

DISTANCE CREATED SILENCE

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## Distance Created Silence

David, you were always so distant, like you were still up a coconut tree collecting, then pausing to look out between the fronds over the ocean. In your face I saw memories of the horizon, a halved grapefruit blazing rising out of the *Antillean Sea*, our island at sunrise: “To those fair Isles where crimson sunsets burn / We send a backward glance to gaze on thee.”<sup>1</sup> And like everything there, it must have shined love on you too. They were in love with you: a whole Island of aunties and cousins and women that had lost their men and some of the men too, they loved you, I have need to assume. I think my white father stole you to America. Gray, not your father; and for some reason I need to say that, not your father, and our mother, brought you here for I don’t know why. You were thirteen.

That was never enough, to keep imagining what you were like there. It was time at last to speak with you. I had finally found the right questions to ask. I planned to make sure you would have to reveal yourself to me—and hence the secrets of our island. If I could pry you open, we might strengthen our brotherly love, then I could pay you back for all your kindness. And I wanted to understand why you shrank away from human connection, intentionally you made your world so small. But I was too late...

Why is the Black mind a continuous mind? Because the work of freedom is slow. Therefore, our voices must be ever resourceful, traveling forward

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Bennet and Jesse McCarthy. “Henrietta Cordelia Ray.” *Minor Notes*, vol. 1, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2023, pp. 85–93.

and backward in time, lending themselves to and beyond our own age in an ongoing collective undertaking.—Tracy K. Smith<sup>2</sup>

One of the first things I wanted to ask was, did you want to move to America? David, we spoke about things when I was younger—back when you remembered better. Maybe it wasn't you, in any event, someone told me how good you were at climbing, especially the coconut trees. Our island is known for them, they are said to be "towering and symmetrical." Docked off shore they stand out silver against the black sand beaches—people say. You left your favorite trees and those you called family behind. I imagine the turmoil inside you attempting to hold onto them—you held me together too. In the years right before I started high school, you would be at my house to drop off the work truck. I often had a lot going on—at odds with my household—you could see that and then you might say:

“Hey little brother, I don't like to watch you lookin' stressed all the time man. You're too young to have those deep lines across your forehead... What's going on Jay?.. Maybe we should just go fishing tomorrow, it's my day off?”

That was always your answer, and the way you most enjoyed spending time with me—or anybody you could tolerate, and so fish with. Brothering me was fishing, for you seemed to have no better way of connecting with people (there was something about the sea). David, you were thirteen years old when they brought you to the States; what was it like to make that trip, were you alone?

I liked that we shared traits, sculptures of model Caribbean physiques: tall, lean, broad-shouldered, with light tawny-tinted skin in winter—a bronzed mocha in summer.

Throughout our lives in California, people thought you were my father. That made more sense

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<sup>2</sup>Taken from the foreword of *Minor Notes*, Volume 1., a poetry anthology that “amplifies the voice of unsung Black poets.” These poems were rediscovered in out of print journals. Thus the lost poet is both witness and subject, the work represents resurrection, into a time and place. David kept island history at a distance, he rarely talked about home.

than anyone else, that you might be family. I don't know if you ever knew—when I was out with my other family, people would say, you don't look like any of them, are you adopted? David, you got to skip most of that. Did you feel lucky to have already moved out by the time I got new siblings? It is still a mystery to me how you learned to navigate this country without mentorship; a Black youth from the “Valcano Arc” lands in a white man's house to start a journey through an alien culture.<sup>3</sup> Back home, you must have been so comfortable in your skin you hardly noticed. I could be projecting that on you—in my youth I was clearly not comfortable in my skin. Like you, my life *here* started in what was an aging, white, almost middle-class suburb. Were you aware that the white people I grew up around and the black kids at school told me I belonged somewhere else? When you got here, did people at your high school make room for you?

Our mother always cried when she called me from Australia, almost every time—I never asked and you never said – if she cried when she called you too. There was no way to absolve her guilt with a massive ocean between us. Was she guilty she left you as a young child back on the island, or more so about the second time when she left us together in America? At times, over the phone, her enmity for my father was infinite, and yet, there were few details, mostly feelings. Mom told me once she had never touched drugs in her life until she met my father. Her return to San Francisco was an escape (from what cannot be known). David, she left you twice: at three or four years old, and then ten years later at twelve or thirteen. My blue-eyed father got us both.

We must have worked like bait. My guess: there was a sea of women, impressed with his choice to be a savior—as you know they ranged in color. Do you remember it that way; is it true that many of them got to see how much I didn't like them? Then he met the last one, Wanda, the

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<sup>3</sup> David worked for my father: climbing trees and chainsawing for the Yard Doctor Tree Service, until just before he died. In addition, he also paid rent to Gray his entire adult life. My stepmother, Wanda, joined our household with a son (Marcus) already six; fourteen months older than me. Within a few years, Wanda and my father started having their own children: my half brothers are six (Gray) and seven (Zack) years younger, and so twenty years younger than David.

half-Japanese woman who moved in and would become my stepmother. But I'm sure it wasn't us that swayed her. The way I heard it, she *not* only loved him, there were troubles following her; ones she might outrun when she married my father. Fitting the pattern, she, like us, was, I think, fragmented. Wanda's struggle with identity manifested decades before. That might explain things: how white male paternalism, shaping our worlds through dependence and living under Gray's roof, proved that he knew what was best for all of us.<sup>4</sup>

There was an implied expectation that we should bask in his pride for the multi-ethnic makeup of the family he acquired. I have long speculated my father believes he 'adopted' the children of, and had children with, mothers of color conferred something upon him: the 80s version of a virtue signal. He enjoyed the attention, experiencing new people attempting to wrap their heads around the relations that made us 'family.' As though he had become a great man by taking on the burden of another's children. But were we a burden? David, you became an under-the-table worker, the talent of my father's business; without health insurance, a bank account, nor tax I.D., and little connection to anything else. There was basketball, fishing, and I guess, me. I never asked if you felt like he used you the way it felt he used us (Marcus and me) in our adolescent years. We all supplied him materially—and with the proximate title of emancipator, which defines his identity (in his mind)...

When I was old enough to ask questions, I was talking with one of your two friends from high school (they loved you too). Steve. He said your island accent was there at first, you were shy, then there was your fluency in the language of basketball, and of course, (get ready, I love that everyone knew this)—fishing...

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<sup>4</sup> We were a spectacle to take in. There was another brother-like person (so far left out of this story) who further complicated what people experienced meeting us all together: Yoshihiro Terrence Okazaki. He is unrelated; coming directly from Japan at fifteen. He was originally a boarder who shared a room with David until David moved out. Hiro stayed with my family for the next 17 years, dragging out college. Hiro was the first son, classically Japanese, and avoiding the mantle of family responsibility.

David, I never got to hear your version of the baseball bat incident, and what about the bathroom fire!? It sounds like you and my father did not get along living in the same house. The story goes, there was a standoff: you were threatening Gray, moving forward in an aggressive batter's stance. And you did almost burn down the house—by choice or by accident, which we will never know—you were sixteen. Grandma, you know the one, Grandma Lee, told me her son, like his father, did not like to be challenged (she told me the baseball bat story). What side would I have taken had I been aware? The American-born younger brother who shared blood relations with you men—I would have been three and wish I had seen that one. Maybe I was inside, making dinner, waiting on the microwave to heat up my Stouffer's frozen mac and cheese.

David, why did she only stop through on her way back to Australia? She had just been on a visit to the Caribbean; were you invited (why wasn't I)? Do you recall, by chance, our cousin was passing through the airport that same day—also on a layover? You knew each other well. She had grown up with you. Maybe our mother planned this as a consolation. After we saw Mom off in the terminal, we had a forgettable dinner near LAX with Sylvia. It was the only time I met her, she was my first Caribbean relative. I was around 10. During our meal, watching the two of you, it was obvious that your connection took y'all far away from me. Airplane travel overhead—while I was sitting with *you* induced a sense of yearning to be initiated. My ignorance also engendered an unreasonable guilt—I did not know how to follow. You shared the same origin and placelessness. Through collective memory, you and Sylvia could locate each other back home; which made tangible my distance from an Island I've never seen.

David, there was something else that couldn't be helped, time had also instilled a foreignness in each of you. I think I saw it. It must have felt like a tease, you needed more time

than a layover. Carribeans (like all once enslaved Africans) naturally looked to between spaces to excerpt agency over our identity—creating liminal community, as in a maroon...<sup>5</sup> We all returned to our disparate corners of the globe: Sylvia was on her way back to England; my mother was nearly in Honolulu on her next layover. We were in your truck at the back of a long line of cars creeping south down the 405. We rode the whole way with an LA radio station husking hushes embarrassing us to speak; a miasma of sound lingered, and the familiar stranger departed our railway car. My other family was waiting for me with no idea of what to say. There was still for me to discover what it meant to be Black and Caribbean and white and American... Sylvia may be dead by now... I wanted to love her too because she discovered you free and frolicking: a single window into what you were like before. You were, then and now, Sylvia's crushing kissing cousin from another life... on the island.

David, did you realize some (many) people found you to be a bossy person to fish with? What was it about fishing that replaced your need for close human connections? There are hundreds of bay bass caught and released who owe you something. You only liked fighting with tenacious, intelligent fish. It was also the mission you seemed to enjoy as much as the catching. You would get hyped outfitting for the expedition: collecting the bait we cast into the sea, buying tackle, and adding fresh line to our reels. You probably don't recall, but there was this Ska band I became friends with much later in our fishing days: Reel Big Fish. I know you know, but I need to say, it was also the name of the main fish and bait store we gathered our bait and tackle from. We went there after a stop at Safeway. Where we had to get us some cooked chickens, chips,

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<sup>5</sup>Once *identity* for enslaved Africans was fundamentally altered in the Caribbean, cultural construction of identity could no longer rely solely on place. Instead, they needed to utilize liminal spaces to exert command over one's life. A fugitivity beyond the potential surveillance of the plantation that utilized intra-island community networks. (Meeting in places like a shoal: an unpredictable and always moving sandbar-like formation often submerged, so unseen just off shore.)

fruit, and the white bread we wrapped around that salty meat. There was no fishing without cold chicken.

You'd wake me up. At four in the morning, our spook-like silhouettes made multi-shadow trips back to the truck for wood—bouldering the long mile out to where we would make a fire between the rocks. We were lucky you were a tree trimmer. My backyard had an endless supply of wood produced by the trees you cut down with ease. Back then it never crossed my mind: is this how it was done back on the island—an onshore fire between the rocks at Rendezvous Bay? Were you casting out over Black Shoals before dawn with an uncle plus cousins waiting for a bite?..<sup>6</sup> You were built lanky, a solid West Indian lumberjack: when I was in my youth I would brag about you, saying, “A quarter will ricochet off his chest louder than when it hits the floor.” My brother, you are invincible, clearly beautiful to anyone that could see.

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as  
cold as its marble, then thek shoulders in winter light  
in the studio attic. I said, “Omeros,”

And O was the conch-shell's invocation, mer was  
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,  
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.

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<sup>6</sup>“An artificial ecosystem linked to the real time dynamics of the stock market.” Or. An offshore geologic formation that is neither land nor sea—as metaphor, mode of critique, and methodology to theorize the encounter between Black studies and Native studies (we are both). Off the coast, islands are natural sites where the interstitial phenomenon of the Black Shoal occur.

Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes  
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed.—*Derrick Walcott*<sup>7</sup>

David, I never asked how it felt to be abandoned twice for (still) unknown reasons, then left with my father; who then became your employer and landlord. Everyone knew and so did you that *you* were an excellent tree trimmer. Did he deduct the rent before he paid you? Since your arrival in California, the farthest I ever heard of you going was Las Vegas. There was one fishing trip too, but not too far away... Have you ever heard of *petit marronage* (“marronage refers to the process of safe flight, self-liberation, and survival”; fugitives of the plantation might create communities on the outskirts of slave societies)?<sup>8</sup> A form of resistance in which the enslaved would run away, alone or in groups, for days or weeks only to return after satisfying some need. It was a strategy. *La Résistance*.<sup>9</sup> Maroons sometimes turned into makeshift villages, protected under the deep darkness of the forest. The residents are coming and going interchangeably; where is the maroon? The best place to sleep was up a tree. David, we should have traveled together or at least gone camping or gone rogue and rode tripped off the map.

David, as you lay dying, I am in Oregon with high Black theory, learning how to write. You are no longer able to climb trees. Nor able to take a few days off from my father’s business and go fishing—alone or with the folks you like... You know I knew when my dad thought our spending time together might calm the coming eruption. We were both pawns, I think, in some larger plan. He must have believed he had trained me *not* to feel racialized, to be like him—and

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Canada: Collins; London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> Singleton, T. A. (2020). Archaeology of marronage in the Caribbean antilles. *Revista Do Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia*, (35), 1–13. doi:10.11606/issn.2448-1750.revmae.2020.164882

<sup>9</sup>Whereas, grand marronage, less prevailing and sometimes larger, refers to enslaved people detaching themselves from the plantation permanently. Like *petit marronage*, the fugitive must attempt to live without leaving signs of inhabitation. This occurred throughout the Caribbean, particularly islands like Jamaica with sizable forests, simply— better places to hide.

black. You were expected to be thankful he ‘gave’ you a better life than what my mother or the island had on offer.

Do you remember when our mother came to the U.S. for an actual visit, I was 20? The timing was bad. You caught a ninety-day bid after your second DUI. The two months she was in Long Beach, you were in jail. For a much longer sentence than the average white person committing the same crime would get. I want to tell you, cause I never told you, our mother was challenging to manage. I never visited you there, I’m sorry. She would not bring me. It was clear she thought it was not right to see you locked up. When she left and you were still inside, I was happy to see her go.

David, how did you feel about my move to finish college? Before that started, I came down around your birthday. I wanted to talk. I wanted you to understand, I found my father’s version of love unintelligible. I thought that might get you to tell me how you ended up staying with him and what that was actually like. It was a serious lunch, around your birthday. We went, you remember, to the high-end fish restaurant Wanda used to waitress at. We ate fancy; you were out of your element, and I think we both had fun. I didn’t learn much. It wasn’t supposed to be our last lunch and we had been talking with increasing frequency on the phone; we got kinda buzzed on my dime and I was proud. That was the final time I saw you before I started school...

