watched me flip

through a teenie bopper magazine while trying to twirl my short, wool-like hair, wearing a Senegal inspired dashiki to church, used to say, "The negro in that child don't know what to do." And they were right. W.E.B. DuBois called this "double consciousness", where one's self-consciousness is continually filtered through another's point of view, through another's identity. "Code switching" is another relatable term. "Code switching" is defined in its name. It is the ability to switch back and forward linguistically, using various languages, or social switching-- the ability to act first to a predicted reaction from a person of a dominant group. This is what I know.

This collection is centered on the ideas of "code switching" and "double consciousness," taking the theories to a space where they've become an actual identity, have become the only stable sense of self I own. Because this collection is, at its core, about ownership, about owning your own problems, bridging and integrating your own experiences within a collective. This collection is fragmented. Imagine a once there but now broken link in a circular chain. Who will fix the link? Will you fix it with another piece of metal, or plastic, or string? Will you step in and become a physical link tying both sides together? There are so many choices, decisions, and half realized problem solving ideas but at the beginning, the purpose is not about the fix, but rather the rush of creation and the sensation of journey. This is about the pieces of information and perspectives and advice given to me to reevaluate constantly who I am and catalogue the attempt to conjure a socially acceptable and presentable identity.

Is this book about survival? Yes. Is this book about feeling manufactured, feeling as if you were born to be an informant, or a translator for two dominant color cultures in America? Yes, definitely. Is this about family and relationships? Yes. This collection, then, is about my relationship with identity through different

stories, different people, and different moments in my life that have shaped that identity, allowing me to tell a story and work through a theory, a theory that will allow me to exist wholly or grant me some kind of peace to play the part I was given, and to play it well.

BLACK BUFFER

My summation of my own personal identity grew out of a beach analogy. Imagine, if you would, the sea at night. The waves during the day are a multi-hued shimmer of blue. At night, a dark inky blackness. The waves would back up and up and up, preparing to launch themselves at the barrier of land in front of it, knowing that the universe aligned only in a few, brief, moments in time where the impossibility of making shore is in reach. So for years, for generations the dark seas brushed up against the sand mass and waited.

When the time came, the dark waves rushed into the sand. The theory of coming ashore fell between peaceful movements and a militant movement. Some of the waves crashed violently into the sands defensive borders, breaking down, breaking into the barrier lines. The white sand dunes, aggressively huge with dilapidated cones on top of their heads, could only hold back the tide for so long until the lines blurred between what was sea and what was beach. The white beach tired an equal separation with the black sea, but the oxymoron was moronic. With feverish determination, the waves bashed without pause. Then the sea splintered. Other waves burrowed under the sand moving as far and wide as possible. Others settled to marry with as much sand as possible, engineering their aggressive, physical DNA to stick to the individual grains, creating a new mixture of dark and light, moving up the beach by moving up the color palette.

As the dark waters' technique and purpose became more sophisticated, small droplets of dark sea were catapulted farther into the sands density, creating honey colored instances like me, a 'freed' generation of black and white, midnight sea and white beaches. My generation could easily be a crop full of

translators or a crop full of informants. Where the sand met the sea, we were created, a Black Buffer. Some might argue that my generation was engineered to be black bodies filled with white knowledge, tempered with a black consciousness, and centered in our sole purpose to transform into planks on a walking bridge, allowing the sea to come ashore and build yet another breed of people until we became something—else—something entirely new.

Even so, a reactionary identity is an identity gathered and pieced together from positive or negative reactions to an event, a person, a place; things even. The world was formed from actions and reactions. We change; we embrace or push away from an action evoking a reaction from us. We have a reaction, creating and shaping in a width of time, a new identity making a cognitive decision to be a part of or apart from a particular group; a particular group identity. Collectively, as a global society, we have parts and pieces of a reactionary identity.

Our brains, on the other hand, naturally internalized and boxed stimuli in storage bins near the forefront of our mind. When we analyze and create enough distance from the origin of our reaction, we would see the different parts or realize the moment where we reshaped ourselves to fit a newly revised vision of self. But what if your whole identity began as a reactionary identity? What if you were created, given life as if you were artificial intelligence, to be an established reaction to an action? What if your ancestral identity was lost, the roots to your past substantially frayed, and your whole identity was based on not being “them” or maybe being better than this elusive “them”? What if your racial identity was based off a reactionary identity from another race, your race a springboard result from another’s? What’s the fight, the lifetime purpose of the offspring the race produces? Where would the assembled crop of translators and

informants go? Do the hybrids stay between sea and beach? What happens to them?

THE BLEACHER GIRLS

“Fair skin is like education, a social and economic step up.”-S.Malik

In class I follow the teacher with my plain brown eyes as she makes her rounds around the room. We are discussing a reading, a map, an equation. As she moves across the room she will pass four girls whose arms, over the semester, have gradually lightened. The melanin in our skins is pierced repeatedly as we wait for the foundation to break and blossom into fair and bright; our skins becoming broken brown pixels in an image, a mirage, until the process is complete and we are as neutral as manila; a soft, non-threatening tanned color; no longer such a harsh black. She passes me first.

We are the Bleacher Girls even though we are not friends, not acquaintances. We add whitening cream to our everyday makeup routine; can even smell each other apart from the lunch bell crowd. Some always smell like Colgate toothpaste. Others, well, the acrid smell is an acquired taste, but Super White Whitening Essence, from the Chinese beauty supply store— found in the crosshairs of every lower-middle to poor class neighborhood— works so well. Mercury with the addition of hydroquinone creates an aggressive response to skin color, lightening stubborn pigmentation. The side effects— fatigue, irritation, headaches, bad attitudes, and scabs— are paltry compared to the sensation of progression. Our skins crackle like Pop Rocks. We are taught by other Bleachers or teach ourselves to love the painful twitch of our skins. The desire to be more than just black; the desire to be better than what black offered us became a mantra echoing in the locked doors of our mental space, a compulsion that we rolled between our fingers like prayer beads.

The summer before seventh grade I participated in Girl Scout camp, and naïvely thought everything my white friends could do, I could do as well. When they sun bathed, I rolled out my beach towel with them. They took a swim in the local river without a swimming cap on, I dove in after them, wanting to feel the river water run over my naked scalp and see the wet strands float in front of my face.

Before my mother dropped me off at camp, she warned me to use my sunscreen daily. “You don’t want to come back blacker than you left,” she reminded me as I leaped out of the still parking car. Shrugging off her warning, I was well aware that everywhere I went I was blacker than everyone else and a little sun wouldn’t change that.

When we hit our bunk beds at night some of the cabin or tent girls rubbed a type of lotion on their arms, legs, chest, face, and feet. The colored lotion varied from a thick, pearly white hue to a shimmering gold color. As the weeks went by we began tossing each other our different colored lotions, swapping pearly whites, golden flakes, and bronze liquids. Our beauty supply list consisted of pink and clear lip-gloss, blue and purple Chap Stick, double bubble gum, short or fat hair rollers, combs, brushes, and nail polished unearthed from someone’s suitcase. Every morning or night the bottles of lotions and sticks of things would fly over the room, arcs like a grasshopper from Kate’s bed to my bed to the bottom bunks and so forth. We shared like sisters and for the summer that’s exactly what we became. We didn’t have a lot of mirrors in the camp, but the morning of parent pickup, my mother provided an excellent shard of silver.

Tugging my luggage from the bottom of the hill to the top, I started running when I saw my mother and grandmother perched on the passenger side of our burgundy Grand Am Pontiac. I launched myself into my mother's arms. A quick hug and greeting passed between my mother and me. When she pulled back, she looked into my face and frowned. She stretched my arms open, looking and frowning at every patch of skin she could see exposed from my t-shirt. Shaking her head with this amazed look on her face, she quickly let me know I had turned three to four shades darker, blacker — uglier, from her tone. My grandmother laughed and rubbed my back while the inspection took place. When I completed the last circle I spun as my mother and grandmother looked on, I stopped in front of my grandmother and there she took her hug from me and toddled back into the car, amused at my mother's frustration at me and my skin. Truly confused at the point, my mother shooed me out of the way and loaded my suitcase in the trunk of the car while I loaded the rest into the back seats. Before I was seated in the car with the car door closed, mother threw a volley of questions at me asking, "where is your sunscreen? Didn't I tell you to wear your sunscreen? What did you do to yourself? Have you seen yourself lately? You are blacker than me. Kimberly? Can I get an answer young lady?"

Going down the mountain I whimpered out responses as best I could, still unsure why she was so angry with me. "The black will go away Johnnie. Stop worryin', both of y'all," my grandmother said tightly, looking over at the fifty foot drop as we took another sharp curve.

After the summer blackening with the sun-tan rather than sun-screen lotion, I remembered staring at myself in the mirror wondering, yes, these are the

same features, but the colors are all wrong. I'm in the wrong colors. I'm different, not the same. I've embodied a different body and the results are not what I want. I am used to my Native American features permeating my black features. The opposite had occurred. I am used to my skin looking a tragic mulatto color, looking as if I had swallowed a red sunset covered in a brown paper bag, stitched up with red and gold string, a romantic skin color I was told, as if I was a holiday package. I was told this description is a beautiful description—one I should wear proudly. The brownish, sunset skin would showcase a golden hue, an exotic hue, a hue that would help me move around in social circles, not hinder me. When I arrived home I unpacked and bolstered enough courage to step into the hallway bathroom and peer into the vanity mirror. Looking in the mirror, it looked as if I rolled around in black soot and instead of looking like a completion ready Dalmatian I looked like a bruised Labrador.

Fall hit. The school semester began. I was still skillet black when my seventh grade year started and no amount of high-class fashion, naughty t-shirts, or name brand shoes would offset the signpost of 'dirty.' I looked dirty, rolling in black ashes dirty. Everyone saw dirty, before they saw me.

I kept mostly to myself the beginning of fall semester. My involvement with the Bleacher Girls was accidental. We never spoke about our particular beauty regimen; never complimented each other on the resulting smooth skin, bright skin, or the tell-tell smell. Maybe once or twice in an informal 'black' meeting, set in the corner of our cafeteria, the topic of skin color would come up with other people and we might join in the universal conversation. Flashes of an ebony shoulder, blond braids flung over a capped sleeve, browns, browns and

more browns gathered in that corner discussing and discovering what we meant when we said black; what tidbits we knew about being such, compared to what we knew about ourselves versus our collective selves, and how to fill in the gaps between the three. What we knew about the broad term of identity always filtered through the ranging colors of our black, brown, and red bone shells of skin.

The best justifying argument for a black woman to bleach came from a fourteen-year-old classmate. Ross and I started our peculiar friendship during seventh grade, my skillet year and the beginning of her Outsider years. The relationship lasted until senior year in high school even though we attended different schools. Often times during lunch or in class Ross argued that if white girls are allowed and even encouraged to tan, to darken their skin, then why can't black girls whiten ours? Over Sloppy Joes and boxed chocolate milk in middle school, I guess it made some sense. Misery loves company so Ross and I made sense as well. Even then, I didn't think it was equivocally the same, but if she could find a solution to get me back to what I used to look like, or even brighter than before, I was game.

The first couple of weeks of the continuous dark jokes: "Damn! What happened to you? You dark as hell?" & "Hey hey skillet." & "You used to be so pretty homie, what happened? The hell you roll in?" and stares from both black and white schoolmates spurred me into action. Ross was there for a few of the jokes. Sometimes she threw up her middle finger at the accusations and at others she just hid within her never-ending sweatshirt or hoodie.

Ross knew that I'd treat the problem like a white girl with an accidental tan. She would tell me sarcastically: "Welcome to my world," with her head cocked to the side and her lips pursed in an attitude. Ross understood somehow that dark, then, was only a matter-of-time problem—at least for me. We both knew I would turn back to a lighter shade of dark—she wouldn't. Ross used to say something along the line that I would use the skillet, but she and the skillet would always be friends.

I knew that some of the Bleacher Girls kept creams and toothpaste and washcloths in their lockers. After gym or when one was having a particular bad day in the skin department, between classes, they knew that a quick application of 'lotion' would calm the panic. I never did this at school. I couldn't afford to panic. The thought of being caught terrified me. The thought of being called a liar, having your contradictions pointed out, having someone remind you that the skin you're in, is the skin people were "kill'd over, dieeed over so that today you could even fathom the idea of walking freely, proudly; without censure in your black, beautiful, nappy headed, African American skin girl!" Being caught was out of the question. There was too much at stake to lose. Too many eyes to watch my disgrace, my terminal fall from black culture and an African heritage. So I went home to fall, to scrub away at history, to detach myself as quietly as possible from this all-encompassing identity.

In hindsight, there's nothing wrong with being black; it's a phenomena I cherished, but looking black, that had to go somehow, had to change. Looking black holds sanctioned connotations that no one, ever, aptly prepares you to cope with.

When in the course of doing something wrong, I lurked down the main hallway and hid in the bathroom where there's only one- chest high mirror. My mother, a cosmetic consultant, kept boxes of Mary Kay cosmetic products in boxes stacked under sink counter. My mother used a type of white cream on her face daily. Rummaging through the boxes I found that she had a type of brightening cream in her boxes and boxes of creams and liquids. I wondered if I could find the cream she used on her face to smooth and brighten— because brightening and whitening are synonymous— right? Brightening moisturizer and whitening cream looked and smelled the same to me. Like a lye perm, once you smelled the thick chemical shed odor, you always remembered it. I thought that by combining toothpaste and the brightening cream, I could double the resulting timetable. The product was smallish and I remembered the outside colors of pink and white. The thimble amount I used fizzed and tingled in the palm of my hand. After playing around in the stuff, drawing initials and shapes on my palm and the tips of my fingers, once I washed and dried my hands, just a little skin rubbed off afterwards. No more than a small amount of dead skin, rolled up tightly and easily discarded waste.

Progress. During a brightening session, I piled the Colgate toothpaste high on my face, as if it were an everyday minty normal, red and white mask. Waiting out the overbearing sting from the menthol mask to become more manageable, I prepared my bath. The water would be as hot as possible. I would feel the heat sear my nerve endings and sink into my bones in a dawning reality that I am burning, and am sinking into the liquid flames, waves lapping, burning at my feet and ankles as the steam dried sudden tears. The water would be hot enough

that I could scrub with any abrasive soap, beads, exfoliating pumice bar with ease, the hot water easing my skin into submission.

The lunch table stopped at our belly buttons and as usual our elbows framed our green lunch trays. Ross and I spent most of over friendship over trays of food, looking across them as if we were looking into a foggy mirror, but could manage to see ourselves. We were geeky and nerdy and passionate about everything during our years together in school. Ross researched the whitening creams and the acceptable side effects of using the creams before discussing our skin lightening prospects. Her argument that first day, when we sat down with food trays between us, was swift, inarguable, and audience appropriate. She captured my attention. Her reasoning to bleach, to use this cream over that cream, intrigued me—so of course I researched her research. I didn't know what to look for while in middle school, but I encountered ads like this: "Bleaching creams for African Americans usually include nature-based products... Fair people are considered beautiful conventionally. Everyone craves to look fine and elegant with a bright appearance..." The expanding Internet was filled with statements that sounded familiar; rang true to my ears. The ads, I found, gave me a sense of connection that I had with Ross. I was not alone in my skin or in my skin warfare.

In college, while doing a research proposal for an Africana Studies class, I came upon a particular yet random article on bleaching cream, a literal white ghost from the past. I took a moment to read the first page of the article, which quoted the promotion of a new age bleaching cream offered a "reasonable skin tone" as an outcome from using the product. I read that, "there [were] various

bleaching creams available in the market and every cream promise [d] to diminish skin discoloration and dark spots [...] Usually African Americans exhibit a darker skin tone, which [is] easily transformed. Most celebrities such as Beyonce, Oprah and Halle Berry are African Americans, but they flaunt a reasonably lighter skin tone.” I remembered thinking that I wanted a “reasonable skin.” Looking down at my arms, the years and sun had darkened my skin yet again, and I wanted—needed— “a reasonable skin,” a skin tone that I could flaunt. If I could possess the best of both black and white worlds—being black, but looking white-ish—having a Halle Berry complexion could solve all kind of glass ceiling problems, right? The ads were convincing, and the article spoke about the ad consumers buying dreams in a bottle. Even in Africana classes, where we faced our blackness, learned to appreciate our blackness, learned where it lived, where it grew up, where it was validated, and suckled from powerful nations, I couldn’t see past a mirror image reflecting a pretty red face with an easily erased layer of dull brown on top. The cream seemed like an easy remedy, a quick fix for a black blemish, a mistake. I could fix this I thought over and over again, staring in the mirror. *I could fix this if I wanted.*

On the right hand side of the article’s website, there were other links to the “worldwide bleaching crisis.” Clicking on the links to see where this line of thought led, I found other bleaching ads. Some of the articles highlighted different ethnic groups of young girls and women going through a familiar whitening process. There were Bleacher Jamaican girls, Bleacher Indian girls, Bleacher Asian girls.

In Jamaica, Jamaican girls use Fare and Bright. The brown and black girls call each other darkie. They wait for hours in their beauty shops, waiting for a chair, waiting for a hairstylist to brush a thick, perm-like cream called Fare and Bright all over their face, neck, hands and arms. These key places seem to take to the cream faster. In Jamaica, it's a known fact that "fare and bright" will deliver the higher paying jobs desired and the social status you want. The Jamaican girls think about this as they wait for the burn to begin.

In India, Indian girls use Skin White, like Snow White. The brown and black girls smooth over recommended body lotions, covering the colored henna tattoos on their hands and feet, before they go to work to American call centers and undergo the scrutiny of India's caste system. They call each other dusky and dark, insults, but some say aptly named. Nearly ten to fifteen females per month are treated for burns. Indian girls become Bleacher Girls at the age of twelve and continuously bleach until they're thirty-five. After thirty-five, an unmated, dark woman becomes even more invisible, so why bother.

I learned that it's a worldwide epidemic to become "light, bright, and damn near white." In America, black, brown, and yellow girls use products from L'Oreal and Clinique to bleach. They ignore each other, but not the taunt of their skins or the undisclosed reality of brighter is better, and lighter is hotter. Black girls are called *tar babies*, even though we shouldn't be quite offended since a member of Congress called our black and white President a tar baby. I mean if a voted, government official and member of our ruling body can call our mixed President a *tar baby*, why not the little black and brown girls?

And yet, after years have passed, after school projects, after the research, after coming to terms with my skin somewhat, I've started the habit again. The pressure to blend in has taken its toll and wherever I am, whatever I might be doing, I'm a skillet again. I just can't seem to get rid of all the dirt. I'm back to using toothpaste. Just a little under my eyes, around my nose and neck. Crest Whitening burns hotter and faster than Colgate or perhaps my skin is thinner now than back in seventh grade. I've stumbled upon more research, looking to see how whitening cream has evolved, where I might get some, and wondering who would even know if I turned up a shade or two different.

I can already hear the compliments. I can see my skin blush a little and I can hear them say—there's something different about you today. Well yes, I traded up in the skin department (wink). There's—somethingggg different about you Crews. Oh you've noticed, yes, I'm closer to manila than ever before (tee hee). Wow you look bright today darlin'. Not so gloomy, huh? (Laughs) Yes, well, no more going back there.

INDEPENDENT SHADOW

There were the: coolwhitekids, coolblackkids, smartandnerdyasians, skateboardandsmokingasians, thefatlatinos, thewhores, thelatinochicksdatingthewhitecoolguys, thecheerleadersquad, theMcDonaldhoes, thesportfans, thedopeddealers, and the chessplaying/choirkids. Branding ran rampant like bagged, red Kool-Aid in Shamrock Middle School, nestled in all its suburban glory. There were no limits and yet there were boundaries everywhere. Skin was no longer the only boundary between people at Shamrock. Skin was just another brand you wore. The brand, however, dictated where you could/would go, whom you could/would go with, and what you might do with them. There were many courts divided among Shamrock's grounds. Some were concerned or rather puzzled about this historical edict, while other went along to get along, happy in their own center of gravity inside their individual group. The front yard of the schoolhouse served as the mass-convening place for each group. It was also the first place where I meet Charles.

Now picture this: a 1970s time capsule. Inside is a long lengthwise school. Many angles and long hallways you'd follow, going toward the towering Pine trees near the back of the school. Nearing the end, the school building dips and in a maze of movement, downward toward the rear, there is a football and track field. Just beyond there, railroad tracks ran miles behind the field. At the front of the building there are four Grecian styled columns and four shamrock-colored, green doors in between the columns. No more than thirty feet from the columns there is the sidewalk where parents dropped their students off at the crumbling curb. As the student crossed the curb knowingly or unknowingly, they've pushed their way through the Shamrock bubble and into the middle of the

courts, which occupied the slabs of rock boulders and climb-able trees at the narthex of our school. Here the student would be processed, analyzed, hazed, and sorted into their prospective brand and group.

I was what they called a floater. I didn't have a particular society in which I called home, but I was not without my charms to flit and flirt from one group to the next. It was easy for me to become an object in the room and fill a gaping void in a group, and then as quickly remove myself from that void and become an active participant— in another group. I provided the lip service one wanted to hear. That was one of my main contributions and, all in all, it was good to be me.

I was an independent agent for a while, a shadow created by others' well-lit assurance of place and identity. I hid within crowds and observed, learned, picked up group habits and stored them for later analysis, determining if I could use them to help myself in some small or big way. I was in the spring semester of my seventh grade year in the late 90s and I had a secret affair only Elizabeth Glizermacher found out about.