Brother, when I would check in from Oregon, my first semester, right after you got sick, the people who guided you through treatment kept me at a distance. I felt like they were protecting you, from me; did you know how sick you were? From a distance, I gleaned they saw a doomed man, no chance for a buzzer-beater, running out the clock on death. It felt like they had total control over your medical choices. I can see how this would go down, knowing the detached way you dealt with change—with yourself. When you started dying, from—the

inoperable Glioblastoma, the baseball-sized tumor on the wrong side of the sack that held your brain—my father not-your-father told me to “shut the fuck up.” About my ideas. And all the research I did into the nation's best oncologist, at the UCLA Brain Tumor Center: they were hosting a free trial. We just had to get you there, wasn't that what the kickstarter money “little” Gray raised so much money for? You might have had more than three months to figure out how to die. There was an off chance to live, had we tried. I was the direct kin connected to your situation; simultaneously, our mother in Australia was diagnosed with dementia. That same week. In Australia.

My father mainly learned from himself. I think of Gray as a geography. He was a ‘self-made’ continent accepting useful interlopers. Our needs were superseded by his. He is not the classic or the worst version of this white man. He is just the one who claims he is our father. I thought he owed you to try something. If he did not want to give you replacement love, did he then understand what was equivalent to what you *had* before, needed—the smartest man in the room, in our situation, was (is?) not someone that loves. Instead, we got a “pragmatist.”

Brother, my lovely brother, I always wanted more from our relationship, and I blame him for making that difficult. If you had had a normal boss/stepfather, I believe you would have known (and trusted yourself) something was off much earlier. Your current health plan would not have lapsed and that fucking cancer would not have been so large when they found it.

David, I want you to know why I love college, libraries, and why all this shit is the gift, (I'm about to graduate graduate school!)—the gift I gave myself, a move my dad can lay no claim to. In a way, David, I went fishing. I am like the man attaching bait then wading into the waves, school is the sea I cast into, and what I reel in are the lessons I'm so proud and ready to learn For some people like *us*, whose relationships with their family make them lonely, the

bounty harvested from University makes us feel connected to something immense... The first book a writer reads is *not* one they wrote. A fisherman has to catch a lot of fish before he has a great fish story to tell.

David, did you ever meet him, her husband, Alan the adoring Australian? After you became sick, when Alan arranged to get me on the phone, she regularly called me “David.” I imagine she sometimes called you by my name. It may have been a mistake—I told her how sick you were, and this sent her into hysterics. I believed then that you didn’t need to know our mother had dementia. Alan was very sweet and protective of her while she was sick. The reason she never came to see you, more than anything, was her diabetes exacerbated by the memory loss. So she stayed in Australia. I talked with her every few days: I listened to the autumn leaves of reason blow away while your brain was collapsing under a swelling fist of pressure.

David, it’s coming... To see you only twice while you were sick, wasn’t good enough. I know you didn’t care to know (which is why I didn’t tell you), the ice cream and the cigarette we shared fed the cancer. That was on my first visit. On the second there was no way to know how coherent you were. It was just before your birthday. I called cousins in from the East Coast so you would have kin beside you (years earlier, our mother had given me a number I never tried). We were all there with you together. With care, you were easy to lift, light, like a bird. They came back for your birthday ten days later. That was impressive, those cousins—not having seen you in forty years. They said you were in a chair by then. But these are not the details you want to know... Important is: thank you, I made contact...

David, now that you are dead in my letter, why am I still talking to you?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> All he need do is look at his bank account and his lack of ownership vis-à-vis the means of economic production, In other words, to face the realization tha one is a worker not a capatalist is far less traumatic—

David, I've learned things. The man who impregnated our mother was the nephew of the man who ran the English consulate on our Island. For that consulate, our grandmother kept the house in order, she did the cooking; our grandfather managed the grounds maintaining the property. Their nephew came for the summer. He was good-looking and had eyes for our mother. When it was clear she was pregnant they sent him away, back to England.

Brother, I know now you only met your father once, at the one-runway airport back home. I think this was just before she left for the states. Then she moved to NY... did you ever know her father, our grandfather, before he moved to Brooklyn...<sup>11</sup> There was a sum of the aunties who raised you—not all of them—who were annoyed and even jealous of our Lucille. The way it went down, says Auntie Evelyn: after the man came from England and impregnated [y]our mother, [y]our grandparents employer offered to send [y]our mother to the “good school,” free of charge. And, once he (you) were old enough, (he) you would start there too—the best schooling on Montserrat for free. Essentially, her status on the Island was elevated by her future birth.

The way I see it, at fourteen, she was already uppity. That's where the dramatic overstyled English airs in her accent came from. Aunty Evelyn has *tried* hard not to talk shit: our mother thought she was special status, conferred by you that had grown in her belly. David, I know a few of them now, our relatives—mostly cousins. We see America so differently, I am challenging for them to be close with (it works both ways)...

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<sup>11</sup> John Mathieu, *the rolling stone* (I never met him); the rolling stone had another family on another island near to Montserrat, a common enough thing. The role of a Caribbean father, is to be, economic provider and protector—a role it seems is easy to spread around. There was a third woman who lived on Montserrat. They had one child: the mouthy auntie Sarah. At first she started in Brooklyn with John Mathieu. Now she lives in the Bronx near the rest (I met her once).

David, I saw the five Western cowboy novels I bought you were still in the box they came in. I'd sent them a few weeks after I learned you were sick. I know you didn't read any of them. One of novels was the latest written by the only author you had ever enjoyed, Louis L'Amour. This was in your teens and early twenties. That is what you told me, you read every one you could find. Well, the one I got you, he wrote after you stopped reading. I think I know why Westerns. I bet it was the romantic escape to worlds with different rules—the men who lacked attachments and enjoyed solitary lives. The Lakers, basketball, fishing, and Western movies. That was your jam. Words and books and reading and vinyl records and study became my life. I had just started my second semester when you expired. My brain was truly being fed. College kept me somewhat clear-eyed and gave me joy enough to feel guilty. If I had finished school much earlier in life, I might have been more help, to you.



## Next On The Menu

In the colonist's mind Indian and wolf often fused into a symbol of the land's hostility, of the danger's that lay ahead."—*Barry Lopez*

He liked to lay on the floor and angle his knees over the couch cushion. Chehalis elbowed deeper, kneading between the plateaus of shaggy beige carpet, arms supporting a tale held above his eyes. Words worked him into a world where animals thrill in thrall their nature. There was always also always his mother. The smell of laundry preceding the creak of stairsteps announcing Ehnita's ascent—*It is time my son*, she said. He pretended not to hear. It was night, after their meal—the TV turned way down. It cast the same frosty blue refracted through the window. Downhill, a desert moon rose above cedars, firs, and citra Spruce blown-out with puffs of white snow. The scene outside was an invitation: to pass through the glass and hopscotch cloudy treetops into town. *I know you hear me*, she said, moving into the frame blocking the moonlight. The change was his cue. Chehalis over-acted his roll-over to face her—a veiled truculence in his eyes. She acknowledged he was in his nook. A singular space; between the thick coffee table and the almost matching wood panels. When he was reading especially exciting passages, she liked to watch his knobby ankle bones work 'round each other—seeming to change direction with the narrative mood. *I was waiting for you—they're about to go hunting again*, using guile he said this seriously as if this *was* their ritual. Rolling back over to work with eyes his entreaty, *Let's read this part together*. It was his everything. She held in her gaze what suffused her. When to teach him where the border of Black boyhood meets any number of

outcomes—a future denied. She could see other planes behind those eyes. Horizons hinted at by the meaning behind his name... “shifting (and shining) sands” the “People of the Sands.”

Movement.

Now lordling above him lovingly, Ehnita said, *What will you do when you run out of new books?*

*This is the last one mamma.*

*Your Aunt Diandra got you six of them at Christmas! Why are you in such a rush child?*

*I want to know them—Mom... did you see on the news, they said ranchers are (testing it out) 'cull... lling?' the wolves, does that mean they want to kill them?*

*Well, culling is killing, yes... I haven't seen that one yet. Did that make you sad, you love wolves so much these days? Saying this had a twist of 'double-demnity.' But for him: will his bloodlines necessarily mar his manhood (a subject not to be discussed yet). I want to meet them, mommy. Will they kill all of them before I'm old enough? The men in the helicopters shoot them and kill.*

She moved to look down on the moon rising. *They have always tried, but they can never get all of us. We, like them, are part of the natural world. What they misunderstand in wolves to be wild and vicious they see in us too, sometimes they call it instinct and now we might say timeless.* Wolves are the

*I don't feel like a wolf. One day, you may not have a choice... now listen little man, she paused again, feeling the future limits love can protect him from, leave your book in the room, and brush your teeth for bed. I know you won't sleep if you take that story with you.*

Over the blankets piled up around him against the night, she fell into the layers of warmth, to softly remind him that his father would be home late. Chehalis, with fresh minty breath, snuggled down deep into the drifts of his *last* wolf story. A small tussle held, sleep vs a story that had to end.

*There are ties that bind you, Dyula. The future for you is tightening; members of our tribe will feed the wrong self; survival overtakes the ability to choose paths. I hear your sleep. We understand your disquiet. Rousing is the threat of our annihilation. You are the one for all of us, the living voice in the chorus that brought you ever-here. Dū-lə, she is the way... to see, an eye can make an appetite bottomless, the passage is only so much at once. This time, they want to consume the future... There will be flying blades drumming your escape. Attend your ears—up now child, white men are not finished with us yet. Awake and lead what is left of our people. Fugitives are free whilst running—away is also a movement towards something...*

(Aeriform tremors) a physical echo of the coming threat.

In a valley beyond sight, there are humans now alert to their presence. Long blades cut into to the air to reach into the sky.

One eye awakes to silt seeping between pebbles. Like what came from her sleep, the land was thrumming, calling her name; “*open your welkin eyes*”; stealing their candescence directly out of the sky. The drum beat... Dyulaaa!!!”

Dyula heard her name—again from a diminishing expanse. She lingered in the margins, holding back her instincts.

*Is it too late, we should be running!*

Man was always right behind them.

“Dyulaa!!” Their howls came from the deep weighted in distress—“Dyulaa!” Bight and Biafra leaped over the massive pine trunk obscuring the entrance of a barely familiar den. Young wolves they were, frenetic, alert, and panting.

“They coming,” said Bight.

“For us,” added Biafra with fervor, “again?”

“We must go, *now*,” they said together.

Dyula had not been their leader for very long. She knew when to run and that had worked so far. She stretched into readiness, plotting a map in her mind, the plan for escape (daylight: death has eyes in the sky). Her body like an antenna of listening.

“Stop... we listen first. And then we move,” said Dyula... meant chiefly them.

Their bivouac den was tucked into a thicket of woods near the top of a rise. A tableland, midway up a precipitous mountain that peaked further to the north—a place to rest. The twin minarets that split the summit lurked above like sentinels, timeless watchers. The den was well-hidden under a mix of flora punctuated by mountain hemlock and redcedar. This was a lair the tribe rarely used for hunting, sitting at the southern edge of what was once their territory.

“They creepin’,” Bight forced out between breaths, “on Soninke down in the valley...”

“From the cliff, we saw him leave a kill down there,” said Biafra.

“That flying machine it’s comin’ for us, and first for him,” continued Bight.

“From way up, but far away, and aiming in our direction,” Biafra finished.

Their size and coloration suggested direct kinship—the youngest of the five left, a pair of cousins—white-furred with undulating dark stripes burnt with beige. Dyula, only recently noticed the playfulness of youth was hard to see in the way they moved now. After weeks on the run, her Lowell companions carried the storm and stress of constant vigilance. For all of them, life had been reduced to being chased further into an increasingly unfamiliar wilderness—that, and persistent hunger.

Dyulay's trust in Soninke was now a matter of timing. He was cunning, and reliably efficient, but sometimes loathe to follow plans (even his own). She trusted him, and Dyula was made for knowing when to trust male wolves. The deceased alpha Manjago was a legend, she never thought to want his leadership...

This was the first time the yearlings had stayed in this den so far from home: the cave-hub from where their hunting paths fanned out like spokes. Their current den was one of a few scattered at the rim of hunting territory. It had been good for all to shelter among familiar scents—if only a listless morning after a failed overnight hunt.

Dyula circled their hunting den, gathering her words for a plan of action. She turned, facing Bight and Biafra; standing at full stretch, towering over them, as they postured obeisant to rank. The even sheen of her tundra coat shimmered, the aura of blowing sand passing under the moonlight.

“Wolof is foraging nearby I'm sure.” Dyula paused to sniff at the air. “We need to know how far away is their white death from above?”

Bight flanked Biafra. Nudging him with his nose to speak, knowing Biafra was a better judge of distance.

“To be real, they are far but not that far. If they can track him, Soninke may not make it.”  
“They shootin’, that made us look, we heard two shots. Bight added—“the man more’an likely knows which way Soninke be runnin’.”

Dyula weighed the variables with the voices from her sleep; arching her head, she projected a probing howl. “If he had stayed close by as agreed, that should alert Wolof.” Telling him to backtrack to the creek ravine and head downhill.

*We are better off as five, no one else dies today.*

Snowmelt and rain runoff from the summits were caught in a channel at the north edge of the forest. The melting rushes overwhelmed and combined with the deep spring that worked alone in the dry months. The trees lining the creek on the flat side of the bank became dense as you moved south towards the den in the middle of the plateau. Beneath the forked mountain peak the grade was dry, rocky, and spotty for cover.

The sun was starting to shrink the shadows over their hollow. It was time to abandon the den. Dyula gathered energy, the forest bristling like something animate but on their side. Her lithe body sprang forward, a rushing whisper under the fallen fir limbs crisscrossed to camouflage the back entrance of their burrow. Biafra followed first concentrating on Dyula; Bight attempted to repeat her dexterity: just missing the comb of pine cone finger through his fur. The young wolves stayed close behind her (they sped deftly through underbrush, their movements always subconsciously twinned). They watched her shoulders telegraph slight directional changes as they scanned the forest for movement; displacing zag as she led from one concentration of shade to another.

Wolof was couched on a rise, his head raised high discerning between scents. Since dawn, he'd been tracking a soft wind of mule deer placenta—a whiff of something he caught before in the dark. It was his habit to talk things over, perceptible only to himself.

“We need to be eatin’ dem or something, or we gwan turn’n to nutten,” Wolof muttered to himself.

The scent was very close, the morning cold.

The bloody mineral perfume hadn’t spoiled yet. If the scent was still in the air—the doe had warning of his coming—moving on before she had time to eat the afterbirth. Wolof.