When the formalities of schoolwork, gym, and lunch time ended, we all left the our courts, and en masse crowded onto the varying buses headed for home or to a shuttle, a collection of buses which would exchange students from bus to bus, recollecting the disbursed students, then forming other smaller groups to take us home, to do this type of redistributing again tomorrow. I treasured this type of transportation. The buses took me from a majority white school to a heavily populated black shuttle in minutes. It was at these shuttles where I learned the ins and outs of black, social society. It was here where I learned how to equip myself quickly for either going white— going to school— or going black— surviving the bus ride home. The closer I came to my house in small, rural-like Ellenwood, the quicker the masquerade mask would peel down

from my face, and unhook its sticklers from my throat. Home since my first day of first grade meant a grade of freedom unattainable anywhere else. I didn't have to choose white or black—I just was—able to exist in both realms simultaneously.

When the school day finished, we were all herded towards the buses, most going to the shuttle from school. I found myself scrunched between a body and the window on the overcrowded bus. The sudden gush of air cleansed the smell of body odor and the sweet powdery smell of Kool-Aid and sugar rocks. This was the typical scent of an afternoon in the metro Atlanta area, on a Dekalb County yellow school bus.

Another hard breeze blew in from my opened window. My newly permed hair slapped against my face as I waited, on a mild, Friday afternoon, pressed against the bus window. The urge to go home, slip back into me, and indulge in the latest *Family Matters* episode had me banging my head slightly on the window. It was way passed time to go. I looked out the square window, overlooking the scenery from my perch until a shadowy blur of golden blond and white cream caught my attention. I turned my head, trying to catch up with the blur. Charles. His name was Charles. Dressed in a long baby blue, Tar Heel t-shirt, with navy blue denims, rockin' the new white, Air Force Ones, with a Tar Heel, baby blue baseball cap on his head—lawd have mercy I was speechless. He was everything white I'd ever wanted. Maybe the sensory overload of blue and gold was what knocked me off my feet, but in that moment I could have sworn 'fore God that a Greek deity, with a curly, Cesar cut hair style glided right by my bus— a bus which pulled away from the curb and began its trek towards the shuttle miles, miles away from him. And dammit if the bus didn't slow down. My life was on the eclipse of change and the bus wobbled along, moving

the exact opposite of where I wanted to go. I stared, even when he felt the hairs on his neck stand up, even when he glanced around his entourage behind him; even when he glanced over his shoulder and saw my face, turned around and stopped to look at me, puzzled, I stared and stared until we were turning at the bottom of the hill, and all I could see was black and gray asphalt. Those baby blue eyes haunted me the whole weekend, nipping at my feet like hell dogs humorously playing with a running morsel — before they ate it.

Shamrock Middle School was a male culture shock after all. When I left Fernbank Elementary, a mostly female world, Shamrock's maleness placed me in a state of foreign, and if not continuous arousal. Once I got over the unsavory state, there was a constant awareness of the innate differences between the sexes, our gender roles, and the social behavior, which stretched between the two sides. It was a struggle to find where I fit, coming from an asexual elementary to the highly sexed middle school. My newly budding breasts pointed me in the direction of the suffocating pink and powdery smells of the giggling girls, but my torn and worn combat boots, five pocket combat pants, and a regular t-shirt said I had more in common with the boys. Not knowing how to feel or what to act on, I faded further into the background, adjusting whatever piece of fashion or other element I needed to fit the group or the occasion. Language, clothes, hair-do's, body clip-on piercings, academic abilities, translating abilities; whatever talents or goods I had to offer were dynamic from day to day, court to court, and on some days, the only asset needed was my mouth.

My mouth was a gold mine in the late 1990s. It's not a spectacular mouth like Kate Winslet or an overly suggestive mouth like Angelina Jolie. My oral cavity is three inches wide and one-inch high, medium plush and with a hushed pink tint, Liz said once. I've learned that lip-gloss is a neon welcoming sign. It

says, yes I am open for business: to talk, to kiss, to flirt; to give what another won't. The two halves are kept dull until I need to lie out a welcoming sign on the masquerade mask.

The King of the coolblackkid's court, also known as the Black Court, was Jason Coursault. He wore the number six jersey on Shamrock's football team. He had the number one spot in everyone's heart, except mine. Everyone, including Jason, came in last after Charles, the boy I saw from the bus. Being that my surname is Crews, Jason and I stood in the same alphabetical lines in school and had the same homeroom together year after year. He encompassed everything good, in a sense. The teachers loved him; he was smart, tall, brown like baking suga, soft spoken, and kind, if not a little devious. He won Homecoming Court our seventh grade year and I believe King our eighth year. I realized that the key to his court was through him and the key to the females in his court was obtained through his equal, Nell Meriweather.

Any good investigator worth her salt would know that Jason's attention grabber, if you weren't his type of female, was football. We can do football, I thought.

"Good game you played last-night," I said, not quite looking him in the face while we sat in homeroom, spring semester of our seventh grade year.

"Thanks Kim."

"Uh. I didn't say great Jason, I said good. If you dropped one more ball and got tackled one more time, I was going to bench you myself."

"Damn. I guess I'm sorry then." His face reverted back to a brown perfection, portraying the innocent-good ole boy expression and I melted, if only for a minute. He replied, "You watch football?"

“Yup I do. It’s an outing for me and my dad—” until I yawned and fell asleep somewhere between Dad’s shoulder and lap.

“Yeah? It’s the same for me. My Dad coaches me. I’ve been playing since little league.”

Bingo. Got ‘em, I thought to myself. We spent the short time in homeroom talking about his games and our Georgia History class, being that we were in the Advanced/ Magnet program and shared classes with each other. We were good acquaintances; we were right where I wanted us to be.

I remember the ongoing topics in the coolblackkid’s court. You had to have or at least have heard of the latest albums from T.I., Coolio, Bone, Thugs, and Harmony, Pastor Troy, etc. The coolblackgirls, a subdivision of the Black Court, kept up with the latest Aaliyah outfits, in- court drama, and the R&B stars. For both enjoyment and research, I bought stacks and stacks of cassette tapes and record different radio stations from V103, Kiss 104.7 and HOT 97.5, educating myself on the new slang, the new artists, and the new hip/hop, R&B tracks— educating myself black. I did the same for the new rock, heavy metal, and country tracks for the coolwhitekid court. I understood somehow that in my evolving consciousness, striving to identify myself through imitations, to survive in either court, I had to copy this week’s imitations, learn the language, learn the lyrics, the fashion; the swag. This, at least in the Black Courts, was more important than having the correct, manila type skin tint.

Unlike other courts, the coolblackkids had white knights and dukes. Charles was definitely an aristocrat in the Black Court or the coolblackkids group. As a floater, I found my way into the coolwhitekids court or the White Court— just as Charles found his way into the Black Court. I walked among the White Court as a shadow, but I was still too noticeable. How can you observe

while being observed? And I needed to watch and learn, especially if Charles was anywhere in the picture. Charles' attention, like Jason's, was only obtainable through court status or special interest, and I didn't know enough about him to create a critical and most desired bond. I spent one glorious semester with Charles and he never knew the color of my eyes. King Charles, a nickname which floated around the school, was apropos. For the coolwhitekids court Charles ruled. There were rumors of a jealous mistress he kept on the side, which meant yet another hurdle I had to deal with. My role for the White Court was, of course, to be the token example of white sincerity and friendship toward the black race. I filled the cultured role. I was the chess playing, choir kid, with a background in classical music studies, theater on stage, honest/intimidating Girl Scout cookies seller, and a fan of Faulkner and Zane, which sat side by side in my makeshift bookshelf at home. Oh I was hot for my individual talents, but I was not his type of hot and Liz Glizermacher finally sat me down for a word or two.

"Kim. You like Charles, don't you?"

"Say what? Nooff. Of of course I don't. Why would you say something like that?"

"You don't have to insult me," Liz said, twirling her left point finger through her hair, stopping to pluck and tear at the split ends from her blond hair.

"Remember sweetie, this blond is from a bottle. I've been talking to you about Peer Helpers for the last fifteen minutes and you've been staring at Charles for fourteen of them."

"You're psycho. I was doing no such thing. And, if I was, it was only for learning purposes. Your court seems to have some kind of pull on the others. The power to set the standard is something you should pay close attention to."

“Uhhuh. I don’t know how staring at his ass or keeping a creepy journal of him—”

“It’s of all of the courts!”

“Ok—creepy journal of him *and* the courts— is gonna help you literally join the club, sweetie.”

“I’m *in* the club Liz, just not as— active.”

“You know Kim, I can introduce you, but it’s never going to work out sweetie. He’s dating *the* whore over there and Annie Fincher told me, that her sister told her, that his gf beat some girl up for talking to him and then...” Her soliloquy was soon tuned out by the bottoming out bass beats of my heart. “He belonged to someone else” and “It’ll never work,” were the only words I could remember.

The word stalker is defined as someone who commits “an act or course of stalking quarry, prey...stealthily.” I—accidentally— infiltrated the Front Office and fandangled an old copy of his progress report. From that report, I—accidentally again, you know—found out his place of residency, what classes he attended, and from that, what girls were in class with him, other specimens I needed to understand. By the middle of the semester, I knew the patterns of his dress, knew the ins and outs of the White Court, and could predict group movements and reactions. The different groups who wanted favors from me traded favor for access into their lives, into their personal patterns. I knew everything and I regretted nothing.

Study to show thyself approved, a quote from second Timothy always came up in the three worlds of home, church, and school. I applied the saying to everything I did. In many of our conversations, my father unknowingly created an urge within me to study my enemy, study the people who are the standard,

who make the standard, set the rules. Between my parents, church, and the few and far in between black teachers I had, I was told that you had to watch your “enemy,” your adversary. You had to study them, understand their reactions, know their decisions, what they think before they realize what they themselves are thinking. I was taught that this is the only way to survive among and outside the standard quo, in this weary watching capacity. I learned early in my childhood, growing up fast, that keeping my culture at a distance and the White Court’s customs, traditions, mindset, and all other aspects close to my chest was, is, the only way to circumvent the glass ceiling analogy – and I wanted that.

Life by the age of twelve was all about tactics. I was extremely smart both in books and subtle military tactics. I sold my literary, historical, scientific and musical skills, and even parts of my heritage, to give me an unlimited pass to most of the cliques in Shamrock. As Carlos Rivera said, “Fair exchange is no robbery” and I listened and learned and adapted coolness and the standards into my regular regimen. By the end of seventh grade year, not only did I make the Principle’s List, but also the popular roll call. I had a place of sorts, no longer in the in between. It was time for me to stop stalkin’ and start a-walkin’. I was going to set down roots in both the White Court and Black Court, going from where I was to where I wanted to be.

Charles was a year ahead of me, I believe. That year, all I saw was that he was up and I was down, and I felt an unusual guilt about focusing so much on him. He had broad shoulders, a six-pack of abs and a face that surely Michelangelo painted faint peach and constructed sweeping cheekbones and full lips, sultry and aggressive. With bleach blond hair, his eyes always seemed to glow, as if a struck match burned behind them. I was smitten. And every time I gazed at him without the pretense of studying him, I bore an unmerciful guilt.

The smitten feelings felt forbidden. The consideration of more felt illicit. I just knew somehow that anything more than working for a white man, or being platonic work friends, is wrong and heavily frowned upon in the real world and in Black Court society. It is inexcusable and a transgression, a breach of some sorts I am still trying to understand. Black women do not fall for white men. It's a rule, a rule that dates back too long to remember and is not up for discussion. So I did not discuss it. I held onto my fascination with a tight leash. It grew to stretch and scream inside of me and eventually it died. I knew this too shall pass—another Bible verse I appropriated with all of my pains. Another piece of knowledge I held close to was: association brings along assimilation. I would succeed in assimilating to the White Court, to White culture, but by eighth grade I understood that studying, assimilating, and infiltrating enemy camps will only get me so far. You can be among them, but you will never be one of them. I'm still stuck in the same skin, whether this year's color is skillet black or in a few months, a red bone hue. Nothing will change reality and I was taught to work with what you got.

For whatever reason, I stopped journaling; stopped considering the unconsiderable. I made short case studies of all the different Courts, still independent from them, but I allowed myself to move more publically among them, taking what aspects interested me and leaving behind the rest, neither tied to one Court and its tradition or another. I was an independent shadow again, alone and confused, still wanting the unattainable. Charles never physically touched me, even though I ached for it. In hindsight I was skin hungry in so many ways.

It's intriguing how people you meet, day to day, never know how much they affect you. They never know how lonely it is to only feel a whip of their

clothes as you pass by and hear the echo of their voices resounding in your ear, and how eager you are to be their equal or be whatever they need, to remake yourself into an image they might find pleasing—might approve of.

We continue to be lost to this sense of touch. Skin needs skin. We need connection, contact somehow. We yearn to be physically stretched and tasted, because without it, we can be nothing more than inanimate gray stone, crumbling. We all need a purpose. We all need agency, a place, as well as the freedom to find out how we fit in the ever-changing redistribution of groups, of courts—how we fit next to another human being. And in this craving, this need, —we'd become soiled doves, tail-peddlers, raspberry tarts, privateers, greensleaves, artichokes, courtesans, working girls, nymphs of darkness; alley cats. At the end, we will learn to whore for what we want. We'll learn to whore for just a touch.

FIRST CLASS

“Passenger Kimberly Crews. Paging passenger Kimberly Crews, please come to the Delta Check-in desk at Gate D 4. Again, Gate D 4.”

I still hear the southern accent roll heavy from the slim, blond Delta representative as she checks me off her list.

“Ticket please. Thank you Ms. Crews. Enjoy your flight.”

The stroll down the ramp way was longish, especially carrying a packed-full book bag and tugging along an overweight roller case. The gateway went on forever. Stepping on board the Boeing 747, this here would be my first time flying First Class. My mother and father saved up enough money and mileage points for almost a year, in anticipation, when I received the opportunity to study abroad in Scotland, attending Stirling University.

1C? 1C, ah, here it is. Wow. Not only First Class, but seat numero uno---

“Ma’am? Would you like me to take your suitcase?” *What?*

“Ummm? And put it where exactly?” I ask, tightening my hand on the roller case handle.

“Here, at the front. We have plenty of room in our closets for our First Class passengers.” The slim brunette motions toward three closet spaces spanning the width of the plane.

“Oh. Oh, sure. That’s fine. Thank you ma’am.”

“No problem,” she says. Collapsing the handle, she struggles just a bit lugging my suitcase away. I stand in front of my seat for a second, still wondering where the hell is she going with my stuff?

A rush of sound jars me from my stillness. The plane jumps slightly as the cargo loads beneath our feet. Action happens all at once and people are filling

the plane at a quicker pace. I sling off my book bag, preparing to store it under a seat, except there is no seat in front of me to store my book bag. Looking around I am a bit lost as to where I put this thing. I move out of the aisle as people excuse themselves, squeezing behind me as they move toward the back of the plane. Having already clogged the airplane entrance, I sit down in my seat with my book bag tucked between my legs, waiting for a break in the succession of passengers. As I wait, I quickly unzip my book bag halfway and take out a few things: my plastic bag lunch filled with warm, fried chicken, a ham sandwich, a few pieces of peppermint, and an orange. I feel around in the bag for my ZUNE and headphones. Seeing a break in the aisle, I notice the bulkheads above my seat and open one. I stuff my bag into the compartment as quickly as possible and go back to my seat as the aisle fills again.

“Good morning to everyone. We will be on our way to Edinburgh, Scotland in just a few minutes. Please move along the aisle as quick as possible and make space in the overhead compartments for our other passengers—.”

The intercom squeaks in intervals as a stewardess address the culminating crowd. Forgetting my Laurel K. Hamilton novel, I find a space to maneuver around the oncoming passengers to open the overhead and grab the book out of the bag, jarring loose an embarrassing tumble of CDs, DVDs, paperback novels, and a roll of toilet tissue—don't ask-- falling around my head. In addition to the chaos sporadically happening around me, the LKH novel decided to join the mess, targeting the back of my head in mid bend as I retrieved the other items.

If this were a videotape and I paused the scene, the viewer would see the hardback novel a hairbreadth away from its treachery as well as the current perplex audience. First Class seating is a good 8...9ish rows or so, occupying the first sectioned-off part of the plane. Looking from the main entertainment—me--

the viewer would find the majority of the First Class passengers are mid something's. Some look mid-thirties, while others are definitely approaching their mid-sixties. There are no children, no teens between them and me in age or assigned seats. And of course, there are no minorities of any color, a fact that never escapes my attention. In fact, most on board so far, who have passed by my seat, are white except this family of Asians. Looking down, I notice my face and hands hold no age spots, my clothing is black, cargo jeans are wrinkled and baggy, my shirt's a mix of poly and ester and cotton, and my shoes are not loafers or heels, but AirWalks bought fresh from Payless.

The inadequate picture was complete shortly after comparing myself to the rest of the First Class passenger. If I un-pause the videotape, in the few moments of no aisle way traffic and stuffing my book bag into the overhead compartment, the zipper on the bag decides to unzip itself and split open. I stood there for a moment completely shocked and horrified. Dropping to my knees, I pick up a black and red, Chinese stamped journal which flew open, turned its own pages, fanning out my secrets to anyone close by who could read that quickly. *Lord if you will get me through this fuc—friggin' mess, I— will not cuss for the rest of the ride. I put that on an oatmeal raisin cookie.*

In several sweeps I move the emptied items from my book bag back into my book bag. Moving out of the aisle yet again, I finish stacking and giving CPR to my pregnant mound of stuff in my bag and careful maneuver it back into the overhead compartment. I sink back into my seat as quietly as possible. One of the many stewardesses aboard gives me an annoyed look as she fiddles with her Delta wings, a pin on her immaculate pressed uniform. She says "excuse me" in a clipped tone and sways by, hitting my arm with her hip. Perhaps she works the coach section of the plane, because I will not see her again—thankfully.

One C is the biggest seat I've ever occupied on an airplane. See, I have a tendency to forget how — what's that polite word they use these days, oh — rotund I am, well until I find myself on an airplane, looking at the bucket type seats, which haven't changed, been remodeled, or refurbished since the late seventies. Walking on the gateway I thought about this, through about this seven-hour plan trip, trussed-up and canned inside one of those bucket seats — like a Vienna sausage.

The two ends of the buckle dangle off my lap. I look at the ends suspiciously and slowly, a prayer on my lips, pull the two halves together to connect. The belt snaps together smoothly. I can breathe and move from left to right comfortably — without me pulling the stitching of the buckle for more leeway. The buckle's still limp. I stare at my buckle for a while amazed, putting my hands in and out through the space between the belt and my stomach.

I find room to stretch my legs out and am surprised that there is nothing but extra room to do so. Smiling, I stretch my 5'6 length out and tilt my head toward the speaker as the captain rattles off the usual welcome and "be good" speech. We take off and my ears fill with the change in cabin pressure. In fifteen minutes or so the airplane reaches its stable height. Across the aisle I see cotton balls of white with only peaks here and there of a disappearing Atlanta. If my mother could burn a patch of land with the words CALL ME HUNNY. LOVE YOU, at this distance, I would only see the smoke rising and perhaps LOVE YOU as we determinedly moved on.

Thirty minutes later the two assigned stewardesses to First Class pass out these long, multi-choice menus. I was asked if I wanted a beverage while I waited for my order to be taken. I couldn't find the beverage list on the menu. The stewardess said she'd be back. The couple sitting on the aisle next to me

ordered champagne and Evian. I want the same, but I.D. would be required. My Georgia license currently resides in the recently re-stuffed book bag above me and therefore not reachable, not without risking another embarrassing episode. Even though I'm twenty-one, twenty-two—my face says fourteen repeatedly. I mentally rehearse declining the champagne and sophisticatedly ordering a Cran-Apple Juice before the stewardess comes back for my order.

Soon after, I will ask for the Cran-Apple can and a cup with no ice. I will slip the can into my pocket and drink water until my dinner arrives. The couple adjacent to me will see this. I will feel the wife's eyes on me, burning through the leg pocket of my cargo pants where I have stored the can. The husband will shake her arm and speak to her in Gaelic, or Italian, or a heavy brogue of some sort. I'll stop looking at her through my peripheral view. I'll plug in my headphones, listening to nothing, and look down at my jeans. I'll wonder why I didn't dress in a skirt like Mom suggested. I'll rub my toes within my four striped AirWalks. I'll listen to the Captain ask the stewardess to prepare the cabin for dinner.

Dinner coats First Class, riding the waves of recycled air. The triple fold menu offers our section everything, from honey pecan glazed chicken breast to balsamic rubbed lamb, with saffron even. Shaking my head I turn to my row neighbor and asked what she was having.

"The beef of course," she says in a bored tone, snapping her magazine closed. "Delta's designated chief to Europe is fantastic."

"Oh. Wonderful. I think I will try the chicken and the garlic potatoes."

“Hmmpf,” she replies, hitting her controller to change the T.V. channel. In First Class we have personalized T.V. screens, which I found pulled out from the left side of the seat.