Getting up, Wolof said in his head, “I ben tinkin’ dis would be de easy pickings, after me taste her greazzy insides, it no trouble to fin’e de mada.” This was the work he liked, hunting alone—keep it moving, *on me own yah kno’ for da greatah good*, he liked to tell himself.

Casually, Wolof assessed the landscape further uphill, figuring where a Mule deer might go to give birth, alone...

Dyula’s call disrupted his meditations. Wolof spun around, his long alabaster was always catching up. With midday full and brilliant, he looked rather like an Angora flying carpet, in layers and turned on its side. As pretty as it was to be busy, he made himself available—abandoning his little project—he turned in the direction of their next peril. Wolof made his way over to the adjacent gorge, taking the shady side down above the waterway towards his tribe.

Wolof thought on light paws; this might be their next defeat. *If he runnin’ frum’ dem’ men, an I know Soninke a be too eaga’, he needa be like a duppy-ghost nah’, An’ stay on da’ same side of dem’ trees... I like Dyula, she right en’ her mind. She kno tings’, but she ain’t no Manjago. If only dat’ big man and clever Eshira were still here—damn I miss dem alpha*

*know-it-alls... dis time, I cyaan nearly hear them sayin dem old tribe sAYIN*: “We share the kin with the moving sand like time, stay in the shadows to celebrate and feast another day.”

“If he wen’ down der’, now he be run’n uphill wit’ his back to da’ sun. For-dam’ sure dat ain’t no way to die.” Wolof said this aloud with unusual ardor. He moved under the trees over terra, a flush of white brushing heather, knowingly—like a shadow of wind.

Before morning after the fruitless hunt, before the sky sent far-off tremors, hunger had roused Soninke from an uneasy sleep. He’d made a decision. His wet nose nudged Dyula awake. She was unprepared, but of course, he had a plan. Soninke told her: he thought, *he* should go scout for signs of something they might track that coming night. Down was where he thought to start, to see what could be seen... When he had reached the canopy’s border on the valley floor, Soninke was overtaken by the reek of cows and their shit. *They must be near*, he thought. The odor, at least, was coming from one direction. The cows had moved on, pies easy to follow. He stalked cautiously through the shadows in the riparian. If horsemen rode with the herd, he nosed, *there should be a familiar foreignness in the air* (Soninke couldn’t be sure yet).

A kill looked far too easy. Soninke always felt that it was strange: *why do they leave the least equipped animals to forage where they don’t belong?*

*The other animals. The ones who pass through our territory, na, the ones we most prefer to eat, they move on when these simple beasts show up in numbers. We are the wolves. We the warriors who are meant to hunt what they eat. It is one of our pleasures... These temperamental creatures are all these men want for and leave us.*

In those last months when the clan was still strong, strong enough to hunt in force, they still spent days without making a kill. When the large bovines arrived with their calves in the

hundreds, and cowboys riding on even larger animals, immediately, traditional prey became scarce. Given a choice, deer, elk, and moose were far preferred. Our traditional prey in retreat between the spokes of our territory, here the ancient treaty between us is broken. Where this happens, it is said that the land will forget its purpose.

Soninke, the dark cunning hunter, was the first to suggest they should feed on cattle: “We don’t know how fahr’ these men go. I admit *nah*, these animals are enslaved; but what else can we eat? We do not have a choice, even though we know the consequences. They come here, then guard the land only for their purposes. We were made a way that eats other creatures to survive. They cannot change who we are.”

Late in the morning, back in the valley—the unmistakable bouquet of ruminant excrement—Soninke began to creep. His stovepipe color would help hide his movements in the shadows. *If I keep walkin’ na, under these trees they will not see, that fortune will place what I seek at the mouth of my retreat. For the sun is high and we all need to drink.*

There were forty-odd cows lingering mostly calves. They milled around a pool that collected spring runoff, joined by a creek snaking along the valley hedged by foliage. Coming within thirty bounds under deep shade is where Soninke watched. The limit of stealth was nearly reached. With a well-timed charge, he might subdue a small calf and drag it into the dark. He felt at war with hunger—losing patience—at his most cunning he was Blackness decisive and elegant, *a material shadow that kills.*

“I am waiting *nah*, just here, just to be sure”

In doing so, sunlight on the move had shifted the umbra to his advantage. Most of the cows were moving away in a negligent mass. He was the watchful one, he had a taste for reward.

Soninke knew his people needed badly to eat. Within him, there was also *our* yearning for reparations. His pack had lost so many (what he wanted was fat calf blood). Soninke slunk down the slope into the light, almost without realizing the quorum inside him had made a decision. He kept tight to the thick of shrubs between himself and the stragglers—an approach that zeroed in on a calf lagging well behind its mother.

*I pity these creatures', their unnatural lives. Maybe I am mercy.*

Gently between tufts of gold grass, his torso morphed into a lupine specter—a slinking black smudge of mirage in motion. A steely black shadow against the brassy grass distorted by full sun. Soninke sprang out from the last bit of high turf—quickenning his gait from powerful haunches pistoning full tilt.

The calf stood lingering in a state of indecision, the last one who didn't want to leave the water. Behind him, a black blur melted against the heat, the daylight blinked—Soninke covered thirty yards. Unawares, the calf looked on after the herd—then a delicious clash. Blood and bones sang synesthetically with the penetrating cries of woke prey. Soninke's momentum rolled them over. He landed atop the animal, his teeth drenched, sucking into the flow that connects the back leg to its rib cage. Before he could finish and release, for a plunge at the animal's throat, two gunshots echoed from a hilltop further down the dale. Another current of instinct rushed in to replace the rapture he was made for.

Fear.

The baby cow was too injured to stand—Soninke paused—he writhed calling out. The herd picked up pace as they moved away. No time for a finishing move—Soninke went for the closest leg. He started to drag and shake the calf back toward the shadows. , suddenly he felt

conspicuous—a lusty black body with jowls slaked in blood standing out against the countryside. The horsemen were too far off to hit a wolf without incredible luck—too close.

*Soninke, do you have enough time,* he asked himself.

Soninke was a beautiful specimen. But to flee with his kill even without duress would have been impossible (up a mountain by himself)... In another valley (gunshots unheard) the pilot and gunner got word over the radio—the rancher was on his way...

*Death from above is coming, if you don't want to die, run!* Soninke slashed across the spring pool and into the pall of penumbra. He pushed up the rise, angling for the main creek runoff that led back to the tableland den.

Soninke used the gorge for cover, as he hastened rhythmically from bank to bank it felt like he was making good time. Minutes into his ascent he thought he'd heard a she-wolf call, the meaning lost under his maneuvers—no time to call back. They were close. As he caught a vague sniff of his kin. Soninke pushed his agility and speed... Hardly perceptible, he began to notice the steep angle of escape, the cut in the ravine, and the water rushing down was starting level off. *I will make it, because na, I always come back alive.* A throbbing beat down the valley was moving in taking over the soundscape. Soninke could not here this over own maneuvers. It was still off aways, but those machines in the air can move fast. *Will they wait or will they have to run? She wouldn't call unless some shit was going down, and I'm it,* he thought.

The creek bluff with a view of the twin peaks was easy to find. Dyula arrived with the cousins. On the tree-lined bank overlooking a bend in the stream, they could see far up and down the ravine. Bight and Biafra were pacing, scanning upstream in the direction Wolof must have come from before he just appeared. Dyula, was pensive, she faced down stream (thinking). She had thoughts on their plight and faced her companions.

She carried *it* clearly for the first time, and that *it*, wastall-tailed and still elegant.

“Bight, Biafra, listen to me now.” They leaned in, lowering their muzzles against her chest in a trance. The thumping of the air machine was still at some distance, closing in. “This forest is rich and provides old trees. They will aid us in our escape, though I do not know how far they go.”

Looking down the ravine expectant, she continued. “Wolof will be here soon, but Soninke may bring death behind him. No matter what happens, don’t run up the far hill with your back to the men in the sky.” On the opposite bank, small groups of dying pines dotted a steep course to the peak above them. The thrumming sound suddenly thinned in the air. The flying death machine faded as though moving away. All three wolves moved to the embankment edge. Their ears oscillating independently, straining to hear while their eyes kept scanning up and down the riverbanks for the signs of skinfolk.

“No gunshots yet, that brother wolf, he gonna make it,” Bight said tenaciously. “Yo, I’m not hearing the hood hawk no more.”

“Let’s give the devil some credit little cuz. I’ve been in the world five days longer than you, those men up there are good at killing us,” Biafra said as Dyula had moved to see further downstream.

Wolof seemed to appear, and then interrupt. “I ben sat here five minutes and don know here noWolof sat, looking over them lazily between his magnificent fair hair. The way down was a trifle scent of placenta. While completely absorbed in teasing out a burr from his paw with his teeth—a casual bit of self-care in crisis. Just upstream from the rest of the group, he sat atop a large rock jutting out from under a lone tree nearest the water. Now having their attention, he gave up on his paw to muse. “*We*, should-a-been born fishah cats, you see. You ever heard a dem’, those mean mothers?” Wolof’s head moved arrhythmically emphasizing his speech. “Dah

white man's chickens that be *sine qua non* fo dem'. But they can catch dem takin' his lil chickens—they don' never figure out how to kill em." The boys were not sure it was time to lay down as was their custom for listening to Wolof in form (story under his influence softened he air). "She live in a hole unda' the broke-up trees by da' rivah' you see; eatin' eggs for breakfast and chickens evory'-night. I til' you, nobody kin mess with that *little weasel*... Ain' she da' special one, doan'-you forget."

Dyula wasn't listening; thinking she'd seen something, was now down in the water. "Dat' crafty one don-nevah' get chased fa' five months by no hood hawk, dat's truth..." Lengthening his pause with a stretch. "Today, I was on a luk fo' greezy deer lefovas'... I come when I git' call here wit' chicken on da brain. Wat woold' you pups do fa a..." Wolof stopped short, stepping in as a way to rise up, to the edge of his pedestal, seeing beyond his listeners. "Yah mann', Soninke is a fine-ting' in motion, you see em' dere'?"

Coming into cleared view, a sleek black *canid* approached from under the tree line. His maneuvers were beguiling—he was high on his own performance. With style, he used the rivulet boulders like dance steps. A resplendent Black water walker running for his life. Just as he was coming up on his final moves, the whole waiting tribal member realized all at once, above their perch, Soninke was running toward the sound of death.

Between the twin minarets, far above the far bank of the watercourse, sound and fury appeared, 'white death from above.' On the far side, they were exposed between the sheer slope dead treeline and the pine cover behind them. They were finally to be reunited but under the eye of their pursuer. The flying machine adjusted pitch, bearing down on them. Dyula bounded downstream halving the remaining distance to Sinonke (his heartbeat pounding he hadn't heard nor seen *it* yet). Wolof leapt from the rock to join Bight and Biafra looking on (back and forth to

the helicopter). Dyula changed course a few dozen yards from Soninke. As she reached the “safe” side of the riverbank, she pivoted to effectively call out...

“*OWWUOOOO...*”

“*Soninke, on me, everyone into the trees!*”

Stereo reverberant cacophony hounded them now, moving through the air and into their bodies. Resonant somatic torture, *they* felt it individually like their bones were tuning forks struck repeatedly. As a collective, it cut off the way the language used to identify each other’s bodie language while in motion. The men in the flying machine caught glimpses of them between the trees—buckshot crashed through the canopy harassing the pack. The sun moved low in the sky; the helicopter men kept loading shotguns, binocularing; trees stood closer together; wolves hid into their advantage; low gas called in to end the hunt; the helicopter had to go home.

The forest became a listening again... After the air in the forest, even Wolof didn’t talk to himself for several miles. They were still heading south moving down in elevation.

Hungry.

The trees started to thin. Men felt far, like apart from nature. The other side of the mountain. A pack of five left, went from copse to copse for cover. Biafra stumbled onto a tiny spring bubbling out the rocks bracing a thicket of spruce: a spring bubbling out the rocks bracing a thicket of spruce.

We rest and we drink

Dyula called for a brief halt to rest and drink. Wolof was scanning the flatlands below when he saw an adult Snowshoe Hare pop above ground to survey the area around its warren. There was

no way to catch him that close to home, however, when desperate enough, there was a way to dig down to the whole warren.

Wolof had no other choice; with an incentive, Dyula figured with five of them they could marshal the energy... For a small feast of almost two rabbits a piece the work was worth it. The carnage looked like a mini meteor filled with blood-soaked cotton impacted into the hillside. A basic meal they slayed like a feast. “Keep moving” she made it clear; they kept on.

Forward down the slope reached the flat lands and sparse chaparral with a one-lane road stripping the landscape like a horizon. Where that new roadway hit T, Wolof could see a large rectangle framed off the ground. Somewhat Fed and still fearful, they approached with curiosity (they planned to keep heading south away from the old into new territory). The structure puzzled them: a billboard with white symbols running across and over animals they recognized punctuated in the bottom corner by a little human girl on a swing.



Like a border marker or signal meant for other humans whatever it may be made no sense to the tired pack. The beginnings of twilight were calling them into the west. Slopes in the

foreground met at a green gulch. Wolof caught wind from that direction: a sun-bleached grassland sans the stench of bovines—promising. It was not their habit to sleep through a whole night but the hares in their bellies had caught up to them, and it was quiet. A rare and necessary trespass of respite they couldn't help but endure.

## Lost Weekend

I can only tell you the way I heard it and breaking tradition, I wrote it down. Are there still *jongleurs*? Like they were in days past—their occupation retelling others' tales as they heard them. They would often be a man or woman sitting by a fire on the outskirts of a town. Like the Roma and their relationship with a village. In thrall to their own words whetted for the pause of the passerby. Their profit was reliant on there being time to listen; in the time before listening lost the competition with everything else. The Jongleur hears one and then shapes it into a transit ticket: thus stamped by the scribe who writes it down.

D'raille was sitting on their building's stoop waiting for a phone call when, *my* storyteller, the neighbor, found him. D'raille followed him up to the fourth floor, talking the whole way, reflecting on the changes in their neighborhood: The unapologetic way they came in—buying Black erasure—paying property taxes—a neighborhood unrecognizable from a few years ago. Brownstones were being bought and sold so fast it felt like their Black neighbors were disappearing; then they disappeared. One day, homegirl Trish was on her stoop doin' her thing, the next, she and the rest of her building were forced to move on. It was hard to know where they went. Likely we go back to the south, never to return.