Dinner arrives. The interior lights are dimmed and the older, European couple across the aisle from me scans their menus while their window showcase stars and grey dense clouds lounging around. Suddenly, the window shade snaps back into place and I look up to see the man staring at me and the woman leaning back toward her seat from snapping the window blind closed. I quickly avert my eyes and look down at the aisle as if I were missing something extremely important. *Maybe it's rude to look out another's window without asking permission?*

Eyes averted, I notice that the woman has on black, stiletto heels and the man—brown loafers of some kind. His pants are cuffed and are pleated in the middle. They look soft. The wife has on beige Capri pants and an emerald silk shirt. The shirt is long-sleeved and beautiful. The colored shirt reminds me of my grandmother and her favorite emerald dress shirt. The shirt held my grandmother's scent, a mixture of peppermint, baking soda, and cigarettes. I wish I could smell the cigarette smoke tickling my nose and poking at my asthma. I wish some things around here would smell of home.

Throughout dinner, it was my turn to be the center of attention—if I already wasn't. I had trouble finding the tray to place my drink on as well as the still warm and wet towel given to me to wash my hands. I thought to fix the problem by literally shedding some light on the situation. On the left armrest of the chair were a multitude of buttons and glowing panels. So many options. I didn't know exactly which switch to turn on my spotlight, and when reaching to turn the knob for more hissing air, I accidentally pushed the “Call Attendant”

button. The stewardess walked by, clicked the button off and walked away, not knowing if I had a question or not.

I still needed to find my darn tray table. I had the urge to just shout for a stewardess since obviously the call button doesn't work for these people. The towel's moisture was leaving little wet spots on my thighs. With a spare hand I felt under my seat and on the outer part jutting into the aisles. I pressed down on my armrest figuring the table would pop up and out, but nothing happened. My row neighbor seemed busy reading a stack of reports and summaries on her table. *It's in the seat*, I finally learn. Shaking my head. *Duh*. Opening my left armrest I grabbed and pulled at the table. The transition went smoothly, and thank God nothing else happened afterwards. The table settled in place right on time.

"Your dinner, ma'am. Enjoy." A brunette stewardess neatly aligns my food tray with my tray table. There are many divisions and compartments on the tray. The biggest division holds a beautifully, honey colored piece of lightly crisp chicken. The tray was mouth-watering, and organized where all compartments were arranged around the main course; all roads leading to the biggest division. I trace the different walls of the compartments and the real-like eating utensils before closing my eyes to pray.

The First Class cabin fills with chatter. Upon opening my eyes, I couldn't help but notice that my dinner tray mimics the division on board. The perhaps most expensive portion of the meal sits comfortable in the biggest section of the tray. It is also the close to the diner. There are the condiments and so running along the outer edges of the tray—the staff. And last and least, there is the bread and green things farthest away and in the back of the tray—the coach class. As I buttered my bread, I think it's ironic that the healthiest and the most basics of

our food group is at the back of the tray, the last thing you see, eat, and help out with salt or pepper. As for me and my row mate, we buttered our bread first, ate our green things, and chopped our meat last. But this doesn't shield us from being complicit in such blatant classism. Just a sheet, a sheer curtain at that, separates the class I'm originally from and where I would be now, if my mother did not save up for months to give to me the gift of experience in First Class, on my way to study abroad in Scotland.

I also notice this type of oppression is subtle and blatant simultaneously. There are many differences the airline places between First Class and Coach, but this type of oppression, oppression defined as stanching the ability of one group of people to progress to the best of their abilities, is focused on creating differences, creating privileges, which should not exist in such limited space. First Class uses real-like table utensils and real salt and pepper shakers, and real hand towels, and have access to the whole plane and more importantly all the media and videos on the airplanes system. These, of course, are mundane things, but compared to the flimsy, barely-able-to-twirl-your-linguine spork in Coach, these simple items or general access, creates unnecessary tension, an unnecessary privilege. To me this says there is trust in the First Class passengers to act first class, because they know how to hold, or appreciate, or in totality do something better with real utensils than the farther back coach class. The real kicker for me, while I licked off the last sultry flavor of garlic sauce from my forks tines, is the restroom situation. This should cause a revolt on a cramped plane. No one from Coach is allowed to use the First Class restroom. A person sitting in Coach cannot cross the sheer curtain barrier between Coach and First Class without being reprimanded. The First Class restroom, when I visited the facilities, held little flowers, and smelled lemony with organic wheat grass soap there to use.

The space was big enough for even my round bottom to move freely within. I can say with surety a Coach restroom is the total opposite.

Coming out of my pondering, the earlier chatter in First Class grew into a romping dinner conversation. I hear politics, business practices, book reviews, and daily tee times at Saint Andrews floating over my head. Adding a touch of salt to my French green beans, I unfold my cloth dinner napkin across my middle. I'm grateful I took etiquette courses a long time ago at the beginning of my sophomore summer at Agnes Scott College. After my previous run-ins with the Southern Bells of the South, my mother and I agreed that "proper education" will be a necessity if I wanted to play hardball with the blonds and the brunettes. I chewed slowly and sipped from my plastic cup as if it were china. I cut my meat into bite size pieces and slathered the honey pecan glaze slowly with my knife in left hand, holding the fork in the right. In my baggy black tee and secured ponytail, my manners out matched most, I observed. Smiling around the tines of my fork, I could hear Lady Dauphine say, "But of course, darling. You were taught by the best." Finishing, I dap at my mouth again, wipe my fingertips slowly then crossed my knife and fork at the top of my plate, folding my napkin and placing it neatly on the side of my tray. I would not be the big, black, messy, aggressive beast in First Class—at least not today.

The rest of the night I kept my eyes to myself and didn't look back over to the couple until their similar La-Z-Boy seat reclined, and I was able to star gaze without causing an international no-no. While the surrounding people began to click their spot lights off and settle down for a few hours, I spent the time learning all the buttons on my remote control. I found "Still in Theatre" movies that were free to watch as well as an abundance of CD albums I wished I could rip and burn on to my laptop above. Wiggling on to my left side as I recline my

seat (first time ever reclining a seat on an airplane), I cautiously lift my eyes across the aisles. The Euro couple sleeps face to face. The pair behind them touches only at the elbows, silently fighting over the middle armrest. Breakfast would be served soon on the plane. I overhear the stewardesses mapping out which section they will take and who would push the dolly through the cabin. Forgetting to secure my journal, I lift my chair back and grab for my journal in the deep, blue leather pocket on the front wall. I scratch *Remember* on a random page of the journal as I fiddled with the strap to secure my thoughts and secrets. *Not a bad idea, Kim. Not a bad idea at all.* I scratch a few notes on a new page in my journal, dating it June 28th, 2007. Still coping with the fantastic dinner and the vanilla ice cream afterwards, I scribble a short list of plane events somewhere at the bottom of the page. While watching a CNN anchor on *Money Matters* I start a letter to my mother explaining the First Class experience so far. Doodling around the message, my lips twitch into a smirk, realizing that First Class has its own inner class issues. The classy most times are found classless.

Tired all of a sudden, I jot a few more shorthand reminders, and reach to click the light symbol, turning off my spotlight. The chair jerks a little as I marvel in the privilege of reclining the seat. Folding my earphones over my ear I hear *The Swan* from the *Carnival of Animals* begin its famed entrance. In a few hours I would wake to find myself crossing the Atlantic Ocean and praying that the plane will not fall out of the sky over an ocean full of Shit Unknown. My Scottish study abroad would begin soon and I best be rested for the journey ahead.

FAN(ANTICS)

“If that bitch steps on my bag one more time!”

One more time? Bitch? Who? I wonder.

The Fresno State Bulldogs play the University of Hawaii Warriors, seven p.m.; a night football game, on a Saturday evening. And of course we are all here to watch our Bulldogs win, but knowing that they will lose, but we are fans and fans are known for their unlimited pool of faith. The two groups of girls behind me don't seem like fans, but who am I to know what fans do? I'm here to fulfill a homework assignment and perhaps enjoy the boys in tights and of course the big screen T.V.'s located everywhere.

I hear the two girls behind me speak over the announcer's voice. The first murmurs a line and the other one—well she's obviously angry about something. I think to myself, as long as the “bitch” she's mad at isn't me, then we're fine, I won't have to be a “bitch” and she won't try to beat me. Awesome. The concrete blocks, both I and the two different girl groups share behind me, is cooling beneath me after the hot Fresno sun that afternoon. The dusky rose of the sun gives its last rays away, drawing lines across the green football field. The concrete bench-like blocks in the stadium are already packed to capacity and the surrounding seats are steadily filling bodies in silvers of air pockets. Crowded is an understatement. The student section of the Bulldog football stadium is completely full. Looking behind me I see an array of colors, coats, Bulldog blow-up rattlers, hats, and caps with sprinkled nakedness, a chest here a thigh there, inserted into the masses of jumping white kids on the row behind me. Our section individually identifies us. The shirtless men, the painted women; the

young faces are not allowed to cross over an invisible barrier, a line of steps, to the other section overlapping our student section. Believe me I tried. Throughout the entire game we are stuck in our section; kept in a petri dish to cultivate our culture cells.

“I wish she would like move her goddamn bag in the first place.”

“Dude---just move up here.”

“Man, it’s like hella crowded up there. And anyways, Brian can see me better down here. Think boob advantage.”

“Boob advantage?”

“Ha! Look down my dear and tell me if your eyes cannot see my boobs?”

The announcer’s voice drowns out the rest of the exchange from the two girls above me. I look up to see what I heard and there, directly behind me, was a chest heavy white girl. To her left, a group of three black girls sat on the cold bench glaring at the over joyed and bouncing white girl and the game. To the her right cheered five white girls, all of them having on the same red and white Fresno State colors and match stickers on their face as the heavy chested white girl right- above- me. *Great. Just great. If a fight breaks out between these two groups, I am right damn in the middle. Why Lord, why---*

“Fresnooo. First down.” The announcer’s voice bottoms out and snaps me back into the game from my observation. That voice vibrates within my chest deliciously. The bass of the voice slow dances down my esophagus and I want it to tell me more.

“Fuck Yeah! Wooo!” I hear, jarring me from the disembodied voice. I try to adjust my seat around this massive male body in a black, Fresno State tee and baseball cap. The insufferable mountain jumps up and down on the lower concrete slab in front of me, clapping his hands and pointing to someone on a

lower level. After a moment of ass watching, I wondered if he was going to dump himself into my lap or fart in my face from all the excitement. Both are strong possibilities.

Shaking my head, I try again to move around him and the giggling girls below me, while ignoring the giggling girls above me. Picking up and strapping my mail carrier purse over my chest I move around the unoccupied spaces on my bench trying to find a better angle of the field's T.V. screen. For some reason I was interested in what the cameraman was picking up and reproducing over the T.V. screen than actually looking at the game. The cameraman zooms in on the top-notch players and when a flag was thrown, he was there to share it with me on the screen, tuning my attention to the drama in the stands, the outraged people, or the fuming referees.

Absentmindedly, I move directly under the three black girls on the row above me. I look at the big screen to my left to see the instant playback I missed due to the screaming drowning out the announcer. Smiling to myself while watching the football playback and then the fan playback, I realize that many of us, sitting in these stands, are convenient fans. We are here to fill a role, play a character that comes to light on the television screen as we fill the stands. There are, of course, the stereotypes, the caricatures in motion. The Betty Blonds are screaming, bouncing, hair flipping, and "oh my gosh-ing" it. The Home Girls are mean mugging and smacking on glue. They have come to see people and be seen.

To the right of the student section sit the Regulars. I could've been a Regular; bought a regular priced ticket, but I wanted not only the student experience at a major state school, but the student price. On the other side, they sit at respectable lengths away from each other. Most are in jeans. Some have

CSUF banners and those mini-cheerleader pom-poms. Where the student section is a litter of gum wrappers, Snickers or Twix wrappers thrown here and there, the Regulars are stuffing hot dogs into mouth. The concrete slabs look mostly clean. The popcorn and pizza smells waft over the invisible porous wall between me and them. I hunger, they eat. I'm packed between balls of shedding, varying colored hair, while they lick their fingers, jerk and cheer in their luxurious space as the cameraman goes back and forth between their section and the players on the field.

I shouldn't be jealous or even mean spirited about the situation. We're all fans, right? We all came out tonight to root for the Warriors—I mean Bulldogs—and support our Fresno State athletics department. But something is still missing tonight in the fandom kingdom.

"It's now halftime ladies and gentlemen. Give it up for the Ferocious Fresno State Band!" Another tenor-pitched announcer shouts out to the crowd. The big screen shows the band gearing up on the sidelines as the footballers leave the field in a run.

I am able to move over to the other section during half time. There is so much movement no one notices the shift. I can enjoy the space if only for a few minutes. Finally able to survey the land more clearly I ponder if whether school spirit equals fandom? Or is knowing stats of games past and present synonymous to fandom? Who teaches us what fandom means? Who teaches us how to stay in our sections? Who teaches us how to act within our sections? I've learned that people, even strangers, will teach you amazing things; mostly through osmosis. We learn how to act, behave, who to watch, who to be embarrassed by; who to want to identify with.

What I do know is that Homecoming is next week. The football game will be here in the Bulldog stadium and I will be here, again perhaps in the student section. Back from halftime, the Warriors kick off, and I learn that Sally and Betty Blond are going to The Mall, the only mall we have in Fresno, to shop for matching underwear and bra sets. I overhear Home Girl and her huddled crew throwing snide, side comments at the girls above us. They are setting a date to get mani's and pedi's at a local Clovis nail and spa shop before next week's game.

Rolling my eyes after hearing both groups of girls, I scoot over again, moving around Massive Mountain and the new friends he's made and brought back from the concession stands. I see the Warriors' quarterback throw the pigskin on the field, but M.M. blocks my point of view. Glancing left I find the "Instant Playback" playing on the big screen.

Whether or not we're at the edged green of the football field or somewhere in the nosebleed section, we are constantly watching the action on the stadium screens. It's ironic that the majority of us will come to the game, only to glance at the field in increments, and stare mostly at the surrounding big screens. The student, the Regulars, and the fanatics all find themselves screen bound. We gaze through the cameraman's perspective. He shows us what is important; he shows us minute details. He shows us what we want to see, who we should see, and perhaps who we should emulate. He definitely continues to show me the sweaty, sticky biceps, triceps, tightened gluts, and the vicious brutality of war being waged on the field. The cameraman knows me. He knows what I want to see, because he has trained me to see what he wants to sell. It may not be the Fresno State cameraman, but news stations cameraman; the NBC network, the movie screen cameraman have directed my wants and needs; where

my eye should linger and appreciate. He places convenient scenes on screens and information conveniently at my fingertips. He's trained me, conditioned me to live by the convenient. The cameraman has shown me how to be a fan.

LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER

Dear Daughter,

Your grandmother and great grandmother are in the next room. Both are leaning over placed squares of newspaper on the living room floor, shucking peas and de-stalking collard greens for Sunday dinner. The two are fighting over who will clean the turkey, bake the yams, slather a homemade mixture of butter, cinnamon, and brown sugar on their tops, and who will be the first to 'taste test' the fare from the oven. You would gurgle and laugh with me, head tilted to the left, watching me as I crawl on all fours, peaking down the hallway at your great gran and grandma. I have done this before, sitting in between the kitchen door space, legs folded and crossed, rocking back and forth just watching them unfold before me. Maybe it's strange, your mother spying on our matriarchs, but Baby girl they are beautiful, so incredibly beautiful. How can I explain what I see? What I feel? It's like watching our beginning and present. Or watching a conversation between an old butterfly and a caterpillar, and seeing metamorphosis slowly take place.

Placing my pen down from the letter, I wondered how I would describe my grandmother to a child I've yet to meet. This whole notion of letter writing to the child I will have, was an avenue toward creating a space, a space to romanticize about a future me, with a future family, and a future filled with a curiosity of what I was like in the past, what I did in my past, and what compelled me to write a letter about it. Letters and notes and list are found in strange places in my family home. Some were left in old shoes, in old purses, and

tucked away in dark cubbyholes within couches, leaving pieces of the writer behind. The compulsion to record pieces of the past and the lessons learned from it, emerged from those letters left behind and the strange objects turned into time capsules. After inheriting or taking up the task no one wanted as the family historian, this type of letter writing turned out to bring a creative, but necessary way of documenting the individual and collective history of the women in my family. I realized that I didn't know my mother and grandmother, or any of the women who've shaped the fabric of my maternal line. If there was a compulsion to write and record, there was a need to know, to learn about these two women sitting next to each other, shucking peas on a Sunday afternoon.

Perhaps I'll describe my grandmother as a worn walnut. Her spirit matched her appearance: solid and hard to crack, but with bendable walls. I've learned that those sides will bend to weather whatever storm comes. She wouldn't want me to tell you this, but she danced recklessly when she was seventeen. Trading partners and never staying in one place with her skirt flying around her bare knees, she was a semi-professional amateur in the 1930s. In Lexington, Kentucky grandma graced adult dance halls, swept by the men in a whirlwind, and sat at the bars with a cup of gin on rocks in one hand, even though she only had enough for a free cup of water and a twist of lime. I think it was there in the dancehalls where she fell in love with limes tucked on the side of crystal glasses topped off with gin. Grandma was destined to escape one-way or the other, but that's—that's another story.

"She moved like liquid lightning," her sister Louise once said to me. One night, she snuck out of the house and went to one of the Coloreds' re-opening dancehalls in Lexington, I learned. A man, maybe in his late 20s, danced often with Grandma at these varying "holes in the wall." He didn't know she was

seventeen at the time until that night of the re-opening, when she was thrown into the air and caught within his arms, twirled in those same arms that sent her sailing through the air, landing ten feet away from those arms and into a card table, leaving a puncture hole in grandma's right side and an inch deep gash on her leg. Grandma didn't dance again for a long time in those dancehalls. She didn't twirl into another man's arms until Mr. Brown came along, who almost killed my grandmother when he died four years after their marriage; who caused such a reaction in her that she never married again, forty five years after his death.

I cannot forget, in my records of us daughter, that the urge to come to your feet, or slap your thighs and twirl across a floor in perfect time and rhythm of a beat, or in and out of shafts of sunlight on the front lawn—it all--we all, get that from your great grand. Grandma told me that, between the three of us, I'm more like her than my mother, your grandmother. She, out of the blue, gave me a piece of advice telling me "--we love hard, mayhap love brief, but we hurt hard too and then we forgive, always forgive baby girl, but you know, then again, we never forget either. We have very long memories, long enough that we have to find reasons to move on from the memories, move out, and--" daughter mine, this woman broke into a giggle, snappin' her fingers and jiggling around in her seat, singing "moving on upppp to the East Sideeee,"winking at me, clapping and a-carrying on. Your great grand baby is a mess of the highest order. She was a serious woman, who never took herself too seriously; who was filled with so much knowledge and joy, but tempered it all with love and honesty; who always prayed for serenity and clarity to know the difference between wisdom and self-motivated advice. She led and protected our family the best she could.

Folding up the letter inside my records book, I thought to myself that my mother, on the other hand, is a different breed of intensity than my grandmother and I. If my mother ever wrote me a long letter I'm sure she would convey her pride, but also the life experiences she went through to come to a pride she could share. She once told me that life's set understandings, and the people who abide by them, are not actually rules set in stone; that this life is in an ever state of movement, fluxing at a moment's notice. She always reminded me that nothing stayed the same.

Researching through the treasure trove of notes and letters scattered throughout the house, I went in search for past records of us. In this new generation of women in our family, no one wanted the job or title of historian. No one wanted to keep the books, keep the history. Stupid. The burden for my cousins became my way to connect to our shared past; connect and learn from those who came before. No one was more willing than I to research our family, or take on the ugliness of where we have been, who we were, and what we did or what was done to us. By being the historian, I am allowed to ask questions that others could not, would not ask; to poke around in everyone's life without guilt or need for sensitivity. I am allowed to break confidence if it's for the written page, if it's for documenting history, if it's for passing on knowledge, wisdom and advice.

My mother, Johnnie, was a brave woman, ever willing to let the past stay dead. But as the junior historian of the family, I relived the past purposely. No one ever asked my mother questions. No one ever spoke to my mother in any other tone, save respectful. Usually she barked out orders and the rest of us moved to follow them. Many would think her above reproach, with her constant

display of strength and power and dignity, but we all are soiled sometimes. And sometimes our tragedies, our humiliations, are record as moral tales.

Maybe ten years before I was born—1976 is plausible—my mother met a man, Malcolm, as all women do. Mom knew what a missed meal tasted like, knew what other's skin felt like in hand-me-down clothes. She knew what it was like to eat at a table set for three, and never four. She missed having a man in her life and yearned for that missing connection.

Before Mom snagged a scholarship to Clark University in Atlanta, Georgia, her family consisted of her, my Aunty Cathy, and Grandma Susie. They lived from border house to apartment, apartment to the ghettos; from Kentucky to Cincinnati. After the hustle to make it out of Cincinnati, Mom landed a job in Atlanta, after finishing school at Clark. She worked for, ironically, the man who would be my father, swinging a shining hammer and a sexy tool belt. His name was Jesse Crews. Jesse owned a construction company on the outskirts of metro Atlanta, one he built in still segregated Georgia. Mom worked as a part-time secretary, answering phones and being a stand-in body at the office while Dad and crew were off-site.

Malcolm. His name was Malcolm. Last name Dishton. He courted my mother in the 1970s and eventually married her. The marriage lasted about two years, but the marriage felt ancient and endless, with time leaving weathering marks on her psyche and skin. I did not know this Malcolm. No one ever spoke about him, not my play aunts, my grandmother, or my mother's girlfriends. I would've never known about his existence or this previous marriage if my mother kept her silence. The secret she stashed away for over a decade poured from her pinched face and pursued lips my last year of college at Agnes Scott. I'd come home from school one weekend, looking to go out shopping with my

mother for shoes to match my drab black graduation gown. I was excited and ready to graduate. I thought, in perfect hindsight, that everything evolving around me would change into something great; that I would move on to medical school and research something awesome and that I would come back home to Georgia after my adventures and write it all down and publish it and become the next Maya Angelou and that life would be fascinating and the world would open its arms and I'd jump head first into them and that everything is, was, on course towards perfection and that nothing was easier than leaving the past and following the path in front of me for the future. That weekend should've been like any other: buy graduation stuff, ensure my graduation in May, pay the last quarter, nickel, and dime of my tuition, go eat, go shop, and go to sleep. Perfect. My mother knew graduation was something not often done in our family. She did what she had to do to ensure my happiness and my successful celebration and journey into adulthood. But, and there's always a 'but,' at the end of the excitement and joy, my mother gave me what I needed most, and to her, that was a story.

I remember having a conversation with her about a class I was currently taking at the college. This was a senior literature course and of course the liberal feminists and conservative feminists within the class were in the middle of fighting over a book, perhaps the *Yellow Wallpaper* or *The Handmaid's Tale*. Mom and I were discussing the book and the validity of the arguments presented in the last class as I pulled into Brookstone, and then into our driveway. Chilly outside, the windows quivered against the winter wind and the rumbling car cocooned us in vibrations. I snuggled into my plush car seat and pulled my hoodie around me. I turned the car off and sat a moment looking out my frost-covered window. I loved Georgia in the wintertime and so did my mother. She

rattled around in her purse, probably looking for house keys, and then she paused for a moment, looking out the window through the frost and then down again into the insides of the purse. Quietly observing her, I nodded towards her door and asked, "Ready to get out Mom'z?"

"You know Kimmy," she said, looking through, but seeing nothing outside the front window, "I hope you never have to suffer at the hand of someone who matters. Or...find yourself suspicious of others around you. It's just not a good way to live."

"Whaa---"

"It's a fate I would spare you if I could Kimmy."

"Ummm. Okayyy. Why are you saying this Ma? What happened?" I replied, truly startled by the advice. I heard the antifreeze leaking from the car. I heard the plop plop sound in intervals disrupting the silence. Even when the heat began to leak from the car, something told me not to rush her. I sat frozen, waiting.

"A college girlfriend of mine told me to stay with him, told me that I wouldn't find a man that liked dark and black skinned women. It'll work out all right, she said. It's just the first coupla months Johnnie, she said. You're supposed to trust him Johnnie, she said. Don't be afraid to let your guard down—finally-- and 'Be your true self with him...'she said. 'You belong to somebody'...she said, excitedly at that. She lied, baby girl, or was grossly misinformed or was just plain stupid, but that didn't help me none. I was stuck. Drowning. Embarrassed and 'shamed. He was ashamed of me, wanted to control me, reshape me somehow. Mal broke my confidence, while he tried to break me."

Mom stopped fiddling with the fringe leather on her purse straps, turning her head to once more look out her passenger window. Her breath made familiar quote bubbles on the Plexiglas. Murmuring a bit she continued, “Malcolm did something to me, something that made me harder, tougher, but something that tore my flesh and my faith in....I don’t know... goodness, I guess, right open. After a while, I couldn’t repair myself. I almost wished he’d struck me. At least my bones would’ve snapped back together. Malcolm tore through me from within and afterwards I was mean, and hard, and trusted no one. I was remade into someone I no longer recognized in the mirror, a woman running, running from herself. He wanted submission. I wanted a partner. He wanted to be in the big leagues and tote around a trophy on his arm. All I’d ever wanted was to be me, to be me fully with another person. I’d forgotten how strong I was; how strong women could be. I’d forgotten my mother’s advice, an advice I’ll share with you. “ She un-strapped her seat belt and turned towards me, gently stroking my hair, and rubbing the pads of her fingers at the ends. She ran her finger down my right cheek. I tried to snuggle my face into her hand, eyes closed; breathing in the soft steel of her skin.

“Mom I—I don’t—I’m not sure what,” I stuttered, sitting there shaking my head in her hand.

“Baby. Listen. Abuse comes in all shapes and forms, but remember so does strength. Just—just never let someone break you or ever call you something you’re not. Learn to live for you and not people and certainly not things. If you learn only this from me, if I only have this to give you, and this you’d keep: never let them tell you you’re not beautiful or smart or worthy. And...and always remember that if you got no love at all, remember that I love you and that will always count for something, especially more than those fools who won’t

love you for who are and who you'll turn out to be." From the driver's seat I just looked at her and she looked at me for a second, withdrawing her hand.

"Momma. I still don't—ummm—."

"Never mind girl, just get the bags out the car and stop floundering about. It's freezing out here. Let's get on inside," she finished, erupting in movement all of a sudden, pushing the passenger car door open and stepping out.

A week later, the speech from the car echoed in my head and I found no reason behind the speech. I finally asked Dad about the Malcolm story. I had a habit of stuttering while asking a question when I'm extremely nervous. Dad looked up from his Monday, Wednesday, Friday pill arrangement on the dinner table and said: "uh-oh, must be something serious when you of all people cannot form a sentence." I had to know. I knew the story was told in confidence, but the tale soured within me. I didn't understand. I have to understand. I felt like this was a necessary betrayal of sorts, a point of creation; a reactionary moment of creation where my mother was revised somehow. I needed to know for the record keeping. I needed to know.

I took a seat at the mahogany dining table and told him a short, abridged retelling of mom's story. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked out our sliding backdoor for a minute. And like a rubber band releasing, he blew out a breath, picked up his pills and began. "It took your momma a long time to truly trust me, to believe in me. I always knew she loved me, was in love with me, but after the Malcolm thing, there was a line she wouldn't cross." He stopped his pill sorting and looked at me with the withering face of a sixty-six year old, saying: "She's much better now. We found a church here, then you came, your brother came, and something just clicked for her." *Better now...Something just clicked*, I penciled down as a mental note. I tried to ask more questions, but he wouldn't

bulge saying, “Some things need to be left alone to die, baby, by themselves in the dark past, starved without attention. Let it alone for now. Learn what you can and let the demons stay where they are.”

So I left it alone, and decided to write about it instead, siphoning a few more minutes from the past, and hoping that I’d pass on knowledge and information and not seeds of un-disciplined fear. I pulled out my letter to my future daughter and wrote to her, finishing the first letter of many letters. Penning another line, I continued hoping that my letters encouraged her to seek me out, pushing my world up against hers, and even though we are apart, through letters and history, we could still journey together somehow.

I don't know what year you may find this letter, Daughter mine, or any of my letters. I don't know if I'll be around to explain everything in this letter or around to explain my experiences at all. All I've dreamt of doing, my purpose, was to pass on what I know; to pass on knowledge not demons. I've learned that people hold the capacity to hurt and harm and cause excruciating pain. But people, people like you, hold the same capacity to love, to heal, and accept love from others. Baby, expect that nothing will change, and that everything will change into nothing. I wish this world was made in such an order where I could assure you that loyalty like marriage is a pack never broken, that you can depend on people, and that nobody will break your confidence and trust, that nobody will break you; revise you, or keep you crying more than laughing. I wish that this was the type of world in which you would be born, but it's not. Freckled by human nature, we live in the sure terms that somebody will always fail you and one day I'm sure that person will be me, failing you; offering a fragmented story and fractured pieces of wisdom you'd have to link together with your own experience. I may, after years of deciding and perhaps before you are born, rip this letter apart, just like many mothers

did before me. You might find the pieces of the torn letter in a box, under varying shoeboxes, like I did. You might piece the pieces together like I did. You might read a letter long forgotten by mother, taped together, missing words and lines faded by age, and from the letter, you'd know a bit of history, you would know a bit more about who you are Daughter.

Then again, I may never show you these records; I may never share with you our collective mistakes, doubts, or leave you to wonder about this moment between me and my old butterfly. I may burn everything or perhaps leave behind jigsaw pieces for you to find or not find. If I have learned anything, it's that ultimately the writer, the historian, decides the fate of history, what to include, what to forget, and what choice facts the next generation will learn. But at the end, my matriarchs' are now yours. I, like you child, am our matriarch's human time capsule. I am filled with their secrets, their flaws and fears. I am also filled with the realization of their hopes and dreams, the best and the worst of them. It's now my turn to find a way to fit my life, your life, and the rest of our line somewhere in between their experiences and the creation of our own success and mistakes.

LIST, LETTERS, AND NOTES: A MARRIAGE

Rule one of reading other people's stories is that whenever you say 'well that's not convincing' the author tells you that's the bit that wasn't made up. This is because real life is under no obligation to be convincing.

—Neil Gaiman

Author's Note:

This essay is full of detailed speculations, facts, intent and unintentional imagination creating a narrative of short proportions. I play with the form and format of this essay because I can, but more importantly because the form imitates the means and the theme. Yes, I do rhyme and use lyrical language and even pop culture slang and references in this essay. Most times I take freedom of expression to the cleaners, wringing all of the vitality out of that understanding, taking out everything I can. There are points in this essay where you, the reader, will become bored, annoyed, and even confused; all's fair in our reader/writer relationship, but look, here's my promise to you, when the last word is read, and the last eye-rolling session is complete---you and me reader, will look at list, letters, and notes; words and art forms differently than we did on page one. Why? Well, there's my story to consider, their story to note, and everything in the middle, beginning with a simple To-Do list.

Enjoy.

Lists are anti-democratic, discriminatory, elitist, and sometimes the print is too small.—

David Ives

**Part One:
A Litany of Lists**

To-Do List
 Grocery list
 Baby shower list
 Wal-Mart list
 Mom's-Shopping list
 Teaching list
 Hunny to-do List
 Lesson plan list
 Roll Call list
 Inventory list
 Little black book
 Phonebook list
 John Wayne Move List
 Voting list
 Death wish list
 Wedding Invitations
 Check-off list
 Dictionary
 Christmas List
 Christmas Shopping list
 Listserv
 Excel workbooks
 A-list
 Payroll
 Blackmail
 Principle's List
 Dean's List
 Protocol
 List of Succession
 Line division
 Shit list

Hunny to-do, the Goddamn List, and the Divide

This? This started when my legs were a playground of manila Band-Aids. Elementary school was the first time I was involved in the creation and destruction of a scratch-off list. Dad called lists from my mother a “Hunny to-do list”. Saturday mornings he would “un-ass my bed”, tickle my feet poking out from the bottom of my covers, until I got up to help him complete the thing. Depending on who created the list, and what the list instructed her to do, grandma called the list simply, a to-do list or when given by my mother, a list from hell. Again on Saturday mornings, I was doused in freezing tap water or the top sheet was pulled dramatically from over my face, and I was made to solve the “Hunny to do” or “Johnnie’s goddamn list”.

Lists have stealthy plowed seeds of their own into my every day. From elementary agenda books to collegiate day planners, I’ve lived my life by list, living hour by hour within the creation and defacement of a list, scratching off items, people, and assignments. The idea that lists were real—or could be considered a form of writing and an art form—was introduced to me in high school. I would discover list were in a league of their own.

Rather my sophomore or junior year at Druid Hills High School, I was introduced to poet and “lister” William Carlos Williams. My teacher, Mrs. Wells, was a middle age, white woman who believed in the academic ladder. She loved the system and made sure her students knew his or her placement on the ladder. I knew the ladder began with the top echelon, the advance placement or magnet students. Knowledge and information was then filtered from the top to the bottom of the ladder, in a system, which identified students as regulars, if they

took regular level classes. Mrs. Wells only taught AP and accelerated students, accelerated students being somewhere in the middle of the academic ladder. Academic standing was everything to her and subsequently to us, the student achievers. We were told to praise the academic tier, value the higher tier in this hierarchical system of education we were born and breed into. In class the academic grandstanding was no longer between the Advanced and Regulars, but between the accelerated/and the APers. We battled between ourselves; most likely do to her decision of physically dividing the class. The APers were seated by a row of running rectangle windows while our seats, the accelerated students, held up the concrete wall. I used to shake my head and roll my eyes when the sun would bathe the APers in sunlight, each of them seating in a shaft of gold, and when it rained, they wore clouds above their heads. Throughout the semester we were seated across from each other, but were never given different assignments. Mrs. Wells kept a huge, on the go, white board in the classroom where she checked of the assignments we completed over the semester. In class we focused on English, the language and the literature. I stumbled on to William Carlos Williams during our poetry section for the semester, my favorite topic then and now. Of the many poets we read and investigated with essays, projects and worksheets, William Carlos William was the one I remember clearly, specifically this poem:

William Carlos Williams "This is Just to Say"

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

In class we made a list for everything. This is how Mrs. Wells organized her life and how we'd have to organize ours. She mentioned during our poetry section, that WCW's poem mimicked a list, but how? How can a taunting list become a poem? How can a note use poetic attributes? Does a list hold music? Are there any rules dividing list and art or are list naturally an itemization of art? I asked these questions as we analyzed and referred back to the poem for our two weeks on poetry. I was lucky enough to revisit the poem in a senior literature class, and between Mrs. Wells and the senior lit. class, we debated across the divide just to say the same things, but in different vocabulary, on different levels of usage of the English language. My classmates and I argued about the tone of the piece, about under-textual meanings as well as surface, and about the poems and poet's intention for the piece—how the author played with form— and a reader's response to the form. I agonized over the triple t's in WCW's poem, the line breaks and the lack of punctuation, but I also found myself mimicking WCW and congruently analyzing that which divided us all: space, language, levels, but—interestingly enough—not list.

Reiteration at the Line

- 1) School is where I learned to list my imperfections.
I pick at them
Like lint on a sweater.
The White lint roller
never worked to make
things better,
just left more lint.
- 2) School is where they learned to list my imperfections.
They pick at them
Like lint on a sweater.
The White lint roller
never worked to make
things better;
just left more lint.
- 3) School is where we learned to list my imperfections.
We pick at them
Like lint on a sweater.
The White lint roller
never worked to make
things better;
just left more lint.
- 4) School is where we learn
listing imperfections.
We pick at Them
Like lint on a sweater.
The White lint roller
never worked to make
things better;
just left more lint.

The Brain

The brain, according to yet another high school class, is trained to place various stimuli into select boxes. The slogan “Think outside the box” applies to this theory. We literally think outside of a box, making a decision, and then place a new piece of knowledge into a box. Over the years, from conception to death, we are always in the process of adding to and subtracting from various “boxes” while forming new inboxes for the conscious or unconscious reception of persons, places, and things.

An article in the *New York Times* discussed the use of mirrors and the brain, specifically saying, “[scientist] are using mirrors to study how the brain decides what is self and what is other, how it judges distances and trajectories of objects, and how it reconstructs the richly three-dimensional quality of the outside world from what is essentially a two-dimensional snapshot taken by the retina’s flat sheet of receptor cells.” So, we use boxes to categorize the world around us. That makes sense. Majority of the human population have a hard time letting go of predetermined or frequently used boxes, boxes such as race, gender, gender roles, likes and dislikes. We use these boxes to reduce the world into its simplest form. These boxes are jagged, perhaps truthful, and unpolished mind mapping. We create boxes to understand and make sense of all we willingly and unwillingly unpack in our day-to-day interaction with constantly changing environments. I say unwillingly – due to the fact that one may turn off the brain only at death. And even when a human head is severed from the shoulders, there is still fifteen to thirty seconds before the neurons die in mid leap, debating how it will box its decision to stay and fight or fuck, or flee.

What I found fascinating while re-reading the article was the idea of our conscious or unconscious selves deciding on what we look like and who we are by what we see. We make the decision if what we see is the same or different and surprisingly our comfort levels are that uncomplicated. But at other times what we see and want to see is extremely complex. We all have that moment in the mirror when we see ourselves and are confused, feeling a sensation of not seeing who we *really* are. There's, then, the ultimate suggestion that we are socially cultivated to desire certain traits which might assure a desired response or stimulation, which will "assure" the uncomplicated sameness that allows us the sensation of comfort and security. This social cultivation is partially responsible for the dissonance between the mirror's reflection and the self-reflection. We are the other half. We are foolish enough to believe we can, without struggle, separate ourselves from ourselves, just to create a new person, a new identity, to hide from the unconsciously-conscious collection of data. Boxes.

The mind from the meta-inside looks like an attic turned into a storage place.

The rows of boxes are never neatly stacked,

But to the owner

There's an order, a hidden manifest looming nearby.

In my case, my father

Somehow, always knows which box holds his lists of Baby Kim memories,

Especially the one involving my mother

Trying to kill me

Earlier in our relationship

But that's another box, on another list.

I remember boxes from my childhood clearly. I like to hide in the boxes I agree with and ignore the other boxes occupying another side of truth. My defined and fluctuating boxes are ever present and are forever re-evaluating the catalogue of items in its box. My first conscience box began accumulating data at Fernbank Elementary where I learned my colors:

People Box:

A List

Black—ally

Long hair---girl

Girl---friend

White---cautious

Boy---foe

After six years of head to toe emersion in my reformed box, colors were separated into a crayon box or a people box. Blackness was a classification I quickly learned to scratch out and replace the word and color with a polite beige or butter brown. The category of Girl no longer functioned on its own, but was connected with a color. Boys on the other hand continued on the list with the same conclusion. After the six years, marked differences and social queues altered the list in the box and things began to change.

People Box

A List:

~~Black—friend~~

Light Skin/Brown---me, better than black, prettier, can tan!

Black---bad, can't tan, can't see 'em—gets lost in the dark, jokes, hurt

Long hair---girl

~~Color hair bows---me, cute, mommy did, hurt to comb~~

Color hair bows----plaits, stupid, got in trouble, too big & wool-like, jokes

Hair down---cool, like rest, no trouble

Girl---friend

White---cautious
 Boy---foe
 Black teachers----nice, fun, funny, cool
 Light Skin/Brown teacher---mean, trouble, hard
 White teacher---cautious, ???

Suddenly, after the six years of training my boxes at Fernbank, my boxes helped me to distinguish between what I had and what desired attributes I needed to survive and possibly seek a desirable response. It was a time where I developed different types of necessary skins. I grew a hard skin. I grew a camouflage skin so that blending would be a possibility. Whatever I was to be, what mixture of cells and shapes, colors and geometric wonders, I hoped, desired, that I would find a type of me in one of my categorical boxes to fulfill a one size fit all.

I wonder if we, as critical thinkers, ever change. Can we ever change our opinion or are we merely changing what item, what stimuli goes into another box, a box perhaps titled: the okay box? Then again, perhaps all of this is gibberish. Perhaps we don't change. Maybe the thought of revolutionary change is literally all in our heads. Perhaps we don't make list and the brain does not box what we see, saw, and will see into a box with an inventory list. Perhaps these theories and stories are not what they seem and are smoke and mirrors in light of reality—a reality of factual facts proved by proof. My only rebuttal of this gibberish is that, maybe my brain, my prejudice, what I have learned to see myself as, is a unique, primitive theology, unformed and jagged at its best. I am only sure of the line I felt when scratched off of a list. I cannot show you the projectile motion of my tears, or the notes from my diaries, listing my daily run-ins with mirrors and reflections that never quite reflect me properly. Those diaries are cooling, pieces of ash from the fire that never happened to my house.

The unadulterated list I made before assimilation took place were rubbed out, the ink smeared and evaporated through the pages. The lists themselves are probably locked in a lockbox, hidden under my adolescent bed. They are probably just an item on a list of imaginings I have learned to box up, because I have learned to forget, learned to get along to stay along; learned to value my caboose at the back of the train. I have learned to avoid mirrors. I have learned to shut my eyes while throwing rocks at glass houses.

An Essay About Lists

Lists are odd entities. They offer nothing of monetary value and offer nothing physically important or momentous to us. I find that I live my life by these creations without much care to their creation or thought to their value. My only concern is their functionality.

My grandmother mentioned once that only city folks live their lives by what they have to check-off. Of course she says this with a polite sneer, but it's true, and yet between the city office and her country tobacco fields, lists are built in both places. Lists give our lives a beginning, middle, and end; a goal to reach, a sense of completion within the day, week, lifetime we've started, and of course a way to track tangible progression.

My Life On A Post-It

Wake-up (830)

Make PB&J

Turn off coffee pot

Dress

Grab lotion

Put lotion on

Grab shoes

Grab roller bag

Grab purse
Come back, grab breakfast bar and vitamin C pill.

While Walking to Car List

House locked—check
Keys—check
Wallet—check
Inhaler—check
Cell phone—check/ On mute? —no? Add it to the list.

At the end of the day, the post-it is crumpled inside a small pocket in my purse or in multi-folds, a sliver of paper in my pants pocket. The list remains with me for the day and at night the list is taped to the wall in commemoration that I have not only done something today, but I've completed the task at hand. But you know what, lists also on-set Alzheimer's at an efficient pace. I have used a list-crutch for so long, that over the years I've forgotten how to remember shit by myself. My brain leaks information like a rain bucket with holes in it.