D'raille had not been up to his neighbor's apartment in a minute. The neighbor, a poet, could feel something heavy coming up behind him. D'raille's footfalls thumped like they carried all of Gaia's troubles. Upon reaching the fourth floor his good neighbor opened the door. As he turned to invite D'raille in, with—an unconsciously well-timed move D'raille was already in the main room. Words, not exactly coherent, kept coming. He felt uncanny powers working against them in *their* part of the city. D'raille weighed into a chair like gravity stalked him. Finally

pausing from his diatribe, he abruptly sat silent, staring into the foggy sheen of wood topping the dining table; the faint aroma of Pledge succored a sense of familial safety. A familiar scent sat with him at table, the pleasant aftereffects of cleaning day. The plants and paintings—his friend and neighbor—sat waiting for D’raille to share his troubles.

“Some weird shit went down this weekend like I don’t even know what to think... Yo, where is your cat (scanning the room with genuine concern); you should close that window. It’s not safe for him to be out there so high up.”

“I didn’t think you liked Screw,” he smiled, “He was born a barn cat, turned into a city hoodlum. He likes his window access open... cats like to get in and out of boxes”

“That’s right, you from the Carolinas. Maybe that’s what makes him so chill, he started out in the Lowcountry”

The poet slid into the seat across from D’raille, pushing aside the candle, the pepper grinder—watching D’raille bend a long arm into the shape of a sail. Anchored by his hand gripping at his neck—at a sword, he might pull out from his torso. D’raille’s frame laid back into the wind as a whispering breeze came in with the cat. This broke their attention—for a moment. Screw circled inspecting the trunk of a house palm before feigning interest in their visitor. He was an exquisite tabby, with gray-brown and white slinky-like stripes, undulating under the influence of self-conscious performance.

D’raille’s mast swung forward to drop-sail. He listed in towards his interlocutor. Through the window, beyond his host, over the brownstone roofs to the north, he faced an urban infinity. The week and so the weekend were ending—dusk. His neighbor thought D’raille looked thankful for that: the natural light fading, giving Sunday up for new tidings, a morrow. D’raille talked and his neighbor, mostly, just listened.

“On Friday, I was loungin’ and feeling like nothing was gonna’ hype my weekend. I tried to finish off the second book in that Afrofuturist trilogy you’ve got me on, but I was kinda itchy. Then my boy Trev called. You know, the dude I first moved to New York with. The white boy who likes to laptop-DJ off YouTube?”

“That kid Treavor,” laughing to himself, “I remember him. He likes to show off but he doesn’t know who or when he’s messing with. It’s cute when he gets up on the sexy-black-seventies—no wax.”

“That’s the dude. He was all white-boy-like:

‘So yo check it, my aunt has got me house-sitting her spot in the city again. But I’m trying to be on Metro-North heading upstate in like an hour. That girl who comes down sometimes on the weekends. Remember that cute ass chick from Soul Night? So here’s the deal. She’s trying to flip me into some kinda homesteader, then a gentleman I guess. Whatever that means... I’m down. I like this girl and her turf up there is all tranquil. I’m feelin’ this!’

“Then I was like, Okay-okay so, so you are juicy about this girl upstate, cool. What’s this got to do with me white cousin?”

“Then he continued, all Emo”:

That’s why I’m hitting you up. D’raille, can you hook me with a solid and house-sit my Aunt’s spot through Sunday? You’ve been there, you know you in SOHO, fully stocked with access to the rooftop chill spot. And she has this new cat she’s excited about, a special hybrid she had delivered last week. It could be fun.

“I didn’t have shit to do, so I was like ‘fuck it’; maybe I will get my girl Pavor to come through and have a lost weekend. Anyway, I made moves... Of course, I had trouble getting the key from the bodega guys. He should have shown them a picture, right? So check it, I get upstairs pretty much under the radar of the neighbors. I walk in to see Auntie’s cat, Marchesa Luisa Casati, in a full stretch as I came through the door.”

“Hold up, what’s up with all that noise in a cat name?”

“I know right,” D’raille was energized by the telling, “The cats namesake comes from this Milan Socialite, part vampire part fashion diva, who embodied *fin de siecle*. On the real, her dad left her and her sister a massive fortune when they were teens. At the start of the 20th century she went cray cultivating her disdain for the mundane”

“So, she basically wore decadence like a cape.”

“And walked the Venice streets naked underneath it, *with* her pet cheetahs leading the way.”

“Damn Pam!”

“But we can look her up later if you wanna see some shit”

“Please, continue, I’m interested.”

“So I open the door. Cat Marchesa is spread out like a leopard skin carpet, that straight up tied the room together. I mean, can a cat vogue? I don’t ever use my phone to take pictures of random shit or watch cat videos, you know that right? But this cat Marchesa, was ignorant of her own perfection—she sets Dutch minimalism in a mid-century modern show-room living room, on-*fiyah*’. And she was gigantic, check out these pics.”

He handed over the phone and his neighbor looked at the pampered, rather enormous, and striking cat; she was remarkable, like a miniature cheetah.

“Okay, okay... So you were baby sitting cat royalty. What was on display in Auntie’s bookcase?”

“The usual suspects: Kundera, Naomi Kline, Zizek, Rushdie, Martin Amis, J. Eagan, some Roth, a new unsullied Notorious RBG, The Profit/Alchemist/Shantaram (back to back), and Beloved, for good measure, to name a few. The shelf was of course bookended with this year’s untouched New Yorkers. But who cares about that, she’s just another middle-aged, mostly cool, ‘liberal’ white lady. Who unknowingly let a Black man, for the second time, house-sit her fly SOHO apartment. The place looks like the '60s art films we could never be in”

“Did you and Pavor enjoy your taste of reparations?”

D’raille leaned back, taking a moment... how to explain what came next? People in the neighborhood say you will remember him, even from across the street. He is exactly handsome, but that’s too basic. They do not say but feel his resting-body excellence—a warming sense of calm in front of his features. D’raille is fitness and symmetry, a composition of black manhood in delicate motion. Screw made a kneady clockwise inspection of the poet’s lap. The trio had nothing to say for a moment. In the version I heard, the plot moved on quickly from here. The weekend was just getting started. D’raille’s features, though magnetic in his burough, were not always a boon in certain parts of the city.

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D’raille made it to SOHO by 4 pm flat, it was a Friday. The sun was bright and bouncing between building windows on Prince Street. He got reacquainted with the layout: Auntie’s wine

fridge and the streaming options, remnants of fancy cheese in the fridge. Marchesa played shadow to his movements. May in New York has the potential for resplendent afternoons; it was his turn to milk the good life downtown. He opened the double doors onto the balcony, taking a congratulatory sip. He was celebrating himself for having a spoiled white friend from college.

D'raille read the note on the counter written to Treavor. It explained that the cat was special because it had a lot of energy and was very acrobatic. There was a leash and collar that Marchesa enjoyed wearing, used when the full-service pet-daycare came to pick her up in the mornings. It had only been two weeks since Marchesa arrived at her home. Auntie was hopeful catsitting wouldn't be too challenging, with assistance from the pet service. She had been warned and advised her nephew not to walk the giant cat outside. It was unclear if the pet was legal in the city (maybe the whole state).

Meanwhile, Pavor was on her way and she would remember to bring the HDMI cable. The plan was to get Korean BBQ, delivered (*w/lots of sides of every sauce*). A complete staycation Friday; watching the model people on the street below, intergenerational trust-in-funding. D'raille and Pavor's real lives were far away, in the abstract. The plan focused on what could be plundered and then binged off the internet. Whatever treasures they found, would get blown up large on Auntie's big 'ol screen—filtered by the haze of smoking trees.

Marchesa is lanky, musclely, and tall as a medium-sized dog; one magnitude smaller than *The Master and Margarita's* "Behemoth." She liked D'raille (but she was easy): she followed him around, she sat on his lap, and she enjoyed the view when hefted over his shoulder leaning, his butt against the balcony rail. When she didn't need attention or want for play, Marchesa reveled in the "good life," sitting in her favorite spot—a flat perch of waterproof carpet drilled into a corner of the balcony railing. At three floors up, she had a

birdseye view of *The Sims* “Fashion Island”: SOHO Edition.

Pavor texted D’raille that she was outside. He set Marchesa down, briefly stroking her behind the ears. She maintained her focus on the games afoot beneath them. D’raille crossed the movie-set living room and leaned on the intercom button by the door. “Mrs. Robinson, I’m in 3A, you can leave the lights off when you come in.”

“Just press the buzzer clown! And you need to feed this Greek deity before she gives up the goods anyway.”

He went into the kitchen and filled a glass of wine for Pavor. In the hall listening near the peephole, he waited, she started to knock. Swiftly D’raille opened the door and with one deft multistage movement, like a swing dancer: he slid his arm behind her right shoulder, removing her overnight bag while placing a wine glass in her left hand—sweeping her inside, then ending the cycle with a kiss at the nape of her neck.

“And hello to you too (impressed)... Check out *this* place. I want to just stand here and stare at it. It’s hard to look away; like when you’re at the Natural History Museum and you get sucked into a lifelike caveman scene. Only we’re in the future where you can go onto the set, you know, look back on the scene of private wealth amassed by privileged women from the 21st century.”

“Her cat’s name is Marchesa Luisa Casati,” (conspiracy in his grin).

“Isn’t that the name of that Italian society chick who used to walk around Milan with leopards on leash and African servant-dudes holding torches?”

“Yeah, she was workin’ it and only tacitly racist if that. I doubt she could see beyond her mirror.

At some point, she commissioned a wax mannequin, of herself, they ate dinner together like they were twins. Then get this; she brought it with her to Paris for fittings with a master fashion designer.”

“D’raille, wait up.” Pavor was now down on her haunches holding the wine glass in both hands, scrutinizing the exotic creature fanned out underneath her. With mild surprise yet sure of her assessment, she said, “This cat is not a normal house cat—Marches has been crossed with a Serval.”

“I know she is some sort of hybrid, But tell me 'cause I know you love to tell, what’s a Serval?”

“Likely, she’s an F3 or *maybe* an F4 Savannah Cat, that’s how they track hybrid genetics. This means Marchesa here is the outcome of the third cross with a domestic cat, in other words, she has one Serval great grandparent... Servals are smaller, lesser-known African cats with long ass legs. They have incredible hearing and reflexes, they can jump super high, and run next fastest to a Cheetah.”

“When did Manhattan people start collecting designer predator cats; and, *why* do you know so much about the rare pet game... I need to know?”

“I have no idea, rich people get bored. But if that’s an F-3 or 4 Savannah, Auntie likely dropped around four G’s.” Marchesa moved away with the assurance of a panther in command of its domain, then leaped to her carpeted perch to judge the sartorial displays beneath her.

“Aren’t hybrids with too much wild blood illegal or unsafe or something!?”

“I mean, it definitely ain’t right to sell or buy early-generation hybrids.”

“Auntie does what she wants I guess... Marchesa seems cool though. But she does have a lot of energy like she needs a treadmill. Seriously, how do you know so much about these

fancy-ass cats created for rich white people?”

“I studied... or I guess I still study white people, especially the rich ones. I should have changed my minor to my major,” she winked.

Now settled in, Pavor and D’raille were set to enjoy the possibilities... She made her way around inspecting the flat; fingered over Auntie’s books judgmentally, and looked up the online menu for Boka. They were both craving BonChon chicken wings and spam-bacon-kimchi fried rice. Pavor wasn’t feeling like red wine and decided to ferret for some sparkling.

“Hey D’raille, I wanna pop this Cremant, are you down?”

He had been petting the cat on the balcony ledge while lighting a spliff. Stepping back into the living room he saw Pavor struggling with the cage and foil over the wine cork.

“Aren’t you a bartender; you want some help?”

“When I’m behind the sticks it’s all about draft beer, whiskey, and vodka sodas. I don’t think we have a sparkling at my bar.”

Condensation caused the bottle to slip from Pavor’s hands. It fell to the floor where the thick indented punt hit the seasoned wood with a hard thump—like a dumbbell at the gym. The bottle rolled back and forth as bubbles gathered close at the neck, crowding near the cork. D’raille, Pavor, and Marchesa from over on the ledge, stared wondering who was going to pick it up. The Cremant stopped oscillating and came to rest aimed out the double doors to the balcony. It was like that moment after the wick goes out, but *inside* the firework, then nothing happens (for a second). Pavor leaned over, her hand reaching—too late. Pop! The cork rocketed out of the bottle ripping the foil and carrying the metal cage with it. Marchesa already on edge from the sudden thud, had been rigidly gripping her platform. Then, to avoid the incoming missile she leapt laterally disappearing from view.

Creamy ocean froths of wine ebbed onto the floor. D'araille and Pavor stood looking out the balcony doors; at each other. Slowly, they stepped over the growing puddle and moved together into the sun. The busy scene on Prince Street kept it moving: "All eyes on me" they said en-masse with every step. Whether the cat had made it or landed splat, nobody had noticed. The cat wasn't down there—or anywhere? D'araille called her name, "Marchesa, Marchesa," in a voice that started with an uncertain questioning, but by the fourth "*Marchesa*," faltered into macabre sobriety.

That wasn't working. D'araille quickly figured this wasn't helping. In fact, would make their search harder once down on the streets. People on the street were starting to be drawn out of their private ontologies, they began to notice: a very *interesting-looking* couple was calling out for a titled heiress on the balcony above. A moment not exactly out of character in SOHO, but this was different. They backed into the flat... Out in front of the building, they separated to draw less attention. With restraint, they still called out the hybrid's name looking under cars, between the trash cans next to the walkup. Before giving up, SOHO judged them passively. Pavor got a pass because she looked like a multiethnic/multinational Amazon in vintage bell bottoms. However, D'araille knew his style was innately aberrant for this district, his behavior thus drew attention. They regrouped on the steps.

D'araille said, "Alright, we should go upstairs and check again. Did you actually see the cat jump from the balcony?"

"I don't know, basically yeah. I think we both did"

A new problem, no keys. Forced to pick at random from the names on the intercom, a man answered from the second floor with the arrogance of a banker continuing happy hour at home. They convinced him to buzz them through. On the way up, a very different-looking man

than one the buzzer suggested was watching them from the stairwell. As they started to ascend he retreated to ogle them with one eye through the inch space where he held his door ajar.

After looking the apartment over and checking the nearest balconies, when there was nowhere else to look, a moody silence hung in the room. D'raille could sense their prospects were diminishing. He could have said it for her: Pavor thought she should head out. He wasn't going to talk her out of it—he was consumed with morose explanations for the impossible, mixed with the heady smell of yeasty white wine.