I had a conversation with a speech pathologist the other day—and you'll find these people in the strangest places—on a porch smoking a Marlboro light, in line whispering to their selves, and so on. We spoke of lists, letters, and notes. Specifically about list—no not lisp, lists. The willow thin pathologist couldn't stop herself from listing reasons why list were vital. She said: "I love list. I make lists all the time, in my head; I write them down, a running list of things I need to do. I keep it, that's how I look back on my week, of what I have done, what I need to do. How I keep order." I told her, of course to make her feel better, that I too am addicted to creating list. Organizing myself like a twelve step program just to get through the chaos of my day. She says to me "we're in the same boat," releasing the cloud of nasty, tar-burning smoke outside the porch door. Our conversation died down as she made sipping noises on the last drag of her cigarette and I my soda. Perhaps the silence was filled with our moving thoughts

contemplating the list we have yet to finish today. I could map out the possibilities of parenthood. I could list a litany of ideas on the origin of list, starting with cave men passing on information, or even the creation of mental list which are just as prevalent as a paper list, but I'd probably need to put together a list and make a note to remind me to do so. I find that these things are circular in nature.

FORGED LINKS

“Pass the muthafuckin’ beer Danny,” my uncle Junior loudly whispered over the radio announcer’s voice.

Winston-Salem State has the ball. It’s 27 to 7 and Johnson C. Smith College looks to be drowning, ladies and gentlemen, drowninggggg under Winston’s three pointers. Earl “The Pearllll” Monroe is in the house.

“Junior, you betta’ watch yo mouth concerning me before I beat your ass like Winston-Salem is beatin’ the hell outta Johnson! Git cha’ own damn shit,” Uncle Daniel replied as he snatched the T.V.’s remote controller from Junior, turning up the T.V.’s volume, and drowning out Junior’s response. My father, Jesse, is seated next to Daniel, settling down with his shot glass of cognac and a glass cup of fizzing Coke. Tonight is what the brothers called Game Night. I’m no more than ten or twelve years old, but by being inseparable from my father, he was saddled with me for most of these nights. My mother and Aunt JoAnn faded in the background when I was in the brother’s presence. It was here where I learned to associate cussing and friendship, drinking as a means to “get deeper into the game”, and that I, just as my uncles, had “fuckin’ fits” too. Looking back, Junior always chose the opposite of what Dad and Daniel rooted for in basketball games. He was usually the one having the fits with me.

Basketball or football games were never interesting. Most times I would worm my way into Uncle Daniel’s kitchen during these family get together, since Game Nights were over his house. I would rummage through his cabinets; find food, find popcorn, and then search for his newly moved alcohol stash. The alcohol bottles, all pretty shapes, sizes and color, amazed me and cooed sweetie

to me to play with them for a while. Throughout the entire Winston-Salem, Johnson C. Smith, Wake Forest or Duke University games, based out of Charlotte, North Carolina, I was invisible, floating from one brother's cup to the other, tasting what new amber liquid I could steal. Close to the end of the Night, I'd be happily buzzed somewhere, curled between bodies on the couch with one of the brother's watching over me and mouthing things at each other while I drifted in and out of voices.

My father in the late 1960s decided to move down from North Carolina to Atlanta, Georgia—his new city— where he would meet and marry his wife, Johnnie—a Yank from Ohio. Mom traveled to Georgia by the mid-seventies to attend grad school at Clark University, now Clark-Atlanta University, a Historical Black College and University. Then, they had me and of course I gelled the staying situation, here in Georgia, but these two were determined to keep up with some element of their home state, and the easiest, perhaps, was football for my mother and college basketball for my father. Of course I didn't understand this fascination with basketball or football until years later. I figured this sports thing was their version of staying connected to a place of origin, holding on to a piece of their selves.

Both are usually calm and introverted in spite of any activities, but the moment Winston-Salem appears while flipping through the T.V. or Ohio State and Michigan banners are posted next to each other, the parentals morph into something—different.

My mother awhile back strong-armed me from my bedroom to the living room. She centered me in front of the towering mahogany entertainment set in our flower-patterned living room.

“Mom. I have Tap practice today. I’m even in my shoes,” I said, clicking them together. To overly solidify this point, I kicked out my twelve year old legs, left then right, knowing the tapping couldn’t be heard on the thick carpet, but the point about leaving the house before “Game Day” started was evident. She in turned, grabbed my wrist, shooed my grandmother over into the burnt orange love seat, and sat with me on the equally burnt orange couch. *Why me?* I thought.

“Awww Johnnie Mae. The girl don’t want to see the football game. Shit, just let her out with the dogs and be done with it,” my grandmother said, sitting on the edge of the love seat. In one hand she held an unlit cigarette, bobbing up and down as she rocked back and forward on the seats edge.

“Momma,” my mother hissed through her teeth, “this ain’t none of your business. If you were a goooood grandma, you would be helping me keep Ohio alive in our next generation!”

“Hold on just a darn tootin’ minute! Yo ass decided to move down here to Georgia, not me. You’re a damn Falcon now; I’m the only Buckeye in this house!”

“Now YOU wait a minute—” my mother replied.

They continued like this for a while. Once my grandmother and mother get in to it, a stampede begins at one part of the house and ends at the other. Waiting out the storm, I shifted off the couch and plopped onto the orange shag rug. Taking off my tap shoes, I realized that practice is surely canceled for the day.

Fandom I understood. It’s like being loyal, right? I’m loyal. I liked G.I. Joe’s and I watched Power Rangers religiously every afternoon, after making a PB and J and letting the dog out to pee. Continuing to ignore the bickering above me, I tilted my head slightly to the right, watching a choir in blue and white

robes sing the U.S. National Anthem on the Ohio State football field. The crowd was divided into sections, rather in deep red and white or sky blue and gold colors. There were naked—well half naked—people in the stands with blue and yellow body paint on them, gold combat boots, blue ‘M’s’ painted on cheeks from infants to gray haired men being wheeled into their seats. Order seemed strung on a string, already frayed and close to popping. Hopefully Ohio will win. When the Buckeyes are having a great day, my mother would bounce cheerfully around the house. Sometime she’d go into her money stash under her bras and take me and my baby brother shopping for jeans and any piece of fabric colored maroon and white.

The bickering came to a sudden halt when the announcer’s voice came through the T.V. speaker.

“Damn Wolverines! Johnnie come look at this shit—awww did you see that!”

“Yeah momma I see, and sit down before your heart gives out!”

“Oh hush. I may be seventy-nine but even I could tackle that freakin’ Wolverine.” Looking up from the T.V., I glanced at them both as they took their respective places on the sofas, finally coming back into the room after arguing through the kick-off from Michigan. Grandma is perched on the seat’s edge againk, shadow boxing with the sprinting Wolverine down the Ohio State field. I heard the football announcer say, “Welcome to the 101th Rival game between Ohio State Buckeyes and the Michigan State Wolverines.” *Rival game?* What’s a rival game?

Game Nights are still a go at my uncle’s. My father has eight siblings. Out of those eight, four are boys. Junior, yet another uncle, worked on and drove

eighteen-wheelers. If my father was the lover and the most loved out of the group, and Daniel the partier out of the group, then Junior was definitely the bruiser and the proverbial black sheep, loved but perhaps misunderstood. He's also the youngest. Being that Dad's the oldest brother living, after his older brother Kenny died years after Vietnam, Dad's house in the 70s, was the halfway house, a shelter for siblings roaming the east coast. Junior was the last one to use Dad's halfway house in Atlanta. Junior needed work and generally desired something new for himself, trying to leave the nest in Winston-Salem and, I later learned, the police behind.

Perhaps the clash and competition between the two factions was woven into every aspect of Dads and Junior's relationship, Dad being a Crews and Junior being a Brown. Sibling rivalry was inevitable or rather is inevitable in families, just like border wars. The ugly rumor mill, in Winston-Salem, spun tales that my paternal grandmother, Vera, choose to leave this earth behind, because of the consistent competition between her children—her two sets of children, products of two different marriages.

Grandma Susie, my mother's mom, gave birth to two sisters from two different partnerships. Grandma raised both, alone and by herself in two states, Kentucky and Ohio. The family of three settled their roots in Cincinnati, Ohio and nested their allegiance with Maroon and White Buckeye colors.

Ohio State versus Michigan State. The Buckeyes versus the Wolverines. The rivalry I was forced to watch or interact with from middle school to high school. Nothing about this rivalry was explained to me, or even a brochure given out. In my mother's house, we were Buckeyes; always for Ohio State and we sneered at anything blue and gold. Now let me say this, my household, in Atlanta, Georgia, is not particularly sporty, so this type of fandom or loyalty

confused me even more as I thought about the contrast between my family and my play cousins. Other than a little soccer and tennis I played at, and of course bowling—a Crews tradition—we are not sports people, or better yet we are convenient sports people. If we flip through the television screen and see a team to cheer for, we'll transform, if not, we continue flipping. This is comparable to the Lewis', who consisted of my play aunt, Silvia, and cousins, Dee Dee and Cherie.

I remember trips to their apartments over the years, and the constant jaunts of rainbow color coordination within. That household was filled with different banners for different colleges; different basketball teams, high school and football teams, and buttons and colors of sporting teams, ranging from soccer to the Olympics.

Aunty Silvia, like my mom, plotted to instruct and educate me on the fascinating world of competition, physical games, the sweaty hot men in tights, and all those complex rules that kept the bulging muscles of the, sweaty hot men, moving in the game. As far as I was concerned, if it wasn't Monopoly or Uno; the physical card slappin', snap-back, whip lash of Gin Rummy, or Spades—I wasn't too interested in neither learning nor playing "outside" games. Climb trees, yes. Hit a ball and run, no.

Before 2008, being forced to sit in front of our big box Panasonic T.V. and watch the same game, same time; on the same channel every year did nothing for me. These were the best moments, during the game, to brush and groom one of my dogs; to dress Diamond, our small, salt and pepper male poodle in a stolen teddy bear outfit, and maybe after half time, try and paint his nails "Pretty in Pink" without being mauled. I wasn't moved. I wasn't connected. Sports

transformed into something more than brawn and playbooks. Sports created its own sub identity, wide enough to extend its culture to convenient or more robust fans.

2008 brought a different perspective with it. After the death of my grandmother in 2008, I found that Game Days for my mother were non-existent. I once wore bright blue on Game Day, and there was nothing, no exciting reaction, not even an acknowledgment. Mom, in her flannel PJ's poured herself a Coke and walked back to her bedroom. She was shroud in gray, a ghost in PJ's for a while.

In hindsight, I knew I would touch my grandmother again. I knew I would feel her softly wrinkled hand slap the back of my head as I wrestled with the dog, the outfit, and the nail polish. I knew that Game Days wouldn't end abruptly as it had. I didn't understand there was a link, some bridge between my mother and grandmother and the Buckeyes. During Game Day my maternal line reconnected somehow with an estranged piece of their selves via a televised football game. Over the years of watching and creating a sense of community within a community of sports we'd formed a web. I never knew how much of my mother was in me, how much of Ohio's sense of self and pride took up space and residency within, and through my mother and grandmother, and how much the snap of the link would hurt; leaving the chain bridge from me to Grand jerking from the sudden crack of binding chains. My house would not survive the silence, especially on Game Days. I knew I could catch a-hold of that chain link and bridge us back together again. But how?

Years later I strong-armed my mother into the living room. I centered her on the edge of our new forest green and gold love seat after bending down in-

between the seats, to ferret out the ever-wandering remote. Flipping through the cable channels, we both settled down and watched the HBO sign flicker, buzz, and light up on the screen. Tonight the Home Box Office showcased the first documentary of its new sports division.

“Kimmy. I really have some things to be doing. We can watch T.V. another time baby,” my mother said. I ignored her and draped a leg across her lap.

“So. You remember that time you dragged me from my room to watch Ohio vanquished Michigan State, 31 to 16? I hope you remember that, because I missed tap practice and had to do double drill’s that next Saturday in tap class.” I pointed at my toes. “You see these. Yeah, you’re responsible for the awkward looking toes I have on this foot.” I wiggled my toes at her once more and she laughed, closing her eyes and shaking her head.

“Crazy girl. You needed the practice anyhow, so don’t go blaming me for those fat toes of yours.” She swatted my big toe and shored at my leg on her lap.

“Mom! You cannot call my toes fat! Whaa—. You know what? Just watch the flat screen and work with me here.” We both turned to see the opening scene of HBO’s “Border War”, a documentary on the Ohio-Michigan State Rivalry. We didn’t speak much after the narrator began his speech. Looking at her from my peripheral view, I understood now that she was just as lost and fascinated over this rivalry, this conflict as I was. Some families passed down china and tea cups, and if I’m personally lucky, money, but most of all, coming from an Ohio, generational-based fan club, I will have the Ohio-Michigan rivalry, war played out on a grass field in dropping winter degrees. In our own way we were both looking for a way to rekindle grandma. We were looking for a way to hold on to this woman, to this woman who found the warring between brother states to be

among her favorite pastimes. That night—as we watched together—we found something.

“You ain’t betta’ than me, Jesse!” Junior yelled as he shoved Dad in the shoulder. “You. Ain’t. Betta’. I am as good as you, and you and Momma, and all of ya’ll know that.”

Dad and Junior had an eleven-year difference between them. Junior was a “knot-headed, bald-head boy I was raising along with my other brothers,” Dad told me over Breyer’s Butter Pecan ice cream. Basketball season started a week ago and the anniversary of Junior’s death would come around soon. He continued with, “a week after he came into town, I found him watching a rerun special on Earl “The Pearl” Monroe in the living room. Steppin’ into the apartment, I was worn out from lying out and planning the face renovation of a city drug store. I expected that Junior would have at least tidied up the living room a bit, since that’s where he parked his ass for a week—on my couch—but that’s where I found him during the first and last fight we had, with a bottle of something brown, and a smokin’ cigarette burning a hole in my carpet.” That was the night he’d had enough.

The way Dad told it, there was a five a.m. knock on his apartment door. Junior, the brawler, was on the run from a Winston-Salem/High Point investigation for a “brutal beating” of a High Point group of black males, ages ranging from seventeen to twenty-eight. Dad lived on the Westside of Atlanta in the middle muck of suburbia and the “re-phasing” of public housing. This meant the nice white collared folks were tearing down homes of blue-collar workers, making room for a new community. Dad’s apartments were saved somehow.

Climbing out of his bed, the T.V. offered enough light to find pants and his newly acquired combat knife, previously confiscated from a drunk and retired Green Beret sibling, Kenny. Shuffling to the front door, he peered out the blinds, and there was Junior standing at the door with a duffle bag and a bus ticket.

“Junior,” Dad continued, “back then, was very talented—at everything, now that I think about it. He had a great gift of gab—charming—but lazy. Could get a job anywhere, but was nonchalant about everything. In our first and last fight, I came into the apartment and he pushed me, accusin’ me of thinking I was better than him, accusin’ me of persuading Momma to think he was a-no good somethin’. See now, Junior I helped raise. I didn’t think I was better than him, but being who I am, even as the second eldest out of the boys, I made my money; had the street smarts to hustle in legal businesses. Daniel actually gave me high praise one time, saying after our father died, that I was the type of Man he looked up to; wanted to be.”

He went on saying, “Once he pushed me I knew right then and there, there was a) gonna be some shit started or b) there wasn’t gonna be no shit started. I had enough sense to take a moment and get myself together.”

Scrapping the sides of his desert bowl, Dad paused and tilted his head to one side. “I remembered what my daddy used to say when Kenny and I used to be at it. He’d pull us off of each other by the back pockets of our breeches, and throw us to the side, waiting for us to run at each other again, Kenny and I. He’d then knock our heads together until we saw stars. Daddy was a simple man, and all he told us was that ‘two brothers don’t fight each other—they fight others who are trying to fight your brother.’” Shaking his head, my father dropped his spoon into the dish and said, “I looked Junior in the eye and told him what

Daddy told me: brothers shouldn't fight—two brothers should never fight each other, never be jealous of each other; should protect each other. I told old stupid there, that I loved him, Momma loved him, and there wasn't anything he could do about it. I also told him—slowly, cuss talkin' to a drunk man is a talent, that he is the future of us brothers; that I am happy to wake up to that thought and it eases me to know that when I go to sleep." He paused to take a quick sip from his Coke, chewing on the ice found inside the cup. "I wasn't sure then or now what had gotten into Junior, but I refused to entertain it. There's no true competition between brothers, between family—at least not in our family baby girl," he gestured to me, slicing his hands downward. "Junior played football when he was in high school, and maybe he thought him and I, and even Daniel sometimes, were playing at beating each other, but that was foolish. Sports and competitions are for T.V., not family."

Later into the night Dad joined my mother and I on the love seat. Mom was closely sandwiched between us. The "Border War" narrator announces the separation of Ohio and Michigan in the Big Ten and the Rose Bowl. At the end of their perspective seasons the brother states battled each other in November, rather in Ann Harbor, Michigan or Columbus, Ohio. As of present time, since 2000, Ohio State has won eight out of ten games, the victor for now.

One of the older interviewee's said something along the lines of: We war because we must. From my own family experience, siblings will fight with and against their own flesh, never marring the chained bridge, but each blow finds a way to strengthen it. The bridge I find now, in present time and at twenty-four, is one on the molecular level, and within the links, events connect two sides of a whole. Then again, maybe, warring is something done on the weekends, on

sibling days off from battling with outsiders, non-family members. Then, perhaps, maybe Dad was right about all of this. Maybe life is about love and survival; the push and pull between old and young, respect and glory, silliness and humanity. All seemed to go hand in hand, as integral parts of who we are, and what parts and pieces we pick up from family connections via flesh and blood or the T.V. screen.

ON BEING A CHAIR

Listen. I don't know what it is about being rounded toward the lower spectrum of my body, but skinny people love to sit on me. Butts, bunions, and lumps rush and plop, swing and fall, mount and crawl on me, the chair. Sitting 5 feet 6 inches I am not the tallest playground, but I have enough surface area to make a difference. My manufacture chose to wrap my arms with a warm gold, while my legs are colorfully painted with warm brown tones, freckled black and bruised here and there. At the moment the mechanics of my edition are complex but do-able. The first step in creation is having all the parts from the box. Now, some chairs already come assembled without mistakes, but the worthwhile chairs are made with long hours and drip drop sweat, nicks and bumps from nails and hammers. Worthwhile chairs are best made with loving backaches and strained muscles from toiling in a workshop. This is the beginning for every piece of merchandise.

Although people will not admit or proclaim, stacking a public claim of desire, they love relaxing into an over-plush chair. The expectations of coming home and of the softest touch this type of chair gives without thought to person's identity. The plush chair is ever accepting, and I've never known a person to snuggle into the gut of a straight back Captain's chair, wishing to stay there, erect and shaped, forever. The Captain's chair is a classic design, you know, as much as the chaise chairs of Greece, France and Rome, all sleek and perfected in its balanced lines. But my extras, my bulging deformities, if I were a chair, were given to me as strength's, a proof of survival as frayed, but tight seams on an old chair speaks to its worth.

While watching a sales person work, there is a compulsive need to check every detail. People are retentive in the search to destroy anomalies, like a blinking cursor line deleting mere letters than an orchestra of living words. They look for missing, damaged, or disfigured parts and if any of these acts of nature should occur, a great addition is lost or rather gleefully deleted and identified as a stepping stone necessary to better creations.

Once created and considered flawed, the need for touch is tremendous and denied. An object such as a chair lives to be touched by its creator; by someone since this is its purpose, to touch, be touched; create sensation, to build a bridge of sensation from its purpose and padding to the object the chair cuddles. I've seen people out to shop, smiling, nodding, and eventually passing by the plush type chairs, leaving a wide circumference of space between the merchandise, never touching just observing and listing pros and cons and style of the seams and weight and color and manufacturing details. Anything less than social correctness is nothing, not worth another look. After a time, without a purpose being met, frequently, things just stop existing.

Here's a thought: chairs can be made by hands. Soldier's rough ruined hands clasp together, palm to palm, fingers interlocking, camouflage covered arms cradling a body between them. It's the most basic of chairs, but its purpose, all chairs hope to mimic. From the suede, mesh, denim, leather, micro fiber, La-Z-Boy, and Ergonomic chairs a sense of touch, comfort, but mostly support is what these editions offer, and what most take for granted, as if peace is an occupation. Chairs are not always made with black bolts and plastic gray wheels. Sometimes chairs are made by flesh, are flesh.

I am burdened with the heavy and the thin spectrums of human society. I am cushioned with the softest of materials: glucose, sucrose, and a build-up of

cells that are kneaded, poked, and prodded as the youngest to the oldest mark their place on me. I have been a Bean Bag, an Easy chair, a Slumber chair, an ottoman, and even a Poofbag chair, but I've served being something other than a space saver, a motionless part of a Fung Shui style. I play the part that's given to me and this is the life of being a chair.

We are merchandise, sold and bought daily with rules, and money, and time. Sometimes living outside of a social identity filled with too many flaws and not enough acceptances, I am just another piece of merchandise made with love from my manufactures hand and damaged by my caretakers. Sometimes I am slammed into and you can hear me deflate in a hushed sizzle of sound. I am clawed into with different size rips, the climbers trying to get a handle on me with catty aggression. Sometimes I am flipped over in rage. Other times moved around in anger. Sometimes I am the only that will cuddle with you. It's me, sometimes, who's the only one to listen when you talk and value your tears when they soak and crystallize into my frayed seams, and yet, people will use and misuse a chair and never say thank you, acknowledging the chairs purpose.

I'd like to think that I am privilege choice of chair than a convenient one. I'd like to think that my role is a sentry role of some sort. I am the ever-watchful foundation in my mind, a foundation given the prized purpose of carrying a beloved legacy in the black thread piecing me together. That I am lifting the future onto the shoulders of me, the chair, while settling the old into the plush of my lap, cuddling them as they doze off to sleep. I'd like to think that being a chair, a human chair, is realizing and living out that realization of being the greatest invention mankind has ever mimicked.

ON BEING A SHOE: A MEDITATION

I think I love shoes in relation to the woman standing next to me. We might both enter a DSW or a Bakers and simply smile at the phenomena of shoes existing. We might have enough gumption to approach the rows of shoes and marvel at the mere possibility of transformation, a physical and psychological change a pair of shoes might bring. I associate change with movement and movement with shoes and shoes with feet and feet with natural foundations. There are millions of shoes, a million types of foundations, and like shoes, each vary in colors, attitudes, style, season, and onward.

When I was a girl playing military missions with my teddy bears and aggressive poodle, I found an unexplored spot in my parents' closet where they kept boxes and numerous pairs of mismatched shoes. Looking for enemy bombs and a pair of shoes for myself, I found my mother's disco era, wedge-heel boots. You know the knee-high, white leather, clear wedge-heel boots, with the goldfish in the bottom—yes, I found those. The one shoe amazed me and I wondered what the shoe offered my mother and why did she buy this type of shoe, and how would you fill the bottom with water without having a soggy shoe? My exploration came to a swift end before I could drag the shoe farther out from the pile. The front door slammed shut and my name speared the hallway. Crawling from the pile of shoes, the white boot disappeared, swallowed back into the pile, lost and forgotten. I never played in the pile of shoes again, but I'm off topic. You don't have to have a fetish to appreciate the bone and muscles you are standing on. Shoes are how we describe ourselves whether as a part of our statement of self at the moment or our identity, which will last a lifetime. We are, at most times, unconscious of our meticulous choosing in the wrappings of our feet. Our

feet are not absurd. They are feet and essentially an essential part of who you are, or better yet who you want to be. They are our shared foundation.

July 19th. On the way to work over the summer, we took one car, my mother and I. We worked at a community college in Georgia, and were running late; it being my fault of course. In a Bronco-like Chevy, Mom and I pushed faster down the rolling hillside of backwoods Ellenwood coming up on Ward's Lake. I glanced out the window during our rolling descent, and caught sight of this itty-bitty, rain-slopped shoe that might belong to three year old. It was a black, soft padding flip flop, forgotten and wet from the pillaging rain last night and this morning. Mom ran straight over the shoe. I heard the squish and wheezing even through the rain and wind as we rolled over the shoe and the little toe imprints on the soft padding.

I wonder at people and how they lose a shoe. Do we carry extra shoes in our knapsacks? Lunch boxes? Bookbags? How do we continue on, most likely limping throughout the rest of our day without the other, left behind shoe? I realized a few days ago that in cataloguing, unconsciously, the world, I have seen plenty of shoes left in weird places. There's a brown flip-flop stationed at the bend of a catwalk near my office on campus. It was there long enough to become a marker for my students when searching for my office. There was a baby's booty, blue with white stripes left in a thorny bush on the side of my apartment building. Walking along, you will notice shoes swept into corners and misplaced in crevices, nestled behind plant life or forgotten behind a locker and a cement wall.

Leaving my Composition Pedagogy course at almost midnight it seemed, at Fresno State, I ran out of the Peters building into a beautiful show of stars and wind. Approaching my car I saw, left by a tree on the driver's side, a man's size 10 flip flop. The sandal was over turned and rested on its side waylaid by a stripped and broken branch. The back of the shoe was caked with soil and desert dust. The edges were rounded outward and hard worn. Shaking my head in the nightshade of the tree, yet another shoe left behind like a discarded gum wrapper, old, useless and resting on its side by a tree. If people were shoes, if we were the shoes we wear, I'm not sure our treatment of each other would change. As far as I can tell we use them, throw shoes out, discard them, forget them, ignoring them at the bend of a catwalk, noticing them stuck between a rock and a hard, but moving forward just cataloguing the world as we see.

On occasion, I'll find lace-tied shoes thrown over telephone cables or electric cords. I'd smile at the shoes and think about the owner, some teenager or even adult who lives by the poor man's wishing well, which are the electric lines running the neighborhood. There's never a penny to waste on a wish in a wishing well, but shoes far from repair may take a pennies place. The shoes owners believe in multiplying power's usage. They believe if the power which lights my house and provides when all else is dark, maybe that same power, if only for a minute, can electrocute my shoes and thereby power my dreams. If only for a minute. One cannot help but smile at the audacity of the reasoning and the dream. Neither my tennis shoes nor I were ever so bold to make such a statement. Were never the pair found hanging from cable wires, but I am a part of this wishing well and people who thought to power my dreams by way of my feet.

I remember buying my first pair of light-up shoes. You know the shoes. I would stomp my feet, bend over quickly and look through my legs to watch the light show on my feet. Running across the floor in Payless, I watched the shoes red beams, light up the shadows cast by the other shoppers as I jumped and ran in and out of their shadows. I always picked my shoes from the boy's section; a by far cooler selection than the pinks and greens on the girl's aisle. The shoes were black and blue with Velcro straps and white shoestrings. I had a pension for wearing the same color of shoes as my father and of course picking shoes with Velcro since those were the only type of shoes my father would wear. I did not understand the need for heels on a good pair of flat shoes. As a girl, I mostly hated Easter Sundays and Christmas mornings. On these special occasions shoes with heels were a must for southern belle girls accompanied by puffy hair and puff sleeves.

My mother would scream monologues at me about shoes and occasions for right shoes and matching belts with the right shoes, and so forth. The scream usually started with my full name and continued with, "You put them shoes right back on. No, not the tennis shoes. The heels girl and I mean now. Where in the world do you think we are going? Football practice. I ain't havin' you sit yo' narrow behind in Chuch (not Church) lookin' a fool in tennis shoes. In my house, we will serve the Lord, and wear the right shoes. Hurry up gal! Making us late because you don't wanna wear heels. Gitcha' behind in that room and change them shoes!" She pointed toward my bedroom and I huffed and puffed and pulled at the white tights around my belly, scratching and tugging at the ruby dress with a praline underskirt as I waddled off. I found the white patent plastic leather shoes with the heels far hidden behind the flower lamp. Took me a minute to re-find them, but found them I did. I had to. Strapping the Velcro

together I tottered unsteadily out of the house and toward the car, my little legs double timing it to catch up with my mother.

My father, throughout the shoe arguments on Sundays between my mother and I, always complimented me on my Sunday's Best as well as my shoes when I complained about them. My father is a Velcro shoe person. He loves all things Velcro. I've noticed that those type of people stick to you, like pinched fingers full of sticky rice. They stick to your gut; cling with you through everything. Dad wears Velcro strapped shoes. Black shoes, blue if necessary but he sports our favorite color black when he's not working in steel toe construction boots. One foot is bigger than the other. He says it's the swelling in "dem bad boys." The Velcro straps seem to give him room to expand and decrease as he ages; as he swells and shrinks.

After having a conversation about his love for Velcro in all things, my father admits his success in comfort and movement is not solely dependent on Velcro via his shoes. He said, "Them knees of mine baby girl. Got to talk to them. You know I do.

I say, alright now," he looks down at his knees, patting both caps on their respective sides, "we gon' move now."

In reflection, it's the gift of walking we walkers take for granted. 'Course we don't think about it, but the reality here is that we forget to thank the ground we tread upon. We forget to talk to our bodies, have a daily conversation with our knees. Giving them a pat on the head, telling them "we gon' move now fellas." We forget to thank them in advance or after the fact, for not buckling together when home girl/ home boy slide by you just as nice. Smelling like

jasmine and rain, and in that moment when those pheromones almost took you to your knees, your feet endured.

Begin Transmission:

From the Desk of Knee Caps and Feet Inc.:

Greetings Kim's Knee and Caps, as well as Left and Right Foot,

Please disregard the smell of heavenly male and naughty intentions from Mr. X and Y. Today is not the day for a break down, so we are locking up shop and keeping it moving. Feet continue on your way forward. Knee's please oil the Caps so that we may have a smooth journey ahead.

Thank you for your common sense and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Your Survival Management

End Transmission. Message Sent.

I think about the shoes I am currently wearing. Flexing my bare toes back and forth within my tennis shoes, the cloth surface of the sole feels thick and sturdy and soft. I find myself back in the car with the little boy's soaked and squished shoe. I feel responsible for his shoe and strangely enough for him. I think now that maybe I needed to tell my mother to stop the car. Perhaps I should have gotten out and removed the shoe from the rain; put out a search warrant for the negligent parents and another for the shoes missing mate. I think to do all of this in hope of returning something left behind. Something taken away from this child who is now missing half of his foundation, missing the pleasure of a soft, thick, somewhat sturdy, soggy barrier of a shoe.

But who am I to cast the first stone.

I deal in negligent behavior all the time. Off with the sneakers and socks, I rid myself from the confines of man-made shoes anytime I can. I prefer my bare feet as my shoes. My sole is within my skin, tightly wrapped with hard patches and smooth sides. Five hard worn toes are packed, but comfortably stationed into a size ten—perhaps a nine and a half on non-swelling days. I love walking in these fleshy shoes of mine. They carry me so many places and grant me the ability to strut by friend or foe, catwalk with sass in my ass, run alongside a first time bike ride, and act as firmly planted stilts, holding varying human packages dropped on to me as if I were a chair.

These feet of mine tell a wonderful story of life's longevity; of steps I couldn't have taken without the shoes I'm in, and yet I am not meticulous in choosing special wrappings for them. Sometimes I leave them ashy and cracked. Sometimes I leave pieces of rocks within my man-made shoes to scrap and pinch at my feet. Most time, I just don't spend enough time with them, my own physical access to freedom.

I remember my first pair of calf high, high-heel boots. They were faux-black velvet with a black wooden, rubber clipped heel. You would find the small, black metal zipper dangling from the inner part of my leg. There is something sensuous about pinching the dangling zipper between your thumb and point finger and pulling in either direction. Even the velvet feel of the boots brought pleasure to the senses. I remember my grandmother whispering to my mother, "if you don't tell her she's lookin' good, you might have to kill that child." I thought I was the sexiest thing among mortals when I wore those boots. I was unstoppable. Those boots gave me a sense of self, an identity associated with

power more so than any other sensation. In those boots I thought tempting and in those thoughts I became a tempest.

But listen. Look down. Go on, look. There they are. Shell toes, relaxed cut, open toe, pointed toe. Many colors and many materials: leather, mesh, cotton, plastic wear, and all different inventions for a shoe. I've known a pair of shoes to kick-start a spectacular entrance; seen them draw people together and split people apart. One pair of shoes might allow a comprehensive movement toward goals, adventures, and change, change being a progressive moment of movement forward. Or maybe a pair of shoes concludes a well thought out statement of who I am, a statement of purpose, or simply a pair of shoes would showcase an affirmation of "I Am". Until I was treated like a shoe, I never understood the gravity of the "I Am" statement. To exist and for others to acknowledge that existence is what we all crave one way or another. Shoes most time are the safest adornment to acknowledge on a person. Shoes are perhaps the safest item to point to and compliment or the easiest to judge, because again, what are shoes, naturally given or man-made? Shoes have evolved into an integral part of our lives, part of our comfort, part of our conversations, our groupings, statements of identity, and the most versatility item consciously and unconsciously donned.

But what of people? I am a shoe. Or rather I have the attributes and functionality of a shoe. Some twist my ends until I'm knotted into a bow. Others love to knot and tighten the material of me around their feet. These are usually the runners. They'll tie me tight and we'll run the track together, but never finish where we started. I am twisted and tied, bound and tangled with this runner, until I am toed off and kicked into a room. I am left unattended, thrown on my side, chewed by the dog, placed in cobwebs, until the runner has the itch to run

again. My purpose is to sit and wait and be on watch for the next run, my next usage.

If our feet could talk they would say: I am the floor of your foundation. I am the padding which you mold your feet to, and I feel you grip your toes on the broad expanse of my shoulders. I feel you. I hear the rush of your body through your feet. I taste the gravel of road and dust, sand of beaches and salt in my mouth as we move throughout the earth. I guard the soft meat of your wandering. For some, I am their only fleshy companion.

We are vain with our lips and eyes. We rouge our cheeks, oil our skin, and paint our fingernails, giving time and touch out of love and necessity. We spend hours on our hair and even more on our abs and gluts, but only a quick rub after a trip in and out of the bathtub do we spend on our feet. After their use, we never touch them again. My point is this: for such a specific addition to our wardrobe, which we may argue introduces ourselves before a "hello" we are absent minded about how important these items are. Shoes should be cherished if not only for the role they play. They are the last piece we put on and the first to hit the outside world. Shoes are pieces we opt to forget, easily thrown away, forgettable barriers, wrappings, and substructure. Sometimes I look at my shoes, and think I have taken off a part of who I dressed to be: teacher, daughter, church-goer; exhausted student. If the world is a stage, then I think shoes are the best part of a role we have to play. What are we, if not the wrappings of our feet?

CONSEQUENCES OF APRIL

I remember when Martin was shot. Hell, we all remember. We were all there. We saw him take his stance, holding the sniper barrel in the sweet spot of his armpit. We saw the glint of the metal sight sweat in the Memphis heat. We heard the quarter click as the trigger lit the spark that spit up a cylinder rumored to be pure silver some say. Some say, this nigga Martin could've only been a thing of myths, made up of some kinda black magic evil. Some say, to kill black magic, to end all of its life cycles, you gotta kill a myth with a myth, slay the magic with purity of purpose and with an ounce of silver, say, no bigger than a 50 cent piece.

The forest quieted itself, as it often does, before a storm began its pitch and roll. That particular day in April, nothing moved. The Southern wind must've blown another way. Not one pine tree, maple, or any leafy greens offered shade. We all felt the cylinder, 50 cent piece of silver nose open our black suit jacket, like a dog nosing open a Kroger bag full of meaty bits and bones. We felt the cylinder nose open our neck skin through the starch of our shirt. We felt the intimate bite severing the nerve of our jawbone, the cylinder digging its tongue into the meat of our tissue like pressing fingers into raw hamburger. Squish.

Splatter. I was there when Jesse Jackson held a white handkerchief to Martins neck, pointing upwards with Abernathy. Pointing and yelling something like "up there, look!" Samuel Kyles and I couldn't look. Our attention was kept elsewhere. We watched. We watched Martin like one would watch a spilled cup

of water spread out on to a table, spreading with as gravity pulled it outwards. We watched Jesse's white monogram fill in pink, then red, then burgundy. We watched a halo of blood fill in the outline of Martin's head twisted softly at an angle. We all heard the stone lick its clops as the concrete opened its pores and moisturized its face. So much blood to stain the ground, and I was there. We all were there, there from the beginning, to the middle, and barely making it out of the end. April saw consequences that left holes in people. Left certain doors swung wide open and other clenched shut; not because of creed, but because of fear. City skylines held man-made clouds, spilling ash as rain, blowing its tragedy from town to town. For weeks, blowing across state lines, and finally—our ash and rain and gaping holes—bushed up against the rest of the Nation, a nation full of people full of holes.

Jesse

I have seen my city change many of times. I have seen the time when Winston-Salem skies in North Carolina, burned blush-red with fire bombs blazing from open store windows and shattered doors. I have seen my front door pelted with strands of arterial spray from rum and spit as I looked out my front window and saw my driveway run whiskey brown into the pavement of the main street. I saw war tanks descend down my street. I saw gentle and laid back neighbors, community kinfolk, greet the tank with homemade Billy Clubs and Seagram bottles with white linen stuffed through the bottlenose and hanging out onto the sides. My city burned for days—weeks—it seemed. All this hell after King was shot. All this rage and fear and pain painted North Carolina, painted

the grocery stores, the tobacco fields, town hall, and uptown's white mansions. April 4, 1968 at dusk, hell happened.

I was eighteen years old, mopping the floors at Amos Cottage for a dolla' an hour. The Cottage was a retarded institution for mostly white and rich invalid children. After Dr. Quick died and his wife sold his pharmacy in Winston-Salem, I had to find me another job to fill my pockets and fill in the time I was missing from school. Dropped out I did, dropped out of high school at Salem High. Thought I knew everything at the time, and seeing that my mother told me she wasn't taking care of a grown ass man with milk still on his breath, I had to find a job. Lucky enough, I snagged a janitorial job at the Cottage. I worked from seven in the morning to seven in the afternoon. After taxes I made fifty-eight dollars and twelve cents. I remember it just as good. I did everything, did everybody's job, and worked all this time and after taxes made only fifty-eight dollars and twelve cents, enough to pay rent to an elderly white man, Charles, who let me rent his shotgun house on 14th and Liberty. I had enough saved up to sleep on a busted, spring mattress and some left over to pick out clothes from a Good Will store. I remember taking naps in the men's restroom, second to last stall, on the top of a toilet I'd just cleaned. It was there, on the third floor of the Cottage, I took my thirty-minute breaks. I made sure the shift managers always saw me workin', even if I was on my breaks. I would sit my mop or broom in front of the restroom door. If anybody was to walk through the door, the broom would fall and wake me up. As if on cue, I would start whistling cuss all nigga's apparently whistle somehow. Flushing the toilet as if I'd been cleaning it, I would back out of the stall, greet whoever walked in and walk on out with my broom, just-a whistlin' and carryin' on.

But that's not here or there, I was gettin' ready to leave at seven that night, and Jesus, hell lifted up its eyes. The Cottage set on top of a slanted hill, like so. While clocking out and jivin' with some of the older, black nurses, I slung my coat on and, I think put my week's check in the front of my jacket, but I opened the door and all I saw was orange rising in places and flickering on like our basement light-blubs. Turning around I asked, "June? What in the hell is going on out there?"

"What? Whatchu mean?" she said, going to the front door where I stood, peaking over my back to see the blazes one her own.

"Damn. What the hell *is* going on out there?" she replied. I wanted to say something smart to her, being that we made fun of each other often, but there was a low moan and a crashing sound I'd never forget coming from the nurses corridor. June and I rushed down the hall to see if some of the kids wiggled out of their bedrooms and were causing havoc up ahead. When we arrived we saw Martha Lee draped in Mrs. Lewis arms, a tangle of black and white limbs. Most of the nursing staff was present in their cramped little office. Now, where Doctor Matthews was and John, his assistant, I don't know, but Joe, the other black custodian, Ray and Jim, the two male nurses, were there with me as we looked back and forward between the weeping women in front of us.

"Well? What has y'all this torn up? And let me just say, have any of y'all taken a good look outside—."

"Hush Jesse," Mrs. Lewis said in a rather sharp tone, "just listen okay?" Dropping my body on the side oak table, I propped myself against the wall and listened. On the main desk, which was at the front of the office, stationed on observation window, the radio was buzzed and then there was this sporadic *whooo* noise, almost like someone was breathing on the microphone.

“This just in: Martin Luther King, Jr. is being carried to the Saint Joseph’s Hospital as we speak. He looks to have been shot on the balcony of his Lorraine Motel room in Memphis, Tennessee. There are reports of an unknown gunman seen waiting in an abandoned building westward of the Lorraine Motel. Reports are coming in folks, and what a tragedy has befallen us today.” The voice over the airwaves was George Lee, the host of the evening section on WTOB Radio Station if I remember correctly. There were more buzzing sounds and muttered noises until fourteen minutes had come to pass, and Lee’s voice sounded loud and clear through the speaker’s metal mask. “Ladies and Gentlemen... I regret to inform you, that the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has...*whooo*... has died on the operating table at Saint Joseph’s Hospital today, April 4th, 1968, at 6:01pm. It’s being reported that the doctor on called open King’s chest to perform a manual heart massage, but all efforts to save King were called off fourteen minutes ago. Dr. King was shot on his balcony at Lorraine Motel this evening in Memphis, Tennessee...”

It took him about fourteen minutes to die, but die he did. He didn’t die with his wife Coretta by his side, not with his children or familiar pictures surrounding him, but in a southern hospital, an institution like mine, with white washed walls, and maybe a strip of yellow wallpaper lining the borders. He died with the smell of ointment and rubbin’ alcohol in his nose. And maybe he died with the hope that the doctors in the E.R. room would do everything possible to get him home. Maybe Martin was scared and he closed his eyes just for a second, just a second long enough to think this through, just—long enough to rest and disappear.

“Dammit! They just had to take him. They just had to destroy the only thing we had,” Jim yelled to himself, shouldering the wall hard and tapping his head softly on the concrete block. Misery. Misery pinched heart muscles, poured onion juice into red rimmed eyes, whispered words into red boiling ears, gave way to shrieks and wailing, and in my case Misery silenced my tongue, pushing me to think of my own father’s death and how I was at least by his side when he went.

We stood there in the office for over an hour listening to different reports coming into the station. We listened to Lyndon B. Johnson as he spook about tragedies, about hope, tellin’ the rioters to not follow in the footsteps of violence, rage, and hatred. Johnson told us black folks that we were supposed to live in the name of Peace just like Martin did. We were told to go home, be with our families. We were told to grieve with the Nation in our collective loss. To be still. To. Be. Still. To be still?

Looking up from my coats hem, I caught the stares of most black eyes. I saw the disbelief, I saw the hurt, the pain; I saw the glossiness of tears forming, plowing into the previous tear making a run for it down their faces. I starred at them and them at me. There was no response in the small room to the stupidity coming from the White House. No movement, no words. There was a nothingness creating a vacuum and I was just tired all of a sudden—worn, old—and tired. I felt older than the eighteen-year-old skin I was in.