“It seems like you gotta figure some shit out. I'm gonna clean up this wine then maybe I should bounce... Unless you need help”

“What if we just order some BonChon chicken wings, you know, chill for a second and maybe she'll come back... But I get it, if you're not feeling it you should go. I'll be alright”

D'raille passed the overnight bag and walked her downstairs. The nosey white dude who didn't buzz them in, watched ominously from the stairwell as they kissed goodbye between the double set doors and the mail slots. On his return ascent, D'raille made it past the eye of insinuation, unspoken but clear. He sat heavily, the kind of weight that keeps one from getting out of bed. It didn't make any sense: The Cat of Evanesce.

The balconies in all directions looked too far away for a supercat' leap, even with planned intention. Marchesa was special, an F3 right—and still, not possible. The bottle drop startled her into flight mode, that moment *before* a cat ran blindly into the street when spooked. Besides, all the balcony doors below, center left and right, were closed nobody seemed home. The wack neighbor guy was ruled out, his apartment was at the back of the building.

Basic needs sent D'raille to Auntie's freezer. The shiniest, most inviting packaged

organic sustenance went into the microwave. Could Marchesa have made the jump laterally to the one directly next door? In any event, the night was a bust: Brooklyn called from the eastern range of vision. He sat down to eat, distracting himself with streamy TV... Google searches taught him a few things: Savannah cats, like African Servals, enjoy being in water (even joining their owners in the shower); they are more like dogs than cats in demeanor; they embrace being walked on a leash; Savannah cats can jump 8 feet vertically; interestingly, New York state only permits Savannah's at five generations removed from the serval, an F5 or greater. They were illegal in the five boroughs in any genetic hybrid situation. Looking for a solution on the internet was no help—dead ends made D'raille anxious (puzzles need to be solved). Changing tracks, D'raelle started an email to Pavor:

Dear Pavor,

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if you were an indoor cat? Especially an apartment cat in New York. Her whole experience is framed by this slender rectangle of space. She understands an imprecise representation of the real world. From windows or balconies, the world spreads out in all directions. But for the cat, it is a simulation she has never interacted with—she can never be sure where it begins or whether it ends. And for a city cat, that uncertain infinity is reframed by the street below, left and right. If she ever made it to the roof, to find row after row of buildings interrupting the close plane of view. The changing heights of manmade structures are like cliffs, dropping into unknowable abysses.

And for a city cat, that uncertain infinity is reframed by her own street left and right. If she ever made it to the roof, row after row of buildings interrupts the close

plane of view. Regularly cliffs drop into unknowable abysses. Marchesa has *only* seen the bottom of her own street—but from above. It's kind of like Plato's cave but the prisoner has a window to look through, instead of only shadows to build epistemology. Because she is limited in how she can engage, her instincts (heightened by hybridity) are frustrated. What if the horizon limit just repeats itself from SOHO to Harlem... Yonkers? She will never know better than what she gleans from her perch on Prince Street.

I'm not trying to get all high theory on you (and I know sometimes you like that), but I feel the trap in this city too, the whole country really. The City is a cave-like cage a controlled experiment. It is part of a larger apparatus that limits Black imaginations from inventing the futures we need to survive the present. It makes sense why I'm hung up on these African futurist writers my neighbor put me on. They seem to (more) easily imagine Blackness in futures that are free.

Maybe Marchesa jumped into a fold in space, and I feel something like jealousy I want to know something: how did Marchesa jumped into a fold in space, willing herself onto another plane where she has all the freedom she never imagined: up here where I write and down there where she lacks full control of her body. A new reality, where the rules and limitations of her golden cage, given to her by a white master have never applied. *Space is the Place!*

You do you Mamma,

I'll figure this cat thing out

Peace,

D.

Draille fell asleep on the couch. The night was balmy but comfortable, a last reprieve from the imminent summer heatwaves. When D'raille got up for water, a scratching noise came from the balcony. He had a look, nothing doin'. In the kitchen using the Brita, he noticed the cat dish under where he stood was empty. Outside, he leaned over the railing and strained to see between the throngs of sidewalk traffic, carefully scanning every foot of space free from shadow. Something else was out there: inebriation leading people to late-night calories, home for final nightcaps, and bartenders closing happy to see them go. He knew there had been food in the bowl before he went to bed. There had been food in the dish since he arrived and he had added more before Pavor made her cameo.

Through the early morning hours, D'raile was up and working on the Marchesa dilemma. At 8 a.m., there was a knock at the door. It was the police. The officers wanted to know how he'd come to be staying in this "swanky" SOHO flat. Some of the neighbors had noticed him coming in and out and looking frantic on the street. It was reported that D'raille was seen going up and down the block, bending under cars, digging in trashcans, and calling out to something or someone in Italian. They told him several neighbors also said he was down on the street with a woman who looked to be the wrong kind of girl. The police wanted to see the keys and then tested them in the door. Then they wanted to search the flat for drugs while he waited outside with the other officer. This he refused as was his right. That didn't make them happy; instead, they pivoted, wanting proof he had a right to be there: The officers walked D'raille downstairs, "We need to be sure—the neighbors are concerned." Several of them were in the hall including the nosey neighbor (just inside his open door). After an hour, Trev finally called back and smoothed things over. The street took notice of D'raille unhappily waiting in-back of the squad

car. The cops behaved as one would expect: When they returned him to the apartment, one of the officers noticed the cat scratching/jungle gym in the corner.

“Haven’t seen a cat around,” one said with a smirk of mild insinuation, the other officer now interested, “You haven’t lost him have you?” With his back to the policemen. Slowly, D’raille timed his turn as he forced a tension-drain from his face.

“She takes the cat with her when she travels. She even walks her on the beach with a leash.”

They weren’t seriously paying attention (the last of 1001 cuts)—a reminder he was encircled by surveillance... The cops behaved as one would expect: insouciant to the disrepute they put D’raille through. The double white officers, had policed him into their interpretation of Blackness; rendering him dangerous and so impotent to narrate his own story. Forced to rely on Treavor, his Scheherazade savior, like that one time in college. With the door closed, he was back on the case: The mystery of Marchesa Luisa Casati, the miniature cheetah cat. There was still the larger puzzle to solve. Once the police left the building, D’raille was not to be distracted by all that quotidian noise. An omnipresent predicament he alone had to remedy.

It was now 11 a.m. D’raille’s plan: shower and eat quickly before walking the neighborhood wakes up. He would widen the search. Sources on the internet made it clear: once a Savannah cat escapes, they hunt, D’raille had pictures on his phone, that would help. Or would it? There are leads you invent for yourself when there is nothing else to follow. (It seemed more apt to believe the cat had fallen into shadow, a wormhole.) After a few hours, it was clear; the most solipsistic New Yorker could not miss this spectacular spectacle of feline. Hunting on the streets of SOHO would make Marchesa conspicuous (like D’raille)—he imagined them together, the Savannah Cat on leash out front. As the sun set behind the

waterfront buildings obscuring New Jersey, his feet led D'raille subconsciously away from SOHO, landing him in the Lower East Side.

D'raille sat alone on a high chair in the window, sipping brown ale and whiskey so local even the barrels were “born in Brooklyn.” The burger had fancy pants written all under it: unstressed ground beef served with house-smoked ketchup and lacto fermented shallots on a homemade brioche bun. It was pricey but better than Auntie’s freezer... He called Treavor upstate, who planned not to say anything to his aunt until late on Sunday. Hoping the Marchesa would show before her owner landed.

D'raille returned to SOHO with conflicting feelings about his burger experience: satisfied, full, or fleeced? He read for a while; Afrofuturism vs Africanfuturism (where will Caribbeans live in outer space?). Before heading to bed, he refilled the cat dish again. Was this hope acting in place a sign?.. Soft jingles... *that was Marchesa's toy moving in the other room.* D'raille jumped in jubilation, and turned on the overhead light: a cat ball with a bell inside sat conspicuously under the coffee table, sans Miss Luisa Casati. He checked the cat food; most of it had been eaten, again. D'raille knew it was crazy, but that made him happy somehow. Maybe after he left the next day Marchesa would reappear *permanently* and Auntie SOHO wouldn't have to go all *Karen* on anybody. He was ready to be done with Nightmare Island.

It was Sunday, he got up late and struggled to get moving. D'raille managed to clean the house by 3 pm., moving methodically slow, expecting another sign from the ether. Finally, he packed it in, poured Marchesa another huge bowl of food, and grabbed the recycling. On his way downstairs, he left a mordant “thank you” taped to the door of the suspicious white guy. D'raelle was sure he saw the dude's shadow moving over the door sill—he gave a last look from the landing. Materially, this was all Trev's problem now. Psycho-spiritually, the escapade was

coming back to Brooklyn with D'raille.

As he came above ground at the Utica A train stop, he felt that back home feeling one gets that mixes with the realization you don't like that other part of your family. Or maybe, that's just how Brooklyn feels about Manhattan (Harlem gets a pass). So, D'raille is back in the BK. It's a chill Sunday afternoon: the Carribeans are *Jerkin'* their chickens, the Po'Boy shack is frying rockfish, and the last Italian pizza spot is still doin' their thing. The hydrant on his corner was drenching the street, it drenched his shoe while he was walking lost in thought. Making his building, he sat down on the stoop and ate 2 plain slices, they were comforting, but he was distracted. Pavor, he hoped, would call him back. The email he ultimately sent was something other than coherent thought. And then, D'raille met the eyes of his friend and neighbor, bringing the mien of welcome as the poet crossed their street. Eventually, their evening together made its way through to me, when the troubadour became my *jongleur*.

\*

Screw missed much of the plot asleep on the couch.

“So what do you think happened to Marchesa?”

“I don't know, but the food *Mosdef'* got eaten. What do you think happened to Marchesa?”

“Hmm, I have no clue... well that is a wild tale mister, but it doesn't feel like it has an ending yet”

“I can't help you there bruh', I'm just glad to be back in the BK.”

Screw was up again. He made ready to change locations—making his way onto the table between them. He was cat enough to draw the kind of attention sure not be missed. Throwing his all into an elaborate yawn and stretched simultaneously, reposed into a sphinx

position, the better to be pet by. They locked eyes for a few moments. The cat rose again abandoning his performance and D'raille swept him up and onto his left shoulder. Screw purred deeply, encouraging D'raille's to stroke. Some of the weight had lifted it was clear to see as he leaned back and drifted into replays. The moments before the Marchesa leaped to infinity: the static and silence after the bottle popped; the smell of Pavor's neckline; and the thought of Korean chicken wings now rewetting a hankering gone missing. Three males in Bed-Stuy were drifting miles away into their larger inner worlds... On the fourth buzz, D'raille saw Pavor's picture gleaming through his pant pocket. He pounded the poet sweetly square between the knuckles and set Screw down on the shinnig dinner table.

"I'm gonna take this," standing up to pull his phone out, he paused, his eyes caught on the eastern edges of their hood, where Pavor was likely calling from.

"Do you my brother."

## Gato Hombre is Hambre

Mmmeeauh. When I lie down level-eyed to the floor, I can see under the door; that's the place where I stay praying, listening for her car, and the clap of her feet before she opens the door. It takes all my strength to be so hungry, but I stay focused—and then that's all I can see: tin cans and the large rumbling plastic bags filled with the food they bought for me. They saved me, and now they starve me. They must have forgotten, 'mee, '—it's been almost two weeks. The radio was on in every room, NPR. I stayed outside away from that noise! The station goes on and on about this disease called a 'Pandemic.' I thought it was a password; you know, for the kids and the treehouse outback. That's where I've been sleeping since they left... "mueuw." During the day, and this is because I cannot escape myself—I am hungry. The woman, Bernice, who comes to feed me, then she left the radio on. I am cat alone.

Radio says, "Public health calls for welfare, not warfare"; "Will it be safe to send mom flowers on Mother's Day?"; "ICE has tested a tiny fraction of ice, near detainees, 'it's all positives"; "America... we have done a great job... I — am — your, 'eradicator in chief.'"

*Of what is unclear:* Bernice began gritting her teeth. She was in the lone car on the I-5, driving between Salem and Portland. NPR kept company but her mother was on her mind (the cat was in the other direction). That early in the pandemic, she more'n likely *was* the only woman on the road in her particularly colored disposition: on any Oregon highway that day, anyway. *This motherfucker disbanded the White House pandemic response team in 2018; The embedded CDC epidemiologist in China left her post in July last year, his administration eliminated her role; and*

*then last February, he was like, when April warms things up, “in theory,” that will make, ‘It’, “miraculously” go away by Easter; while my people have been reduced to a polysyllabic he cannot pronounce, “comorbidity”—thanks Fauci for pointing out the simultaneous fuckery of African American problems.*

Bernice changed lanes blinking across an empty highway. *Is it possible that we will learn from this moment? Hello liberals and progressives, Capitalism comes at the cost of people... We have not seen that yet. Instead, those greedy richest-of-men are watching us die. The premium put on white life is a guarantee on Black Death, in cities all over my country. Can COVID be clearly seen through the crisis of disparities it has exacerbated. Especially found in long-term care facilities, like her mother. Where she receives care out of Bernice’s pocket, mediocre medicare doesn’t cover it. We already know, one-third of all reported COVID deaths happen in nursing homes. Sheeit, and we know who makes up the majority of that statistic.*

Approaching the fringe districts of Portland—the Lake Oswego outdoors were empty—Bernice felt somehow safe and yet exposed, though for the first time she felt unnoticed. (Or maybe they were instead inside watching her on Ring; linking their cameras to surveil the whole vicinity on lockdown, as she thought she was rolling through undetected.) This was not her part of town and she had been made to feel that before. It was the day Bernice took her cousins to the lake for a swim. They were visiting, that’s why she did something out of the norm. That was why she was fined a tidy sum, threatened with arrest, and watched her cousins shrink under the eye of Lake Oswego police. She didn’t know: Oswego Lake can only be accessed by Lake Oswego residents. She saw the white kids go in right next to them. She hadn’t seen the metal plate drilled into the cement leading down to the water. Paid for and managed by the Lake Oswego Corp. It read, “Private Lake: Please stay on the Steps.”

*Will they remember us when the supply chain breaks down?.. NPR has got me heated today—and why am I in charge of that whiny cat? But hey girl, you should slow down ‘round here. Is this when onliness turns into hypervisibility?* This part of Portland, suburban sprawl is empty without their children. Bernice was in trespass, the way the Pacific Northwest nonthreats always pass: everywhere outnumbered all at once.