After hearing Johnson’s mess, I saw Martha Lee ease out of Mrs. Lewis’ arms in mid-rock, wipe her face with medical gauze; grab her jacket and purse, leaving the office space. Kind of in a daze, all I heard was the clicking of her

heels and the whimpering noises of a handful of our able-bodied kids peeping out of their windows. The moment broke and those whose shift ended gathered our belongings and walked out. I heard Jim tell Mrs. Lewis not to go home tonight, and to make arrangements for her kids, but not to leave the building tonight. His voice faded and I kept walking, but I heard him say to call the other white staff, and tell them to bunk down here at the Cottage until morning. I reckoned Black Jim and Ray was gonna stand guard tonight.

I didn't really understand what I felt in those moments, walking towards the parking lot. I was scared. I was frustrated and angry. I was proud and kind of comforted that—finally— I could walk the streets of Winston-Salem without the risk of being harmed because of the color of my skin. I knew there would be no confederate flags flying tonight or any Klan members out to terrorize the late shift workers, because my people were running the streets. Tonight we terrorized with purpose. We were hell bent on destroying everything that reminded us of who we were, what we didn't have, and who we didn't have any longer. But through all of these thoughts and emotions running through me, I was just—at the end— disappointed and hurt. The hurt was so bad it crawl down my throat and suffocated me like clumps of grits stuffed into a pipe. I was so full of ether things— that I had not noticed the smell of burning tobacco or saw the nearby fields begin to blaze. I followed the glowing taillights of the others cars as we trailed together down the main paved road and on to the main drag of downtown Winston-Salem. I knew, after seeing a car bombed and overturned on to its side that I just wanted to get home, stay home, and think.

Kim

I have seen my father's face change many times. I have seen the time when crossing the border from Georgia into the Carolinas would lighten his face, as if happiness could be refilled like a bottle of syrup. The happiness was thick and the love for his birthplace even more so. Winston-Salem skies in North Carolina, the first time I remembered them, burned yellow. It was a hot day sometime in the summer months. I wasn't as impressed as I let on. Winston-Salem was nothing compared to the lush jungles of Georgia, especially in our half and half, country and city parts, of Ellenwood. Dad and I, when he's feeling better these days, try to make the six-hour trip from our door to my Aunt Virginia's front porch, on occasions, when work and school allow. We'd sit at Virginia's round table in the dining room and eat watermelon with a fork, salt n' sugar, without a plate, discussing grown-up things like the "hussy next door," "the adulterous fool down the street," and the newest sibli'n' drama between the Brown's and the Crews'. I've come of age where I can sit in on these round table discussions, instead of walking slowly back and forth from the kitchen to the living room, stock piling forks and spoons and food that I snuck out to the hound dog next door, since I couldn't eat the four plates I ahem, accidently fixed for myself and cousins. On this particular trip to North Carolina though, I didn't learn exclusively about hot water cornbread or see the ancient graveyard plots filled with bodies ending with family names of Madison, Brown, and Crews, dating back to the early 1800s. On this trip with Dad, I learned something else, something more. Something tied to the natural echos in my body, to the neurological pathways I have unconsciously formed with bodies in ancestral grave plots. Somehow, on the trip, I have given myself, shed parts of myself, and

soaked those parts among the grains of ancestral ground, pushing something out of its slumber.

Jesse

I knew I wouldn't make it to Mama's house that evening, going down town to hit the freeway, so I decided to veer off the main road heading back into Winston-Salem. The roads were blocked by abandoned cars and unhitched buggies. There were cops in '56 Fords with rifles tilted outside barely cracked windows. Huge pieces of store windows stood like caution cones on the road as I eased my car around the scattered shards. The jagged pieces laid in wait, waiting to be used in the rioting. Driving in this was no longer an option I decided. Turning off Wilks street and onto Twelfth, my headlights spotlighted a group of rioters, in everyman clothes, walking down the middle of the road. They turned like a unit, a human roadblock, and waited for me to pull up to the center of their line. They surrounded my Chevy, peeped their heads into the black space of my car.

"Say my man, you need some riders?"

"What's happenin' Daddy-yo?" I replied to the man with the afro, propped against my driver door. "What's good fella's?" I nodded to the rest.

"What up nigga," a bald headed, brown-skin brother yelled back, scratchin' his back with his homemade Billy Club.

"Eh man," the ringleader, I assumed, said, maneuvering his head left and right, wedging his Afro inside my window. "We bout to burn this muthafucka down, ya heard? Them muthafuckas don killed Martin, my man. Martin! That nigga was all we had and is gonna have, ya heard?"

“Yeah!” someone shouted, waving a Seagram bottle and a lighter, I saw, in my rearview mirror. “Chicken shits put a goddamn bullet in his head.”

“Fuck whitey!” another screamed to the group.

Oh these muthafuckas was chargin’ to go, chargin’ to hurt, to hunt, wanting change through retribution, and I knew if I said something wrong, change would begin with my blood on the pavement and my car stolen. The city wasn’t run by Black folks that night and in the weeks that came. It was run by terror. A terror so thick, I could see the ghostly chains snapping shut on the thick of their necks. I couldn’t see where the ends to those chains lead. This, mentally shaking my head, was not freedom or even vengeance; this shit in front of me was madness. Yeah I wanted vengeance, but the ghost in their eyes wanted death, killing bodies to eat at the souls.

“Yeah man” I said, speaking to the line of bodies against the hood of my car. “I heard the news. That’s some sad shit man. I’m mad as hell! A man doesn’t take another man’s life like a goddamn punk, he faces his opponent and takes his licks standing up and lookin’ you in the eye, right?”

“Hell yeah you’z right,” the chorus of bodies responded.

Nodding my head, I clinched my fist and hit my steering wheel once or twice. “I just want some damn justice. I want some peace. I want Martin to go home to his babies tonight, not lying up in some white man’s city morgue!”

“You betta say that!”

“Well look y’all—I gotta check on my wife and kids, but I’ma be back out and then, we’re going to work!” I shouted.

“My man!” the ringleader shouted back as he pulled out of my window, slapping five’s with me, and allowing me to pull off and on down the road. Coming up on the first downward hill a few yards away from them, I took off,

hit 50 miles per hour like a bat outta hell. My heart was still pumping hard as I made a quick right turn to get off the road. I turned my lights off and crept on home. The Molotov cocktails exploding and burning high was enough light to guide me to my front door.

Kim

Aunt Virginia has a small but respectable porch attached to the front of her house. Daddy said it looks a lot like his house on 14th and Liberty. I asked him about the house and he said it was a typical shotgun house with two bedrooms, a living and dining room interconnected. His porch was perhaps a little wider than Virginia's but the houses are about the same. The house phone rang and Aunt Virginia steadied herself on the edge of the rocking chair, hoisting herself up onto her knees, and slowly stood tall, situating her weight on her stocky frame.

"You got it Ginia?" My father asked as she stepped into her house shoes and headed for the kitchen from the porch where Dad and I occupied the other rocking chairs.

"Yeah Jesse, I'm aiight. I'm gonna get Sip up so he can eat supper and head on to work. I'll be back," she said, walking towards the phone and her bedrooms to prod awake my uncle Sip. Chewing on a toothpick, I questioned my father about the 14th and Liberty Street house.

"So—tell me about this house I never heard of. What's the deal?"

"Oh. Hmmm. I aint neva' tell you about the riots in '68 after King got shot?"

"What riots? I thought that only happened in like, Detroit—and all them upstate areas—maybe a little in Alabama and Mississippi, right?"

“Noooo,” he replied with a pinched expression. “Girl wherever black people were, riots happened. We were so angry, so hurt and upset. We really didn’t know what to do with ourselves. Most were looking for someone to make a move so they could follow and let loose this unspeakable rage.”

“Wait, wait. Boring Winston-Salem saw some kind of action—and not the lynching kind?”

“Babygirl, mad as hell ain’t even the tip of the iceberg. We were all so young it seemed. We were filled with a hope, an addictive hope: the type of hope that wakes you up before the alarm and helps you to bear the brunt of harsh things. The type of hope that helps you bend but not break. I remember having conversations with other black men about that type of hope. About going out to work a good job, pay my bills and take care of my family kinda hope. Hope to finally feel like a whole man inside—feel like a man earning his own living, instead of a boy lookin’ for scraps from another’s table. A hope for more, babygirl, and when that hope was taken with one bullet through one man many thought the movement died and all that hope black people had built their dreams on, silenced their mouth for, took the kinda shit they took—everything just exploded.” He took a sip of his iced coke in a cup, rocking slowly on the blue wicker chair. I stay silent, looking at him look out at the neighborhood, the trees, and the stagnant cascade of crumbling rocks dividing the street from the front lawn. The street lamps grew flames, one by one, in their glass cases. As the lamp closes to us flamed on, my father told his story, what he saw in April.

Arriving at his house, my father pulled into the back of the house and parked. His house was a typical southern shot gun house, with the bedrooms in the front of the house, while the kitchen and entertaining room was located near

the back. He stood in a shadow on the front porch of his house, grateful that the rioters didn't know him and his lack of wife and children. He looked over to see his elderly neighbor, standing outside her front door, watching the engine wagon race down the way. Her nightgown billowed out a bit in the hot, cinder-licked wind.

The night of the story, I myself stood on a porch, everyone still and asleep in the house. I stood in a long t-shirt and lighthouse pants, no socks or shoes. I could hear the bones buried beneath Winston-Salem. I heard them roll the dirt back from their mass graves, unhinge their jaws after 300 years and wail words of horror and fear, rage and unbounded commitment to never forgive. I heard them over my father's voice in memory. I heard them over the screaming of bright lights and white cars with Sheriff Stars on them. Closing my eyes, my head rolled back, and then left to right, my arms hugged my form. I felt them in the wind. I felt them shriek with voiceless screams. I felt their combined breath and I tittered on the edge of their insane grief and my unknowingness. I was swept away into a memory not of my own making.

Walking to the front of house and peering out the window there I saw the giant walnut trees down the street catch a-flame from the sparks blown over from the burning stores nearby. Moments later I saw a fire engine start down the first hill of the street with a war tank shadowing its progression. I saw the old woman from next door, my left hand neighbor walk out of her front door, curious; her white gown billowing toward the passing tank. Where the song started from, or rather from whom, or even if there was a song being sung, I heard this gut-wrenching emission. The first hum of "Lonesome

Valley”, an old Negro Spiritual, started in the dark, mixed with the shrill tenor of the engine wagon filtering into me somehow. The song began.

*You’ve got to go
To the lonesome valleyyy*

*Youuu, ohhhh,
Got
uh
Got To go
There,
Byyyyy
Yo’self*

*Noooooobody else
Can go for you
Youuuuu
Ohhhh
Gooooot
To goooooo
There
By-iiii
Yo’self*

(yes suh, someone shouted over)

Ommmmmmuh.

If I saw the Invisible, I’d imagine the culminating voices I heard to look like vibrating shades of black and brown threads, strands shooting from the mouths of my neighbors—from myself— outward into the dark as we gave in to the melody. There was this necessity to fall into the rhythm, to fall into the song no one knew, but everyone had heard. The ground trembled underneath us. We created a vibrating web of voices that wept and sung and shouted, and yelled, bodies filled with so much horror emptied

themselves in the web that kept growing, coaxing more mouths to open and more strands of vocal vibrations to fill the web. The web became thicker, linking us from house to house, body to body, thought to thoughts creating synergy. We were individual parts functioning together to produce what we couldn't produce apart. Our voices knitted together a moment of creation that was as wild as the energy pouring into the web, reinforcing our connection to each other, black to black, kin to kin.

The humming saved us that night, saved me somehow even though I knew nothing of the consequences of April. I felt the strands drain our collective connection to the boiling rage and uncontainable sadness within the bones, the city, the people connected to the people connected to the web, past and present—just—drained. I felt the strands gather the jagged parts of our collapsed hope and begin mending, repairing what we thought was gone.

We've become so caught up in ourselves, that we forget the healing nature of our own cultural song, that song we'd feel in our bones; that song we'd sway to without a sound insight. We forgot that within tragedy our community of bodies—singing and humming together—creates-a-link between father and daughter, between body and body, filling in the holes that were red and raw. In church my pastor used to say, "If I got no words, if no words will do, I'll just wave my hand, hum my song, and bear on through." Once the understanding was received, from whatever higher power graced me with past vision, I had the choice to fall out of the memory, but I wanted to stay. I could see my father standing on a porch with me in April, unknowingly swaying to the hum of nature, moving to the old slave narrative being sung, being re-lived. He would sing with me, trying to find a way to let go of what ghost he held on to, that we as a people held on to, wanting to find and offer relief from the overwhelming sense of lost that day in April.

Within minutes of that thought, I was torn from my connectedness by a passing truck. I heard the squeal of tires that cut in between the baritone, bass,

and tenor voices echoing in my head, in my ears. I could still feel the strands vibrating and moving in the middle of me, finding their way into my sensory nerves. I was jarred away from the vision but it didn't matter — I sang still. I sang out the bitterness of my history, the shame of bleaching, detaching my culture from me; I sang out the ugliness of death and my own reflection of broken hope. I sang out the fear in me, the worry about my past and present happenings, the mistakes and disappointments. I sang, offering my voice for theirs, whoever they are to me. They, the bones underneath Winton-Salem, sang a song for Martin, for the people in the city, for the whites holed up in their houses and for the Blacks walking around with holes in their chest. Years have passed in all but a brief moment within a brief vision, but I sang with them. I gave them my throat.

PAYING FOR A PLOT

The main path to the funeral office was blocked by graveyard construction. An orange and black backhoe moved cautiously through the orange caution cones, avoiding the rounded head stones, but eating away at patches of ground. The cones blocked off almost all roads leading to the back of Restful Home cemetery. The only road available to me was Glory Road, which crossed over Serenity Way. My grandmother's three month old grave, fresh Georgia red clay overturned and packed with gravel bits, dirt, and remaining scattered flowers, awaited my right hand turn on to Serenity. I bowed my head respectfully as I drove past, not stopping or pausing, but continuing to ignore the unfinished row of graves.

Earlier I'd received a call from my mother telling me to drop everything and meet her and my father at the Restful Funeral Home office. I thought, perhaps we were here to talk about getting grandma a head stone, a nice big one; one we've saved up for, it looks to be, three months now. Up above I saw my father swing the divers' door open to his Dodge pickup truck. The familiar aggravating groan of the door opening made me smile as I watched my father's burly body tumble down to the loose gravel.

The day lit sky merrily moved above us, punching holes through the overcast. Mom's champagne van sat farthest away from me and Dad. Dad waited on me as I parked and secured my car, hefted my purse onto my shoulder, and with a sad grin, fell into my Dad's embrace.

Walking toward the office complex, I hugged my father even harder and asked, "Why are we here?"

"I guess we're picking out funeral stuff."

“For who? Or whom? Or Whatever.”

“Whom, baby girl? What have they been teaching you in college?” he laughed. Dad looked down at the top of my head. He smiled, gave the crown of my head a quick peck, and leaned into me as we synced our steps. I allowed my question to go unanswered and his question to hang unattended in the warm air. I don’t know what college prepared me for; definitely not this. Agnes Scott catapulted its pupils into survival chemistry, basic lawyer level philosophy, acrobatic economic equations, as well as honorable surface politics and delectable lip service, but death dealings? There were no 101 classes for this type of business. My wish when coming back to my country establishments, in the final tendrils of my May graduation, was to come back elegant; formal; my code-switching fandangle down to a ‘T’. I came back sophisticated as I wanted to, but months after graduation sophistication found me with a stripped sanity, and not a drop of know-how for casket pickings and graveyard plots. I came back home more broken than when I left.

“Welcome to Restful Funeral Home. Mr. Crews and Kimberly, Mrs. Crews is waiting for you.”

Oh. We’re here. I didn’t notice that our legs had climbed steps; a hand had opened the door; that our bodies waited for an introduction. A powdery blue strangled the room. Sandalwood and some sort of disinfecting spray stifled my sinuses and my nose began to run. In response to the overpowering scent and nauseous coloring, I leaned closer to my father’s left hand side. With my eyes closed, I imagined caskets rolling through these hallways; bodies being emptied through PVC pipes; wondering how many stained stainless steel medical slabs silently sat underneath our feet, as my father and I made our way toward the back consulting rooms.

Order Number: 626 John Doe.

Order Number: 627 Kim Doe my toe tag would say.

We are brought here, to this house, to be emptied, erased; forgo who we were and in its place, become an order form number. An assumed identity wouldn't matter much here.

The lady leading us, our consultant, stopped in front of the second door on the right and directed us inside. We sat around a brown non-descript table adjacent to the window that over-looked the left hand side of the building. I sat opposite of everyone else. Warm and polite greetings were passed back and forth between the two factions seated a file folders length away from each other. Suddenly cold, I scooted closer to the window and moved into a shaft of sun. They began their talk about why my parents had come to Restful. I looked out the window. Different size flags flapped, petals detached from stems and rested on new patches of dirt piles and shovels. Farther out, a white tent was being raised. The two overhaul clad men punched leg by leg of the tent into the ground, while another rolled a faux green grass mat over the red clay. They held on to the metal legs, leaned in and laughed some; shooting the breeze about this and that. The bobcat could be heard in the background, perhaps intermingling with their laughs, but I only heard the bass rumble of the backhoe diesel engine--

“Kimberly? Kim?”

“Kimmy.”

“Hmmm?” Jarred from the scene in front of me, I found Mom and the consultant staring pointedly at me.

“Yeah. What's up?” I asked, readjusting myself. Our new position left us in a lop-sided triangle. I noticed mini-stacks of papers, brochures, and order

forms here and there spread between the consultant and my parents. I wondered what we'd bought.

"So. Kimberly. Your mother and father are deciding on, maybe---," she looked at my mother and nodded in her direction, "similar casket colors, that they are picking out now. What would you like your color to be?" I would have snorted and answered white, but the sarcasm might've fallen flat for the dark, maple colored consultant. So she watched me watch her, perhaps expecting me to swing an answer right then. Of course I, like most high schoolers during my high school days, had already planned my funeral. I knew that I wanted a full wardrobe of black. I wanted black cargo pants, black tennis shoes or combat boots, a black shirt with some kind of sarcastic writing on it, hair down, a black hair tie on my wrist, and of course no bra. I want a statement. A "I'm gone, but still present" statement. I wanted a ball busting, sassy Sapphire statement, still showcasing my badassness even if the hanging flaps of my breast were drained of any liquid after death; skin sliced lengthwise on both sides, down far enough to skin the skin, cut away at the meat and liquefy the rest. Death, how we would shape our death and the statement we'd send after dying, were a part of the white noise in the background of our pre-death preparations. We actually thought about what we could create in dying, and who we would be pre-death and post death, and what we would do to earn the death we wanted. Our eccentric group understood perception and how quickly it might change classmates or administrator's impression and opinion of us, simply through the careful construction of dying. Our romanticized death in high school meant a portal to ultimate freedom, another "Other" world; a portal we would chase with tablets of prescription painkillers, Korn and Marilyn Manson albums. But that was then. I never thought I would put foot to pavement on this topic. True, I

wanted an obsidian coffin with chrome lining, and defined myself by the black and chains I wore, but coming to face the reality of casket color questions, I didn't want to voice all of this or speak out loud this romantic death into existence.

Unconsciously, I glared at the consultant. I caught myself or my face before she looked at me, but this place—this situation—was driving me out of my skin. I was cold, I itched; it smelled funny, and I wanted to go home—and not the eternal one which she wants me to pick out the curtains and colors for.

The consultant glanced down at her paperwork and made notes with her slick company pen. Her brown skin looked ashy pale against the suffocating powdery blue. Her two-piece black blazer and skirt swallowed her medium sized form.

"Black," I murmured. My parents huddled over another brochure ignoring her and I.

"Black. A Black coffin," I said louder. She looked up and smiled at me.

"Black? Well, wonderful choice. I'll put you down for a black casket covering," she said, as she saluted me with her pen and scratched my answer on a blue order sheet. I turned back toward the window and watched patch by patch of ground give way, the orange backhoe filling and emptying its mouth full of dirt.

The meeting wrapped up shortly afterwards. My mother finalized the sizing and trimmings for grandmother's head stone, and decided to forgo buying casket pickings, for now. We were then given the option of a family bundle: pickings, plots, and pastor paid in full for a reduced bundled price. We opted out. Mother did, though, pick out our family gravesite from one of the numerous

sheets of paper we all were handed during the meeting. Gathering our belonging we were going out to view the ground which would serve as our new gravesite.

After handshakes and farewells to the front office staff, the consultant prodded us toward the company car, which sported a dark blue suede interior and a long trunk. She drove us to the bend of Serenity and Glory. She pulled over, half on gravel and grass parking in front of our plots. She jumped out of the car with clipboard in hand and waved to the unfinished row of graves where my grandmother's miniature red flag marked the premature end. The consultant remarked upon the lovely placement under the trees Mom had chosen for grandma's eternal cubbyhole. She walked my parents around the surrounding space, pointing out the advantageous area, which would contain our family of four. She urged us to consider the importance of planning ahead for our loved one's final transition and that tree spots, with this much space, are coveted sections. I knew she wanted to say that on the cemetery grid, we would have what resembled a corner office. I wanted to kick her and the annoying backhoe that rolled on by.