“nMnmssph nmph... Meeou”... Radio goes on and on into the night. I don’t. I would begin to care if that would grant me a meal. I will agree or disagree with anyone on the NPR for a bowl of food, any kind of food. I’m here in need. Nutrish® please and I’ll believe anything. The fate of the world: that’s what The Boss and for different reasons, her co-parent with far-less power were concerned with before they left. And then—that unpopular lady called the Governor said, the state stays shutdown. Which offered the main family unit—of which I thought I was a part—an excuse for a prolonged ‘spring break, off the grid’.

I did not think this could happen since *he* doesn't live here anymore. And then there was Bernice here all the time. I admit, there were benefits: When the new lady friend started sleeping over, I noticed The Boss seemed happier. After they roll around, and this works well for me—Bernice doesn’t fidget in her sleep the way co-parent with far-less-power did—meeoOW! That nook between all those legs in our bed was my warm place again. And *now* it has been *three* days since she stopped coming. Bernice left the radio on in the living room and that has me worried because radio says her ‘preexisting condition,’ which I understand is permanent, could kill her. Hombre is hungry, “Mmeuwe...”

...Once when I was delirious, you know from the drugs after my surgery. On our way home, The Boss made a stop, I didn’t mind. There were aisles of packages, the beautiful full ones that make it clear, we’re all fine here. It was my only visit to ‘*the store.*’ They say, ‘the store,’

with such nonchalance as if a visit to a building full of abundance was a simple spectacle—less than a delicious vision. There I am, and there is no easy way to lay in a plastic cage while high. The boss lady is pushing me along in some noisy rolling contraption. We're moving past endless stacks of boxes, girthy packages shiny with possibility. *They could be "treats" or a bed made of catnip or rain kibble—make it rain.* Had the space been larger between the bars, I could have "Swap!" batted one open with my claw skills, just to see its insides scatter on the floor. I would it forever and again, a swing at joy!

That is my-most-vivid-fantasy, but it is of no use. Alas, it now obeys as all my other thoughts do, in service of my hunger. This brings me back to my main focus, that meter of porch space I can see on the other side of the door. I wait; in gray stripes alternating white and brown swirls fanned out on the heated tiles of the foyer; with my black lopsided tabby-M reflecting twice from the tile and the glass in the door; as though *my* Bernice with canned tuna will arrive any minute. I know how to wait in exactly the same place for as long as that takes. Day three is about to expire and no sign of the very tall Black woman. I'm so hungry I could roar. That is *my* preexisting condition.

"In other news: The Masked Bandit, 42-year-old Vladislav Drozdek, was arrested today for trying to sell stolen N95 masks in Beaverton, Oregon. He allegedly stole the masks from The ReBuilding Center, a construction and sustainability nonprofit in Portland, which had been making the masks to send to local hospitals to help tackle the coronavirus pandemic. Law enforcement has confirmed between 20 and 25 cases were stolen, totaling more than 10,000 masks, incidentally—found in his car. The day after the theft, an

employee of the nonprofit saw his Craigslist post. To which she responded and set up the meeting that led to his arrest.”

COVID lockdown Driving (that day) into the outlying areas of southwest Portland was unusually easy. For Bernice, it was also like driving into a bucolic landscape, framed by a city, the foreground an eerily empty exceptional green. Bernice had time to notice, *what a pretty metropolis*, prettier still on lockdown. *I guarantee that man in the Whitehouse has no respect for this virus or anyone else—He-jus’ tryin’ to cash in... Oregon crazies are throwing anti-lockdown parties in National forests—coming out of the trees with AR-15s scaring brown hikers off the land they think belongs only to them. This whole societal breakdown has become an opportunity, for some of them—to be exactly who they are.*

My Lizzy and their Peggy are the same age. They were supposed to attend school together. The backyards between our houses didn’t used to have a fence between them. That happened after the “Welcome to Harmony Hills” cul de sac barbecue. Right after the conservatives moved in. The sac assumed the two small families would have made fast friends, cozy neighbors. It’s been six summers since that fence went up. That was the last time “all-knowing republican dad” (that’s what she calls him?) and The Boss’s co-parent with far-less power, spoke: over property lines.

Right before that mess, I arrived in this progressive home. The people I was with before went away one day while I was eating a can of tuna in the backyard; they drove off in a big truck. I waited until I was starving. Then I decided to walk the center fence dividing the backyards. Landing far from home, I walked down a small dead-end hill and into Lizzy. I did some figure eights ‘round her legs—that’s what works on little girls. Within a week I was fed

regularly, wet food nested inside a timely opened garage. After the co-parent with far-less power moved out, I got a cat door. Now I'm called "Lizzy's emotional support animal."

I like progressives. I think. But they worry me when they worry so much when they try to leave town. This time they were frantic, expecting correctly their Governor would call for a shutdown, of all "non-essential businesses". They called themselves "essential workers," I guess that meant they didn't have to work anymore. *But they were also essential for me.* Then the Governor decreed a second and more expansive "stay-at-home order." I learned later that, conservatives around here were very angry about this. But my family felt, "we need to get out of here before the crazies storm the capital."

They were acting like "the store" would stay closed forever—all of them—but for how long? The Boss decided to invite her co-parent with far-less power out to the cabin, instead of her new lady friend. She did this, it seemed to me, to show that her parents were on team Lizzy. This created a storm of packing and arguments. Then they forgot *their* Hombre. But they remembered to take *my* food. I can picture Lizzy after they arrived asking, "Where's Hombre?" She would never forget me if she had a choice.

Next, The Boss had to call in her boss 'lady friend' to save the day. She started coming over regularly, to fill my bowl and crack a can of wet food. After two weeks, the situation for Bernice, my savior, must have changed... In the time we spent together feeding me, I gathered that her mother was not in Portland where she lived. She had contracted that virus; she was uninsured; living in a problematic long-term care facility. Her daughter said, "That's your fault 'cause you didn't vote for Bernie." Who is Bernie? I heard them another time on the phone louder than the radio: her mother telling Bernice, "Biden never pretended to walk the walk

nowhere with Brother Martin, like your Bernie. Mr. Vice President will have my vote in May.”  
Then that was the last day I saw her (is Martin Bernie’s or Biden’s brother?)

I should mention that on my third day without a visitor bringing food, I tried something new. An activity I’d seen more ambitious cats do. I attempted to feed myself by catching a dirty rat feather: those common birds with green sheen around their neck. After that failure, I sat on the counter in front of the side wall of the catfood cupboard. From inside I caught whiffs of the new food in shiny unfamiliar packaging. Hard salty crumbles I don’t particularly like. But that Black woman is still my favorite if she would only come back. I need her to come back, there is a can of tuna open in the fridge, and I can smell it.

“In COVID news: Nearly half of mothers with children under the age of 12 report food insecurity since the pandemic started; as Republicans have moved to block proposals to expand access to food stamps”; “This — is — going to-go-away, without a vaccine... we’re not going to see it again”; “The U.S. death toll passes 80,000”; “Giant Murder Hornets have been reported in the Pacific Northwest, which could decimate domestic bee populations.”

Bernice shifted her thoughts, then let them drown in the recursive news cycle she never turned off. She was making moves in her mind on the ride into the city. Bernice was thinking through a back door plan to best the healthcare industry. “That soulless for-profit institution,” her mother said, “has been trying to kill me my whole life.” *My bucket handles this highway like a boss—out of my way Subaru!* She felt one with her car, an in control fever few on the highway. *If I can find*

*a means to hoodwink the administrators at one of these nice nursing homes, she will be safe for a while. As well-to-do parent-children move their loved ones out, I will slip my mother in.*

The opulent dwellings she passed were familiar yet absent, though they should be pregnant with people. Home for the privileged was now a womb filled with idle/restlessness. *I'll get her in through the backdoor if I have to...* Bernice was a daughter who knew how to come with aid. A Doctor of Nursing Practice, specializing in Care Work (rootwork), ready to wrestle the healthcare industry into submission. Bernice would not stop until she found a room with a ventilator and 24-hour care—even if only for a few weeks. That would give her time for a new plan. *And surely she, my lover lady friend—sitting fat at her cabin hiding out—will be back for her cat sometime soon. As white-class successful children take their parents home, accidentally, they've made a temporary space for others. Once they've been moved, the new COVID rules apply: residents are not welcome to return without testing and quarantine....*

Still waiting.

Dreams. On my fourth morning without food, I awoke standing stiff. The dream started with me floating. Floating parallel to the counter flat on my back gliding past my favorite dried cat food. It was sitting there on the counter asking for it. *Joy is approximate to food.* I slashed and missed; this spun me around. With each turn, I frantically reached toward desire. Again I slashed and slashed. Finally, I'd done it, that fantastic thing I imagined like a dream: that hazy trip to the groovy grocery store. A shower of delicious dried food came flooding down from the glossy beached pinata.

Kibble like rain.

Wait, why was I still suspended? I wanted the ground under that waterfall of chow, you know, bathe in my bounty. Better still, on my descent, the refrigerator door uncannily swung ajar, thus revealed—sitting on the bottom shelf alone, a wide-open can of tuna dazzling in refrigerated light. I, *had finally landed*. Food, miraculous food was all around me. What can be described as more than joy?.. Unexpectedly, right above, coming into view over the eggs, a vaguely discernable head loomed there ominously.

As I tried to get away—a futile scrambling on marble pellets of my favorite catfood, fanned out like a great confetti conceit (I was frantically running and not going anywhere); the kitchen light revealed details grotesque, an unfinished head. It looked rather like a dog. The fridge door began to close, I could see the outer edge of a body trapped in metamorphosis. At the end of a long phantasmagoric guttural growl that sputtered into a cough—like the thing was trying to say something—half lipped, the half-dog man fell edging the fridge door to close on me, and all the chicken of the sea. The figure loomed for a moment, betraying an absence of purpose. I was still running with my stare frozen as it lingered there on its hind legs looking unfinished and sick. The thing had me cornered, I tried to run; what was I slipping on? It was like trying to run on the marbles from television. The creature moved further into the kitchen without using its legs. The dog/man thing could now float. Inexplicably, the creature began falling forward so delicately at first, quiet like a board. The dog/man wheezed as he fell, attempting to push out a word from the dog or the man part of his face, it sputtered—just before it crashed and smothered me, the word came, “Phhaamdphееemic...”

That’s when I bolted onto four paws of full consciousness.

Another tragic experience. What I assumed would be my ritual dream until I starved to death. Not paying attention, I wandered toward the neighbor's yard. The rat feathers scattered; I barely noticed. I couldn't tell if having a worse feeling was better than being hungry. A good cat-nap-nightmare has its upside. But wait. Is that the sound of Peggy singing? (That's Lizzy's little republican friend!) She was drawing with chalk outside their sliding glass door. When she saw me she dropped everything. Already on her knees in play mode, Peggy called to me. I came, and she hugged us into delirium. Quickly realizing the full situation, we made mischief; Peggy broke the rules and brought me, her new kitty inside. There in the kitchen, listening for the mouthwatering pop wet-cat-food makes, I completed no less than ten figure eights around Peggy's legs.

Subject: Male cat approximately 6 years old.

Breed: Tabby

Name: Hombre or Hambre

Not skeletal but thin, healthy coat.

Thursday, April 9th, 11:09 A.M.

Peggy brought the cat inside around 9 a.m. He belongs to our neighbors. It's unclear how long they were together before I intervened. He seems to be content since we separated them. Hambre can be observed with any computer in the house (The basement pandemic camera is always on; if we blackout it switches to batteries going infrared when there is movement.) For now, we drop dry food down the laundry shoot. While the cat is distracted we put wet food out too, on the basement steps.

Hambre has been eating ravenously since we took him in. However, he won't eat canned tuna, very odd, he seems to be afraid of it. We have some dry and old cans of wet food from my sister's last visit. That was lucky—we don't like the store. The neighbors have not returned, it's been 17 days; the Black woman has not been seen in four. It looks like she was the one feeding him—now it is up to us.

“The \$1200 stimulus checks are in the mail—with the President's signature on the envelope.”  
*And what good what that do for me or my mother?* “The President said today that he will end funding to the World Health Organization.” *I work full time and my mother hasn't worked in a long minute, we wouldn't get shit.* “Towns from Washington state to Indiana have seen armed groups begin patrolling the streets after rumors spread on social media about an Antifa invasion;” Bernice had found a target facility. She had to double back towards the lake—Altrua Adult Care was the ticket, however, back in Lake Oswego. *As the COVID deaths soar in care facilities, people of color are on the frontline. Why do I repeat death language information, in my head,* There were friends Bernice reached out to. One, a Kalapuya colleague from OHSU had called her back on a favor—there were 16 vacant rooms. Four with lakefront views—it was truly the longest Thursday she'd ever spent in her car—Bernice intended to capitalize. *At least for a time, my mother will be safe and cared for by a lake she is not allowed to swim in (or is she?)...*

Friday, April 10th, 7:00 A.M.

Research: can an indoor, outdoor, or any cat spread the virus? Unlikely, but nobody knows for sure. Quarantine has been sufficiently long. Peggy stayed up until late watching “Hombre”—

she's becoming attached. We will let him out at the 24-hour mark. Just to be safe, he will not be allowed outside in case of possible contact with the contagious.

Friday, April 10th, 9:00 P.M.

It is finally 9 A.M. and my family still shows no sign of illness (it would be too soon to know and too late anyway, I realize that); Peggy is happy.

Saturday, April 11th, 10:00 am.

The progressives have come back; Leona, my wife, has delivered a note through the mailslot between the glass panels in their obnoxious front door. We are awaiting a response.

Saturday, April 11th, 1:25 pm.

Progressive ex-husband guy delivered a note to our porch just before he drove off with his gear.

As follows:

*Neighbor,*

*Thank you for looking after Hombre. We will leave the garage door open. Could you put him inside and hit the button on the right as you go out? He needs to be quarantined.*

*Neighbor*

2:30 p.m., we are giving Peggy a few hours to say goodbye. We are worried about separation anxiety. Neither my Leona nor I like cats... now we are considering one.

5:00 p.m. I am watching as Leona and Peggy walk Hombre around the cul de sac bend. As they approach the driveway towards the open garage, Hombre seems to notice the Subaru has returned. He suddenly started to scramble, slithering free of Peggy's grasp. Hombre ran to the back behind the house. I assume to his cat door. Peggy looked stunned, a cat's version of the Irish goodbye...

*The things we do for our neighbors.*

## Andre

The Bread Man: his name was like a Troy or maybe a Todd. He showed up on weekdays. He was tall, reddish-haired and congenial. Good with kids—as I was a kid then and never minded him, that makes me think he had that gift—it's unclear—he might have had kids too. Todd or Troy would park in front of our house, in a Cutlass-like American convertible. Red and it mostly matched the burnt brown of his very 80s suit. He always wore a suit for his irregular and frequent visits. When he got out of the car—and we knew he was coming—(I'm going with Ken now) Ken slung a sack of store-bought bread over his shoulder. We're talkin' Roman Meal, Home Pride, Wonder Bread, Webbers brown and white, all the ones with spell—binding preservatives.. Straight-up basic-ass bread from the grocery store. Ken shut his long red car door and sauntered like he had always lived on the sunnyside, right up to our front porch.

In Long Beach, California we have a long sectioned set of parks meekly green, flat sprawling spaces for a few miles, separated by long wide Southern California streets. El Dorado Park sports a fairly large duck pond: A popular place to take a walk around a man-made lake cushioned by false sense of nature. We could not consume ten loaves of shitty store-bought bread in a week or even three. When Ken dropped his bag of bags of bread, there was a kinda Christmas vibe. No matter how much bread man bread we already had... Before they aged out, or got moldy, my father had a system: the slices fit neatly into standard single-size lunch bags, drying out on top of the fridge, where they would become their true purpose. The overabundance prompted a 'family' trip to the Duck Pond. (This is where my stepmother Wanda took over.)

Ken would come up to the door and say hello, “Is Big Gray around somewhere?” My little brothers were bread sluts like they were autistic, needy for easy squishy foodstuffs—so Ken was cool, almost famous (maybe they remember). Condition normal; when he showed up it wasn’t a huge event but things were about to happen. My dad would come around; he and Ken would go out to the Cutlass and fetch a large cabin trunk. Not the old-school version that could have made the trip out west with pioneers. This was a new-school packer—still black, but with cheap-looking brass; a functional simulacrum of straps, slats, edge clamps, corner bumpers, and drawbolts that trussed a classic steamer class chest. Essentially, it was the trunk an 80s parent buys as a cheap thing their kid *will* abuse.

A family trip to the Duck Pond looked like this: my stepbrother, Mark, with a bleached skater-flop (naturally blondish, older than me by 14 months, and a full-size larger); my little brothers (who were probably between four and six years old, mostly white like Mark vaguely Japanese); and me (mocha brown with good-curly-hair). We would pile into Wanda’s white boxy Honda, Accord, several brown bags of stale shitty store-bought bread making bread crumbs in our laps... The Duck Pond was gross. There are still, and since before I was aware, a *massive* amount of ducks there all year. In addition, local flying birds sit and shit the rocks white that hide the pipe for the ersatz geyser set to a timer sticking out of the pond. Bird shit is constantly on the move and completely inundates the water.

[I haven’t asked my *other* little brother yet, but the one six years younger, the senior of the two and eleven months older, barely remembers the Bread Man—but he does remember the bread.]

The trunk would go straight upstairs; they came back down to hole up in Dad’s office. We all knew we were not to disturb them. After an hour with the door locked, Ken was off. For

the next week, green bucolic aromas were the incense aroma we broke and toasted bread. Ken todd was this man who came over. Recently I learned in 2 minute phone call with father, that hughes, he was the son of a bread distributor based in Cypress; he wanted to make more money. in thought (or maybe were taught) was funky cut grass. After the right amount of days, Ken comes back with another smaller sack, of sacks of bread. The trunk would go back to his car. This time the two-person board meeting was brief. And now we had even more—*way* too much bread.

The larger park complex also boasts a nature center. Town fathers of old did a fair job of preserving some likeness of ‘Long Beach’; without suburban sprawl, colonization, and the genocide of indigenous tribes: the Gabrielino/Tongva/Kizh and Acjachemen/Juaneno. One of the park rangers explained to me that these white ducks “don’t belong here”—and they are “too fat to fly which is one of the reasons why they are here twelve months of the year.” Most interesting to me, these enormous white ducks are *the* Pekin ducks, used for Peking duck: an American breed grown for meat, derived from ducks brought from China in the 19th century. The other most often nonflying fowl found at the pond is the Muscovy: long-necked with variable dark and light plumage, and red warty skin on their cheeks and face. The reason *some* of these most obese meat ducks are at the pond, mixed in with several other species (both migratory and domestic), comes down to the demands of Chinese restaurants. That at least explains the Pekin.

Some days it was all a game: we made the family trip to the Duck Pond, and this time, two Pekin ducks followed us back to Wanda’s Honda. (My stepmom did not enjoy my company, for her boys she was the fun parent... I only wanted some sum of them, to be nice.) With our help, the ducks were hustled—willingly —into the car. Back home Dad played his

veto, overruled by family edict, and he truly didn't care... About the ducks... at the beginning of their week's stay, they seemed to be loving life in our backyard. The kiddie pool was out 24-7—lots of Bread Man bread. Before we managed to name them, one of the two had fallen listless—distinctly melancholic.

During these years my stepbrother Mark and I on rare occasions worked together. We had eyes and ears, divergently formed curiosities. We shared a kind of parentage marriage. On some afternoons, our parents started happy hour early at the happy hour spot. Though we could dig that we had been thoroughly warned, “Do not ever go upstairs unless you are asked.” We decided anyway to solve the weird grass smell coming from upstairs: The ceiling fan centered over the landing was in reverse; Bread Man had stopped by; and the grass smelled uncommonly strong. Did they think their system was working and we couldn't smell it?

Zack was outside, Mark was babysitting, and we had scissors. Once outside the spare half-bath, our nostril hairs tingled. Marcus and I knew what we were doing—locking myself in bathrooms when Marcus was trying to kick my ass, for no reason, was my thing. It was a cinch to get in. Standing in the center was an industrial-sized white trash can, the same one the Yard Doctor Tree Service used—my father's side biz. Through the bottom edge sealed with caulk, there was a power cord poking out, snaking up to the plug above the sink. When we lifted the lid we got blasted, wet zests of sticky green perfume. Inside, above a small pneumatic contraption in a tray of liquid, a baby bear-sized pile of weed; suspended in a netting that might work for small medium-sized fish. Somebody was getting paid.

After a week, we decided to bring the two giant ducks back to their intergenerational home (epigenetic trauma aside)—the Duck Pond: touching ground on home turf, they ran with semi-useless wings pushing headlong into a gaggle of their friends near shore. The ducks we thought were the ones we'd brought back played and seemed to talk with their buddies. The gaggle came by for some stale store-bought bread. We believed we had done the right thing. The bread bags empty we headed back to the car. Wanda reversed out of our spot facing the pond. Rowing backward so we could turn away; simultaneously, the duck that would soon be known as Andre flapped across the water, the narrow space of grass between, and stationed himself in front of our car... A few of us got out. He walked over like he was Howard the Duck making big life choices. Our new friend Duck walked past us, and sloppily jump-flopped onto the floor in the back seat... magically, and intentionally really, we got a new pet.

Hence, Andre joined 'Dad's Menagerie of Bought Wayward Pets.' There was the octopus that had eaten *everything* in our fish tank: a pair of seahorses; a pufferfish; my favorite, the beautiful jackknife fish; a tribe of ornate goldfish; the supply of guppies the octopus was *supposed to eat*; and the neon tetras too. He eviscerated everything except this black eel that lived in this skull at the bottom of the tank... Snack after school was the thing too look forward to—across the dining table, eating microwave burritos, there were games afoot in the fishtank. My father's marine death match arena—watching the octopus harass his cellmates. Between the five minutes it took to heat last night's rice with instant miso soup... the tank went ink black. Hours later, on one side of dinner. The water cleared enough so we could see: his octopus floating just under the surface missing a piece of his face.

The nature center ranger told me ten years ago that random meat ducks are dropped off in ponds when they don't sell as ducklings around Easter (suburban problems?). I have never heard of this. These ones, the Pekins of the El Dorado Park Duck Pond magically appeared one morning, full-grown. This happened before the Ranger's time, he said, "You know, in the early 80s." Before the main 'Mad Pekings', the duck suppliers went out of business. Recently, the latest generation of meat pond ducks are a problem. News anchor confirmed, fifty of them cannot fly. This would not be so serious if the pond wasn't undergoing renovation and slated to be drained. As the local group of elderly white women volunteers tasked with catching these fifty ducks have said emphatically, "When the fence goes up... the flightless birds will not be able to get out and they will die." The killer they believe, would be urban-nane coyotes coming seeking a more certain safety from wilderness. I think it has to do with all the bread, man.

Twice a year, Dad bought "house geckos." On occasion, we watched the natural attrition of praying mantises... then he put the survivors into the garden. We had an African Grey parrot named Budgie who hardly talked. (Budgie was short for *budgie smuggler*. And that refers to: "A jocular reference to a (white) man's tight-fitting swimming costume or swimsuit appearing as if he has a budgerigar concealed inside it, i.e. his bulging genitals." Budgerigars are parakeets.) African Greys are supposed to be the smartest parrots in the world; capable of learning over 1,000 words, speaking them in context. There was also a cat named Monty. He came home for a week or a month at a time—until he didn't; lastly, two small dogs. Doc was short for dachshund, and Eisha (Doc's son from across the street, our neighbor made us take one of the pups), which somehow we were made to believe was the word for dachshund in Japanese... So the question stands, why not at first, Wanda's duck.

Andre loved our block, posting up on the nearby corner by a drain where water collected enough to draw in small birds. He liked to go down there, especially in the morning—to scare the little birds away, running at them with “flap-squawk flap-squawk” splash. Andre owned the mini bathing pond by the corner curb. Every house had a small lawn out front. Andre had free reign. Our neighbors either liked or tolerated our new addition. He usually slept in the backyard. If somehow he got trapped in the front, behind the gate, Andre would flap and quack until a passerby or one of us in the house came to open it. His best trait, and the thing that never got old, was his obsession with shoestrings. But he would only go after them when they were tied and on your feet. We even bought him a pair of cheap bathroom Payless Shoes one year for Christmas. He ignored them, moving along to do his thing on his block. The best was this daily old couple taking their walk. Andre would see them coming (some people never figured it out); all he wanted was to peck at your shoelaces until they were untied. Even if you re-tied them right in front of him he would leave you alone—job done. But when you tried to avoid him altogether, the situation became comical. Daily, Andre would accost this couple to their mild annoyance. Every time they passed, he plodded along as they outpaced him. After they turned the corner, he stopped like there was a forcefield at each corner of our block (our house, never out of sight).

In that same season, upon reaching home after school one day, I noticed these two younger kids looking into my yard from over the fence. As I approached they told me that Andre was sick. Looking into the yard, there was Andre, backing up and then walking into the corner of our fence (the cycle was on repeat). Wanda came out and said Andre was poisoned by some idiot down the street. Some old Oakey red-necked dude. He drained his radiator fluid into the gutter. That morning, Wanda came out to find Andre down the street in a neighbor's yard standing around like he had forgotten his purpose. She figured out that there was a slick of that

fluid mixed in with the puddle at the end of our block. I went to investigate myself. It was an obvious toxic green, now moving with water from a neighbor's sprinklers.

Rewind to the weekend before; after playing a soccer tournament, I was on the couch. My legs were buzzing with lactic acid. On TV was one of the Chuck Norris “Missing In Action” films. The flick struck for one scene only: the first or second Black man to die was poisoned. He had been taken in by the Vietcong ‘warden’ of the POW camp. He was being abused—first as a coconspirator against, it was the 80s unclear, and second, because they made him a ‘house N.’ (the Viet leader watched bootlegs of American TV, and movies. He loved that shit). When they threw him back in with Norris and his platoon, he was very sick. Norris, in his infinite white commando command of the situation, said they needed to walk him around fast and flood this soldier with fluid, it might flush the poison out.

To save Andre I knew what to do. The rest of them had given in. I walked him awkwardly into the backyard as the two younger kids looked on. Inside the house, a shallow bowl with water milk and stale bread crumbs from slices dying atop our fridge. Andre was tucked in the bushes at the edge of the backyard (I’m sure he was trying, too...) His head was flopping over into the bowl. Scooting around on my knees at intervals, we walked together, I kept his head up. Until almost nine o'clock, he was still moveable, walkable, and *not going to die... That other duck, the one who wanted to go back*. They called me in to eat and then left me alone. Soon after nine, Andre stopped being able to use his legs. A sick body wanting volition, Andre, I was sure, was desperate not to give up on himself. We sat together, he was in my lap. His white feathery soft warm alien heavy body, this cool ass duck; a human potion poisoned the gutter, stealing his night of infinite resignation. His body slowed down, and then, he let go.

My father, ardently, wanted to stuff Andre. Then place the *taxidermy* above the TV stand with shoe strings dangling out of his mouth. Wanda, playing representative for the rest of us, vetoed that idea. He was buried under the plum tree I leaned against as he died. The tree is no longer standing. My father lost the fight with stepmother. He wanted to stuff him, no—sit a taxidermy Andre on display with shoe strings hanging out of his orange beak. My dad didn't get it. Andre loved most to untie the strings that laced a shoe together. What a cool duck.

## The Fish Fry

Two years after Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant made the move to the Lakers, my stepmother, Wanda, became one of their flight attendants. Carnival Airlines was chartered to fly several Western Conference teams between select destinations for games. The most salient anecdotes she related from inflight with the NBA are as follows: the press and announcers drank like fish while they gambled with some of the players; Kobe and Shaq rarely spoke; Kobe was exceptionally polite; Carl Malone is a weirdo; and at this time, Shaquille preferred petite Asian women, to the physiognomic wonderment of his team. (Wanda is half-Japanese and felt the need to relay this through my Lakers-obsessed youngest brother Zack, 13). She was one of the last hires for Carnival and, just before they ceased operations, Wanda cashed in on her benefits: a “family trip” to the Bahamas.

At the end of days for the airline, the Bahamas was the only interesting place worth flying to from their hub in Miami. Like with all family trips, there is a member who feels strongly about “how much fun it will be to travel together.” That was Wanda. My father held different views. This was a high-profile return for me re-entering the family—coaching your little brothers in soccer with your father can open space for temporary peace. After spending a long day at LAX, six of us made it on standby with Carnival’s partner *Pan Am* (also on their death throws). From Miami, we boarded a puddle jumper so loud my father couldn’t hear the rest of us; these were the days when packing nip bottles in your pockets was expected; he’d found his peace, and he had his quiet.