Burying the four members of our family would've cost about \$4,000, the consultant calculated, while she scratched figures on her blue order forms. My mother gasped. Side by side the three of us overlooked the bit of land which would cost us \$4,000. Action erupted and almost together on one accord, my mother and the consultant stood head to toe arguing over the outrageous price. My father moved closer to me as I turned toward the setting sun, no longer facing our new necropolis or my outraged mother. Dad and I looked past the company car and took in the untouched land that stretched at least a mile in front of us. The great pines behind the expanse of land curved the darkening sky into humps of green then orange, green then a slash of red, green then a bit of

yellow. Perhaps my father thought as I did. All this here, was not an item off a Bucket List that I wanted to check off.

We have two sayings in my culture. The first being a statement about lost and the second being a statement about gain. The former is loosely translated, saying: to lose someone extremely close to you, a natural death or not, would *put me in the ground sooner than later*, because to breathe a minute longer without that someone is incomprehensible.

What I'm afraid of, and maybe Dad was too, is that once our ground is paid for, when our names officially mark the registrars list for plot ABC and D, which one of us will meet the ground sooner than later? We are told as children to never be on speaking terms with Death, to forestall the possible as long as possible. With our backs turned away from our grotto, have we forsaken that saying, unknowingly numbered our days, inviting not just the idea of Death, but planning a future meeting? *You get what you pay for*, another saying whispered in my ear. Lord willing, it will be awhile before we reap what we have sown.

Haggling with the graveyard consultant wasn't easy, but Mom managed to get us buried for \$2,000—a buy two get two free deal. *I didn't know funeral homes had coupons*. The consultant walked quickly toward the car. She dug around through the driver's opened window and pulled out her cell-phone, dialed a number and began a conversation, reading notes from the clipboard. I turned around from the trees to see my father covering the short distance between him and my mother. They spoke softly walking back toward the road to stand by me, walking over our graves. The three of us stood side by side overlooking our layaway plots, a \$2,000 hole where we can shove our bodies into, cuddle close with Mother Earth; becoming a source of protein for the worms, grass for the antelopes, and toothpicks for the rats.

This experience is lending itself to folklore. I shook my head and couldn't help but think we were living the fucking circle of life here. We will be close, together, forever, sharing our tokens for the ferryman who will have to cross an ocean from Greece to Georgia while we hitchhike to purgatory on Huck's raft via the Mississippi River to meet the Ferryman in ceremonial white robes, with paper money we'd burn in paper lanterns on the way to the Mississippi River as we tug along our suitcases full of a miniature sized set of a Terracotta army, and Dad's construction tools to build us a house once we get to where we're going --.

"Mom, I don't wanna die here. You know what I mean, Mom. I want somewhere else. I want to go home woman. No, I don't mean somewhere else in Restful, and stop yelling at me. I think you and Dad will like it here, but I don't know where I'll be or when I'll be—I want to make this decision with my husband, just like you are making with yours." I shoved my hands into my jean pockets and glanced her way, then back towards the ground now sporting four new red miniature flags. She cuddled closer to my Dad and told me that if anything should happen to them, that they wish to be buried together.

I tried to make a joke about burying them separately; both on opposite sides of the cemetery, but the joke fell flat. Abruptly, Mom yanked me by the front of my hoodie and I found myself smelling spearmint on her breath. She told me that, "eternity was nothing more or nothing less than what I pledged to this man, and come hell and high water I will be at his side and him at mine. Do you understand that girl? I won't leave him and I will not tolerate being left alone and left behind. Do you hear me child? And you will bring your ass here to visit us, flowers in hand, because I will love your ass while I'm here and when I'm gone and you will like it and you will remember. Do you hear me gal?" She finished with a scream. She jerked me closer a few more times, emitted a low

moan and let go. Dad pulled at her shoulders, turned with her and enclosed her form into his until I could see her no more.

The consultant asked if we were ready to go. I asked to stay a few more minutes, and told them that I would walk back to meet them at the cars. I stood there awhile, huddled inside my hoodie. I stared down at the different geometric shaped patches of grass, imagining my body stuffed into this rectangle. I stood there no longer in a shaft of sun, but rather encased in a hole of pre-darkness, familiarizing myself with the scenery; asking myself would I be happy here. I noticed the high hills, small daisies and honeysuckles littered around, the advantages of shade and protection offered by the surrounding trees. I even imagined the space where a daughter of my own will one day place flowers at my feet or adorn a pricey headstone with purpled tinted flowers she found on the way here to the graveyard. I imagined she will replay my words as my mother words play in my head saying, jokingly, "you should have loved me while I was livin'; gave me my flowers while I was there, poured me a drink while I could've tasted it and cried when I could have shushed your fears."

Who knew that today, we'd drive ourselves to view, haggle over, price and pay for our own graves. I finally stepped up to the miniature red flag marking my grandmother's grave which I ignored until I couldn't. I realized in that moment that one of my biggest fears is having not fully loved the persons walking in and out of my day to day, having loved things over people. I realized that I held them as possessions, as pieces of me easily put aside for something other, something fleeting, not realizing that you'd never have enough time with the ones you love and that measurement of time is never enough time to spend with them. Staring at the sharp lines creating a rectangle entombing my grandmother, I wondered if I used my loved ones, these pieces of me, more than

I stroked the smooth, faux leather of my car. Did I comfort them more than cooing to my laptop battery, petting the sides of the machine, in hopes of it lasting another minute more? Did I interact with them, touch and accept touch from them? Did I argue more with my home appliances, and lecture and frown at my mirror image, than paying attention to a loved one?

Looking at the little red flag, I knew we had to expedite grandmother's headstone. Every plot surrounding hers threw their shadows over her little red flag with their tall, big, and sturdy place markers. Even though my family understood the cemetery marketing scheme, we'll play the game. Grandmother's marker will equal the surrounding stone slabs. We will buy the plots. We will purchase the caskets, the colors, the water resistant lining, the pastor, and the funeral wreaths. The papers were drawn up and paying for a plot is an investment we will make good on soon.

DRESSING FOR THE HOSPITAL

Someone calls 911. Coming to this side of town, you have about twenty minutes until the ambulance arrives. That's twenty minutes to drag yourself from the washroom to the bedroom, throwing to the ground your pajamas and throwing on a fresh pair of drawers, undies. Rule number 1: Never go to the hospital without fresh underwear. It's a peculiar instance when professionals tear off or sift through your cloths and find stained, ripped, or holey underwear. They ask themselves if you and the underwear are really worth saving. An ER table is not the place to fail, not the place for hesitation, or doubt from you or the ER team. Failure is an option you literally cannot afford to bear.

The ambulance is here. The nice young people bring the stretcher into the living room, asking a volley of questions as they look around the house, looking for the body in need of transport. Rule number 2: At the very least, have your living room straightened up. The cleaner you are the higher class you seem to be, the better care you might receive. You already hear your dearly departed mother whispering about public and social protocol as you make your way, slowly, into the living room. Customary guidelines are unspoken where you're from, but apply all the same. There are rules for any type of engagement.

Your entrance into the living room from the hallway doesn't have to be grand, but humble as polite smiles and greetings are exchanged. You are bundled up and strapped into orange seat belts, flat on your back as they roll you out into the night's air. The previously pressed slacks, the starched, crisp t-shirt, and dark dress shoes all catch the red and white lights. The neighbors are standing

outside, or looking through their living room windows. You watch them watch you. The gurney is shouldered up and over into the silver belly of the ambulance. The paramedics count down as they haul your body through the back entrance. You grimace a bit as your chest tightens again; your hand gripping the crease on top of your pants. Rule number 3: Try to wear your dignity at all times, even when your daughter quickly wipes away at the tears she doesn't want you to see. From the dimly lit belly, you see colored crystals hanging from her cheeks; her fingers leaving a streak of milky white and crimson red smeared on her glasses, a reflection from the ambulance lights. Offer her a smile and leave the guilt alone. Infallibility and Manhood will be right where you left them on your return home. They'll be there waiting.

The wife, your wife, wants to ride in the belly of the beast too. She hasn't shed a tear. She can't. Now's not the time, in front of unknown people; in front of unknown circumstances. She can't fit. One of the twenty-something's gives a partial shake of their head and begins to shut the left then right door. The wife grabs the handle. "We'll see you there." She let's go and shuffles the semi-dressed kids into the house, warms up the van, waits for all the doors to shut, and takes off. Rule number 4: Never leave home without the medical insurance card. They won't see you. There's an Express lane for cardholders only at the hospital. You should know this by now. The family in the mini-van makes a U-turn.

Don't break it. There's an unspoken rule of silence in the ambulance. It's already late, two am in the morning, a school night. No one wants to be disturbed, but heart failures happen. There's oxygen among other things you take in, breath

after breath. Breathe quietly. The plastic mask covers everything from your eyebrows to your chin. You don't complain about it, it's rude, and the young person already removed your hand from the mask once with parental sternness. You're too tired anyways to fight with him or her. You are reclined, barely noticing the numbness at the edge of your fingertips, the coldness slipping through the seams of your church shoes, your best shoes. You don't say anything about the numbness or the stinging moving up and down your body. It'll eventually go away—as usual. You have work in a few days, so no unauthorized naps until it is safe, even though you can almost hear a voice in the back of your head whispering: *widow maker, you'll just beat the widow maker if you don't fall asleep*. You're almost frozen though. You murmur cover and cover is given. Rule number 5: Don't think tired. You can't afford tired. You can't afford this whole situation in the first place. Tact on the necessity of Healthcare and you are living above your means.

Before they rolled you down the packed hallway, your gurney bumping into other gurneys and rolling over white *Anni Hi Nurse* shoes, the paramedics park you in the middle of a back room somewhere. They are nice enough to put the brakes on the gurney, leaving you under the bright, rectangle light beaming down above you. You stare at it for a while, thinking, humming the chorus of a gospel song; trying to warm up the sterile environment, hoping Heaven will be nothing like this. Still there, you wait. The shuffle of feet outside offers some kind of solace. There is music here, you think. You remember your daughter watching *Bambi*, watching the “drip drip drop little April showers”, the rain splashing on the fawns nose. You hear life happening. You hear it moving on, and are amazed that you're still a part of it, just waiting for the storm, like the fawn, to die down.

A nurse pops her head into the room, frowns, and murmurs to someone outside and you never see her again. You continue to wait. The numbness from the ride over is gone, as you knew it would. You feel better, just extremely tired. The surge of nervousness that prompted the pain, the seizing of the heart, and the ambulance call, has evaporated, gone, and now you're just tired. You want to go home. You sit or rather halfway recline into the lessening cushion of the gurney, still strapped down to the metal slab. You sigh, wiggling again to find a better spot on the slab, and you hum, this time an upbeat gospel hymn. You wait for someone to take notice of the room. Rule number 6: Know that the nervousness will dissipate. Try not to panic as much. Wait a while longer. This too shall pass.

Someone finally comes into the room. They heard the singing. An older nurse in her blue flared scrubs, chestnut skin, and floral uniform top runs through the normal checklist: blood pressure, temperature, heart rate, sinus, allergic to anything? Medical no. History of high blood pressure? Yep. History of diabetes? Mother; maybe a sibling or two. Pain level? 1 being the least 10 being the highest, what's your number? 0. Insurance? Yes. Card? See, my wife's bringing it. Stop. Call me back in here when she arrives--with the card. You pat yourself down as much as you can with the straps still horizontal across your legs. You find your cellphone in your breast pocket. The wife and kids are ten minutes out; you hang up and wait for the card, the room, the calf high curtains; all the while preparing your "I'll be okay, don't worry. In and out remember?" speech. Rule number 7: There is always a hospital speech to prepare and execute while at the hospital. There's the family speech, the spouse speech, the doctor speech. When dressing for the hospital, don't forget to go over your lines at home or on the way to the

hospital. The right speech just may save your life or more importantly your credit as a provider and your capacity as an independent.

The family finally arrives. Your daughter and son have a book bag and tote filled with stuff. Your daughter might have a college chemistry book in there somewhere while your son might have a high school biology book. You remember they're both taking science courses this school year. Off the gurney and onto the motorized hospital bed, you come to the point, looking at the nurse and doctor pour over your chart, that these people are just as dumb as you. They say practice medicine for a reason. You've been having these random panic attacks noticeably for months now. This is the third trip to the hospital just this month and all they do is monitor numbers on a beeping machine, slide you a plastic cup of two 600mg Potassium horse pills, pills to infuse your failing body with energy, not fixing but treating. They fluff your white pillow and come back to jot down numbers, tap your IV bag with a pen, nod your way and leave. Rule number 8: Be as grateful as you can. Take pride in the fact that you are a medical mystery. You're hopeful that if the doctors can't fix you, they can at least drop a wooden nickel in the bucket to assuage the symptoms, plug the adrenal gland, and allow you to live at least a half life with enough energy to go until you stop. You have that.

A conversation begins outside the curtains between your wife and daughter. Your son has stolen the remote for the miniature T.V. in front of the bed, deciding to curl his tall frame around your ankles tucked away in the blue woven bed blanket. Overtop *Wizards of Waverly Place*, the daughter ask if we're losing Dad; do we need to, you know, make some preparations? You cringe.

This—twice in twenty four hours—you’ve heard tears in her voice, heard her begin to wheeze from the draining emotions and fluid clogging her lungs, her body failing her, her lungs filling up with the by-product of tears, tears you’ve caused, a failure you’ve caused. Your son taps you on your kneecaps, wondering what’s wrong. Your brow lifts as if asking “what”? He nods toward your face and says you look as if you are in pain, the same clenched expression you had before we called 911. You shake your head no and wave him towards the T.V. Your wife informs your daughter that you are only staying overnight, two...maybe three days tops. Your daughter’s not convinced that’ll you’ll make it overnight. In between their conversation, the nurse in the blue scrubs swished the curtains back and forward, stuck a needle in both forearms: the right to retrieve blood and the left to insert a tube which will slowly release whatever shot they decide to pump you full of. A mini-heart attack, more of a spasm really, the ER doc assures me, as the nurse blue scrubs tangos with my wife back and forth through the hanging curtains and outside the room’s door. Rule number 9: Don’t hurt. Take a deep breath in, run your stiff hands down your face and breathe out. You’ll survive this, whatever this is. Even to prove that you’re still Daddy, that you’re still your family’s ace in the hole, still their foundation, still their safety net. You’ll beat this, because you’re not sad, you’re pissed.

Your family is gone. You shooed the wife out the door with the kids. Maybe a mistake but your daughter is preparing for her midterms at Agnes Scott and your son needs to go home, wash and iron his Navy JROTC uniform for dress out tomorrow. You flip the channel on the T.V., shake your head and turn it back to the witches. You finish the show. You are warm from your ankles to your feet. Your toes curl into the impression your son’s body left on your blanket. Rule

number 10: You will accept that life happens whether you're prepared for it or not. It also keeps its pace as we move in and out of time and space. Closing your eyes for just a bit, you know that they'll move on, find happiness again with or without you. You can make your peace with that. You will find the courage to make your peace with that.

The on-call doctor comes in overnight to check the "signs". You're asleep until you aren't. You call out Doc and he stops at the door. You ask him to pull up a chair and "give it to me straight, Doc". He does. Straddling a hollow metal-like chair, he tells you about the range of problems you might have. The alphabet list goes on, but the top three contenders are: Adrenal Fatigue, Addison's disease; Adrenal Burnout Syndrome. This week, he says, we're leaning more toward Adrenal Fatigue. You feel your forehead clench and brow dip. The doctor explains that all three contenders are adrenal gland based. Last week another set of doctors said it was a tumor on the left adrenal gland sitting on top of your left kidney. The left adrenal gland from the body scan, measured the tumor to half the size of the tip of a baby's pinkie as explained to me. The facts are many, but the actual solutions for my troubles are few and far between. The Doc continues saying, "From the MRI a couple of weeks ago, right? The tumor seems to be tearing at a section of the adrenal gland. The gland is releasing naturally acquired vitamins, like Vitamin C, and electrolytes like potassium into the blood stream. It then deposits into your urinary track system, signaling to your body that it's waste. These two glands contribute to various functions in our body, one being energy and stability which you are—missing." You're quiet for a pause. Thinking. Trying to add up a medical mystery. You nod your head as if coming to a conclusion. "So Doc. When I sleep, I'm building up whatever in my adrenal

glands, but as I build, the tumor is allowing the electricity to flow out and when I wake up, I feel like I ran a marathon instead of rested from eight hours of sleep? Yeah?" He smiles, pats you on the kneecap and says that's about right. You want to "lay hands" on him too. Pat him in a few places. Shifting in bed, you ask what're we gonna do to fix me? He's thinkin' surgery. You can see the delight in his eyes. The dollar signs dancing in time to the invasive procedure he's planning. He's already poked around your femoral artery where he wants to run a tub into your heart, unclog the gunk and angle up there some type of stints to keep the big arteries clear. You'd already grumbled at him during the first checkup of the evening. This time you fold your arms across the cords and clear tape and gauze camped out on your chest, and glare. Surgery ain't gonna help shit. You know this. And yet, the Doc here believes your mini heart seizure was from the slightly clogged arteries. Bull. You keep tellin' them it starts with anxiety, a falling sensation, like your body comprehends its failing, but your mind doesn't understand the ridiculousness of the situation. Your mind forgets, covers the sensation with the list of things you have to do, people you have to take care of, bills you have to pay off; stuff you have to fix. The anxiety builds until the heart quivers in its cage, and then your brain acknowledges a problem and then weakness, fatigue ensues. They don't listen. The gray haired nurse in blue and the doctor just smile pretty, nod, check the numbers, and move on. They're here to practice on you, the John Doe. "This here is a Medical Practice. We don't cure shit." Rule number 11: Calm down. You know this 'quick fix' will only give you a short sigh of relief, if any at all. They can't operate on the adrenal gland because they are not a 100% sure if the spot on the MRI is actually a tumor. They opt to work on your heart. It's easier. Stop rolling your eyes. Fix your face.

Relax your tensed expression before looking back at the doctor. Ask him to hit the lights for you on his way out. You're tired. Weary, really.

That 'Life Alert' commercial pops up on the T.V. You can't help but to roll your eyes. You glare at the weakness. It's not you. It is not you, not you today. Your cellphone goes off. "Home Calling" the screen blinks. You pick up. Everyone's on speaker saying their goodnights. The kids leave to finish up dishes and take showers. Your wife asked you about details you're too tired to answer, but you give the best condensed version you can: don't know a damn thing, but want to do surgery. She presses you for more, but you can't, not right now. Before you hang up, the phone goes back to the kids. Your son wants money for the afterschool concession stand. He also wants to borrow your black shoeshine polish, brush and kit to shine his military dress shoes. You tell him to reach in the bedside bucket and take one of the few five dollars you've saved for a rainy day. In the same bucket he'll find the black shoe shine polish in an old, rusty tin can you use to shine your Sunday's best. There's yelling and crashing in the background. Your daughter comes on the line. She's grabbed the phone from her brother, telling the "Boy" to shut it and take a hike. Their voices are the last drip drop of music you'll hear for the night. She reminds you that "this drama right here is my next essay Daddy. If Momma doesn't cooperate with the Mirror Image story, be expecting an interview soon. You're my contingency plan Pops." You smile and shake your head. Ever since her first creative nonfiction class, she's been bugging you and your wife for stories, for pieces of history. You love her too much to let her down. Stopping her before she begins, you tell her that "if you write this story, you better take me out of it. Fill it with you baby girl. Tell my story your way, but tell it somehow where I can be in it, but sharing it with

others at same time." She says she'll do her best. You know she will. She yells to the rest of the household that "Daddy said gooodnight!" and I wait for her to hang up the phone, always reluctant to leave first. You mute the T.V. The remote falls to the bed and you finally close your eyes to rest. Rule number 12: Stay alive. Sure you're thinking about the grave plot you're making payments on, the headstone you're figuring out with the wife. Yes, those are your counting sheep, but you figure the universe won't see you dead and in a grave until it's paid. You still have work to do.

HIS EYES

What I know:

There's a medium purple hue circling the outpost of my father's eyes. The sclera is white as it should be. There are flecks of misplaced red brick, microscopic points of concrete dust, and perhaps fine pieces of cut and chopped grass stuck within the thick, wet film of his eyes.

If one looks closely enough, one can see in the iris layered browns, shades of brown powder blown outward, intermixing; no discernible pattern to see. The pupil is ever watchful, an exaggerated pinpoint of blackness surrounded by the browns. And then there is the ring of royal purple encasing it all.

A genetic mistake perhaps, a colored ring found around a colored man's eye. Historical truths showing up on our children's face my elders would say. A blending of the races they would finish. One cannot hide forever events taken place in the darkness. African-Americans are no longer Africans. We are another breed stuck somewhere in the middle of color distribution, a range of shades of our skins and our eyes.

Most, like me, longed to have colored eyes, wonderful eyes, eyes which marked us as mixed breeds, as beautiful, unique; different than the black browns of our eyes; a small legacy of entitlement than chains.

I wanted his flaw, a mutated gene that would make me, classify me, distinguish me; then separate me, identifying me as something rather special. A mulatto gal. Light, bright, and damn near white—tanned, Moscato colored gal. A color I wanted.

Twenty-five years down the road I look into those aged, tired, but ever clear eyes and envy my father his ring of difference, his ring of beautiful. His purple-rimmed eyes are one of a few paths, leading out of black restrictions, giving him the ability to move in and out of our shared black world. Eyes, bursting with color, or slightly rimmed is all one may need to move through the orange caution cones when navigating self-pride, social placement, and a choice, an option to pass, a role to play.

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