Nassau International Airport customs were too easy—September 11th was a few years away yet. Leading the pack, Zack had already met the official cultural liaison—a Black man

offering free rum. Gray or “Graysie,” 14, was down two shots already—quieter and more book-oriented than his brother. Music from the welcome hut sailed island vibes washing over us. Little Gray was playing catchup as he tried to get the man's attention, over Zack's strategic talent for ingratiating himself, and my stepbrother Mark, who was 22 (he had 14 months on me), and his *need* for drink generally. Mark asked for a triple. The Welcome To The Bahamas ambassador had nothing to lose. His job was to smile and pour as much rum as you liked—Mark drained three poly-thimble shots of rum: white, spiced, and coconut.

“Do you buis’ wanna try the extra dayk one... or the aeegged rum... evry-ting’ is better in The Bahamas.”

“Yah bui, I’ll drink them all, keep em coming.” Mark had no shame in jumping right in with the man offering drinks.

He was a behemoth, it was hard to see where the quarter Japanese was. The parents approached—their mother Wanda wanted to join the party. After a flight with nips, there was no way of telling my father's mood yet. He was the one not in a rush, and like us, was not one to refuse free hospitality. The airport welcome hut was working. We left our troubles on the mainland, *offed* them with local “kill devil,” rum’s first onomastic: wards off the bad juju on the inside. Another accurate and prophetic name comes from the English, “rumbullion,” meaning a great uproar or tumult. That sounded about right for us. We were all ready to outpace the royal “tots” of rum issued to every sailor in the British Navy at “six bells” (11 a.m.)—until 1970.

The lesson here being that none of us knew how to turn down free booze. We needed a ride to our hotel, and we were right on time for “tots,” but would our luck continue? Jesus was outside waiting for us, in a finely aged jaguar limousine: the king of kings’ son—incognito on a side hustle and Blacker than a hard-backed bible (a bush mechanic too). Jesus would prove to be

the one man in Nassau that could keep this family together; at least until the fish fry... Rum, in The Bahamas, can change your luck.

This was the first time we had been anywhere where *they* were outnumbered by people of African descent, *my* people. That was new to me too. It was my first time in the Caribbean, and near enough to where my mother came from. For them, their status in The Bahamas seemed fungible for what they enjoyed in the States. The hotel staff and nearly everyone they encountered treated them with an obsequiousness similar to the timid deference Blacks treat whites with in South Africa. But there was never enough rum for me to shake off the questioning stares. This is the repeated theme of my life when out with my family: it was always clear when the waitress was going to fuck up our order because she couldn't figure out how we fit together (that was on me). Yes, it happened in The Bahamas with Black waitresses too (this was sad and uncomfortable), but the white ones back home were impossible to forgive.

Dinner was uneventful. Father was tired and drank steadily—Wanda strayed for an extra glass of buttery Chardonnay at the bar. Little brothers went upstairs to their TV—Marcus, with me in tow, went looking for trouble. We explored the hotel bars counting six, including the two satellite tiki huts on the beach. The game was – how to spread out our orders. The trick was – to use new rooms every day for our bar tabs, switching them around for every bar. Then we might drink free for the whole trip. Like the pirates who once ruled there, and as Jesus would explain the next morning: we don't turn water into wine in The Bahamas... we pour rum into the water it keeps the water from spoiling. We took an extra “rum ration” and went to bed.

Just like at the airport, he was there on time unasked for. Sitting beyond the steps curving ‘round the turnabout encircling the fountain, thank god, *Jesus is even more patient than we are sinful*. We shall see.

“Was *goin* on?”

“Good morning Jesus, can you take us for a drive around the island?”

“Yes Mr. Gray, it’s not a big island—maybe two hours.” When Jesus spoke pure, he licked the creole casually.

“Can we go and check out the surf?” At the time, Wanda was still a ranked surfer in the WISA circuit (Woman’s International Surf Association).

“Yah bui, Master Zack, but there ain no surfing on Nassau, you have to take a boat over to Eleuthera, one of the outer Islands...

“Damn, that sounds far.” This wasn’t a surf trip, but we were all curious. “Aye, you jam up back there?”

“We’re all good Jesus.” Gray looked at Zack unclear how his brother always knows what's up.

“So wait, can anyone be called a bui?” Good question.

“Yes Master Gray, bui is like dude or with Black Americans, Nigga.”

“So I’m a bui too... but I don’t like the N-word. How would you call a woman?”

“Da woman is just da woman, bui is for anyone.”

“All right, I’m, *Da Woman* yeah!—okay Jesus, let's go see the other side of the Island.”

The Bloody Marys were working.

“You can be the biggety one, Miss Wanda.”

We made it through a part of town where the people were busy with daily things. A mix of old colonials' square and proper; colorful clapboard houses close together; and modern villas filled with tall glass windows, owned by foreigners and sitting close to the sea. Before we got out in the country, Wanda agreed with me that we should pick up some rum and sodas. Jesus

suggested a stop at a shop down the road. He said a “Conchy Joe” was the owner. They sent me in with the money, a white man stood behind the counter. He spoke Creole like he had been born there—and so had his grandfather. Wanda was leaning out of the window yelling for me to get ginger ale. Conchy Joe went out to the porch to see who was calling. Watching my Asian stepmother, from over his shoulder still staring, he said, “Yah some Hoity toity bui, das a wibe crabby hangin’ out dat window.” Jesus explained as we spilled rum and warm soda into our cups, Conchy Joe thought I was a rich man with a nice woman in the car. That sounded like the sanitized version (crabby = vagina).

It was clear we were heading away from downtown, and yet, there wasn’t a whole lot to see at first. After an hour of drinking and looping the island, we found Jaws Beach. The main cove had a short jetty of rocks, protecting an inland channel. There was a sandy beach to one side—undeveloped and peaceful with a desolate kind of beauty. This was the spot for a little sojourn. It was named after the scene in *Jaws* where the two old guys, shark fishing on the pier, have a close run-in with the Jaws and nearly get eaten. The pier was long gone, but the Pilings are still stranded there offering perspective between the island and the sea. Jesus kicked back in the car while the six of us went off in age-appropriate pairs to explore the beach and peninsula. My Dad seemed amused and annoyed that Wanda was already playfully buzzed. It was only 1 pm—we were all buzzed—Mark was far ahead and Dad was way behind. My money was on Mark, a happy drunk most of the time.

“I’m not a fan of rum. I’m ready for a beer and some lunch. Jesus, where do local Bahamanians eat? We like seafood.”

“You want... I should take you to the Fish Fry?”

“Is that where you would eat?”

“When I don’t go home to my wife.”

“Then you should take us there. Jason, bring the boys back to the car, and where's Mark?”

Imperceptibly, except for me, the mood was starting to change. Dad, for some reason, didn’t like it when Wanda was having too much fun. Back then, he also had no patience for Marcus when he was starting to get wasted (Dad knew what was coming). Little brothers on an island beach are easy to find, and that was not a problem. But Mark was off somewhere unseen... There were some Americans around the bend past the point, Mark had found them and their guitar. He’s even better when he’s drunk and he was very good already. Mark was killing it on *hit*, and hard to pull away. My Dad had pissed him off earlier, dogging him repeatedly over his drinking habits back home. (Basically, Marcus, since freshman year, has been very very drunk.) Spitefully, he filled up a giant glass of rum (so that’s where it all went) and found his way to these random people—they had given him beer as they sang along. (At this point in life, that was his main social currency.) It was now 2:30, and Dad was noticeably put out as we approached. This wasn’t good, *I* was usually his actual target.

Back in the car, Wanda was trying to find Bahamian music, “Da woman wants to dance, can we go dancing?” The boys were being silly almost getting along for once, buzzing out the window hair flying and off my dad’s radar at the same time—to be so lucky! I was trying to help Wanda find a station as my Dad started to lay into Mark. When I found some music and Wanda got up and into the sunroof, my father’s focus changed. It was now my fault because I’d suggested we get rum and decided to get two bottles—spending his money—why didn’t I use my own money?

“I thought Wanda had paid for it,” Jesus almost looked concerned; not yet.

“And last night... you are so ungrateful. You had to order a bottle of wine for everyone at dinner. Wine that only you would like. You couldn’t just order by the glass like everyone else.”

“Well, I didn’t even drink that wine Gray, I had beer.” I could tell he was in the zone now, and still, there was a long way to go.

“Leave them alone Gray” Wanda was calling down for a different song. The boys were playing dumb—smart.

Wanda sat back down in the car, we were close.

“But yeah Jason, you were the only one drinking it.”

“I thought it would go well with the whole fish we ordered”

“You always want something different, your father’s right, you could have ordered by the glass.”

“Awe come on Mom, leave Jay alone, he works in fancy restaurants. He fancy now.”

*Thanks, Mark... not helping.*

Dad went at me until we pulled into a lot full of Black and brown locals. Shanties with corrugated roofs were lined up wall to wall. Ten of them with their backs exposed to the old pirate bay leading out to the cerulean sea. Outnumbered, my father decided to focus on where to eat. Jesus wanted some of his money upfront for the tour so far. The boys suddenly realized they were starving too. The smell of fried fish and the sounds of pounded conch had their way with us—things calmed down. My Dad got his beer. Wanda was talking to local women about their dresses and hair. There was no way for me to melt in somewhere. I am too light, I looked too American.

The shacks ran with a two-man crew, less often the cook was a woman. A fryer to the left, a small grill in the middle towards the back, a cutting board just under the standing bar with

tubs of ingredients, next to small sauce buckets flagged with labels. The other one works in the background, going out to catch and clean fish or crack, pull, and then pound conch into compliance for frying or Bahamian Conch Salad. I didn't know if they had conch on my island. I expected they did. At this point, all I knew is that I should know how to do what they were doing so naturally. And, that my drunk-ish mostly white family had picked a Fish Fry shake to try; and I am with them, surrounded by other people who look more like me.

There is no doubt, the food was very good. We were sated and still sipping. On his third beer, Dad didn't remind us he was the one paying. Mark was trying to convince me that I would be the best person to find a guy with weed. *Why couldn't he try?* My dad got interested since he was the expert on trafficking. He went out into the fray in the full armor of privilege. Within ten minutes he was back with a man following close behind.

“This guy says if you go with him he can get you some ‘Thai Stick’” That stuff is legendary!”

Mark was like, “Fuck it, I'm down.” I said I'd go with.

Nobody knows the real history of Thai Stick. Every once in a while, even *High Times* will put out an article reveling in its potent mystery. It came into American weed culture through soldiers in Vietnam. Simply put, a Thai Stick consists of high-potency cannabis buds, skewered and wrapped with threads of marijuana. After this, the super-blunt is then dipped in cannabis oil (back in the day, maybe it was opium) and topped with powdery kief (cannabis crystals). When your ready to smoke, the bamboo stick is removed, then the remaining hole allows for “optimal airflow and efficient burning.” It's said to have originated with the hill tribes of Northern Thailand. After the war, the Bahamas became one of the main routes for these Thai marijuana cigars to reach the U.S. market.

I went with this dark Bahamanian guy, my giant white stepbrother refused to come over to this red beat-up truck. The guy with us talked to the driver and I got in the back. We drove ten minutes into a rundown neighborhood adjacent to the Fish Fry lot. In the back of an unassuming clapboard house, the man with me knocked. When the door opened, a sweaty dread stood there red-eyed. He looked at me with vague interest, then spoke to the connect' in a slow rasta Creole. His voice was gravelly and musical at the same time. The darkness that framed him in the doorway was not an invitation to enter. We handed over the agreed money, \$20 American. Then the usual thing happened: he closed the door; we waited for what seemed like way too long; then I started to think we'd got took. Without ceremony, he opened the door again and handed us this long sticky ganja kebab, it had a narrow dowel down the center.

When I got back, Mark was waiting but the limo was gone. The guy in the truck wanted money for the ride.

“Damn Jay, your Dad is fucking with us.”

(I was also rather buzzed, so to be accurate, from here forward, the tale is fuzzy and likely untrue to the standards of memory. And, we got the Thai Stick!)

I called my brother Marcus to ask him if he remembered this trip, so he could add details and facts I missed. He is still a drunk. Like very drunk, more than less of the time, when he's not at work. He is a journeyman electrician. It has to be noted that Marcus now drinks less than he could at 21 (on the Bahamas trip) or 14 or at 30. He still drinks plenty. If water on the brain messes with memory, I think that is part of the deal here. I still trust him. Mainly cause we were kids together when our parents were messy.

I think I'm wrong, we were not left at Bahamanian Fish Fry by my father. We got a ride back with Jesus to the hotel, in the ratty Jaguar limo. Mark and I and little Gray and Zack and Wanda and my dad went back to our rooms (I was rooming with Marc; little Gray was rooming with Zack, and then there were our parents). It was evening time. Marc and I smoked this dank obliterating weed, then decided to try out our system. Roaming from bar to bar; from beach bar to cabana. The weed was bombastic. I have never been that high. And Marcus is drinking like he knows how to. I lost him at 8 pm, we never made family dinner.

I was red eyed and roaming around the hotel, using our system: false room numbers and changing bars every half hour. At 10 pm, I was pretty loose and most of the guests I encountered were in the mood—likely not also high on Thai Stick like I was. I meet these two 35-year-old women from Louisiana. They were bored and drunk and blonde. We talked about Faulkner's invented world and the way some characters reappear in the back and foreground in different books. We all appreciated Faulkner's mastery, his narrative tone shifting between Compson versus Sartoris family stories. One of them was a college English teacher. I was not attracted to either of them. When the bar closed, it was clear, the next thing to do was to attempt a move towards sex. Young and horny and starting to realize one of the reasons single white women vacation in places like this. On the beach with one of them. The weak light from the closed cabana bar watched our clothes peel off. We were both too drunk (and I way too high) to accomplish much... I woke up with sand in my bed and Marcus on the floor.

The Thai Stick got smoked, I mean, my step brother and I knew, as soon as I bought it, we would not be able to bring any of it back. Marcus, and I, decided to get stoned all day and night and avoid my dad who was being the prick of this 'vacation.' When Marcus—who can drink more than all of us (and you) in a day—woke up after the Fish Fry, he said: “Yo Jay, lets

hit that Thai Stick weed and get drunk, fuck your dad. Isn't your Island somewhere 'round here?

I love rum cocktails at breakfast.”