

*CAN THESE BONES LIVE?* A COLLECTION OF STORIES

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The collection concerns itself with race, gender, masculinity, marginalization, the act of violence as a means of self expression, identity and the performance of identity, love, and loss. The collection also uses historical events—more specifically, events that are central to black culture in Northeast, Ohio— to situate the characters and witness their response to these historical events. I strive to illustrate blackness as both political and fragmented with the characters in my collection. My characters believe that what they are doing—exactng violence, abusing women, disrespecting each other— is somehow the normative; that somehow what it is that they have learned is how they should perform black identity.

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PART I

SERMONS, TERRORISM, AND THE (RE) ARTICULATION OF BLACK IDENTITY

IN *CAN THESE BONES LIVE?* A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

## Introduction

Sermons scare me. It has always been this way. As a child, I remember grabbing my mother by the arm, terrified of the booming voice that screamed at me. It seemed as if the Pastor was speaking directly to me, as if his gaze had narrowed in on mine, telling me with exact certainty that my life was doomed, that no matter what I did, no matter how much I prayed, that God was going to get me.

I walked around with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was by no means a perfect child. But when I ventured to do something—leaving the house without telling my mother, or eating junk food before dinner, or running around my classroom with my friends—I thought about being killed by Jesus or being crippled by God. I was terrified of both and I lived, as a young kid, as if any wrong move would be my last. Back then I didn't realize that I was being conditioned into being a good and obedient Christian. Back then I didn't realize that my Pastor was creating an identity for me— a way of living and being.

I also didn't understand the complex language and codes of the sermons. Beneath the rhetoric, underneath the performance, there was a living, breathing text, a set of instructions—something to hear, something to use to understand the history and experiences of the black folks that came to church every Sunday. I was unable to comprehend that and I was unable to crack the codes that were being disseminated every Sunday. When I was old enough I stopped going to church. But the idea that somehow I was always doomed followed me everywhere. The idea to write about sermons wasn't planned. It happened when I began to think about the oral qualities of my work, the

manner in which I purposely manipulated language, used the call and response method from the black church to deconstruct and then reestablish identity for my characters.

Having its roots in the African slavery, black sermons have worked to create and sustain hope, faith, and identity within the black community. “From the beginning of the modern slave trade,” argues Dolan Hubbard, “Africans first experienced the New World through the body—the suffocating middle passage, chains, thumb screws, beatings, mutilations, and hangings” (Hubbard 1). The trauma that occurred to the body was made more tenuous by the loss of self and, “stripped of all else, the African American’s own body became his prime artistic instrument” (Hubbard 2). Moreover, “it was the new, oppressive environment that forced African Americans away from their craft arts and their old ancestral skills toward the emotional arts of song and dance” (Hubbard 2).

Even though African Americans created different avenues for expression, they were still restricted by the dominant culture and “to console each other, members of the disconsolate corporate community resorted to those forms of communication that are elemental to mankind: dancing, singing, and speaking” (Hubbard 2). These forms of communication gave rise to discourse that worked to politicize and recreate a black identity. One such form of political discourse is the black sermon.

Dolan Hubbard argues that, “having to approach God from a stance different from that of the majority community, black people intuitively recognized the inadequacy of the conventional God-man relationship that formed the basis for much of the Euro-American encounter with God: God speaks, man listens...the black encounter with God has been poignantly expressed as “our fathers/mothers cried and God heard their cries” (Hubbard



2). Therefore, it became essential for blacks to create a means of expression that would accomplish two things: help them connect and maintain that connection to God and create a favorable identity for themselves and for generations to come.

The black sermon, a “venerable art form with all the virtuosity and inventiveness of jazz” (Callahan xi), is a cultural marker—a means of wiping away already negative images and false histories, a means of recreating self and an avenue for sustaining the improved images of the black-self within the community and in the dominant society. It also serves as a way of reinforcing what is and is not an acceptable way to live. Hortense Spillers offers an observation on the grammar of the sermon:

The thrust of the sermon is passionate, repeating essentially the rhythms of the plot, complication, climax, resolution. The sermon is an oral poetry—not simply an exegetical, theological presentation, but a complete expression of a gamut of emotions whose central form is the narrative and whose end is cathartic release. In that regard the sermon is an instrument of a collective catharsis, binding once again the isolated members of the community (Hubbard 4).

The language in black sermons—the holes, loops, use of metaphors, symbols and syntax, questions the politics of blackness and an already prescribed ways of being; it provides answers, creates and gives space for interpretations, and becomes a set of guidelines that help shape and foster identity within the black community. In this essay, I will discuss my fiction and its sermonic elements and why I used the short story form as an instrument to create and discuss my aesthetic. In doing this, I will also discuss the restrictiveness of the black sermon—its ability to isolate further those who fall outside its purview— and how my characters terrorize themselves and others to (re) articulate a new black identity. My goal is to show that identity is not static— that identity is free flowing, diverse within— and if restricted, it implodes upon itself violently.

## The African American Short Story and Its Traditions

My first experience as a writer began with a short story. It wasn't a very good one, however. I used vocabulary words to cobble together what I thought was an entertaining as well as "serious" story. What did I know? Not much but I was proud nonetheless. I continued to piece together stories from things that I had heard around school or from conversations that grown folks had around me. I had become fascinated with words and realistically, I didn't know enough to write anything longer than two pages.

As I moved through high school and to the early part of my college education, I was introduced to Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, and Raymond Carver. Their work taught me the intricacies of the short story. I learned the importance of grabbing the reader from the first sentence; I learned how to build and sustain plot; I discovered the power of dialogue. More importantly, I learned that for a short story to be effective it has to be deliberate in its approach—it doesn't have a lot of space or time to linger. I also learned that the short story as a form could convey a lot of pertinent information in a short amount of time. I learned, I think, the most valuable lesson from these authors: that black people were either missing all together or were characterized so negatively that it made me ashamed to be black.

After those horrifying lesson about black people in literature, I searched the class schedule for a class dealing with African American Literature. I found one. When the time came for registration, I sat by my phone waiting for midnight so that I could schedule. In that class I was introduced to the short stories of Alice Walker, James

Baldwin, Gayl Jones, John Edgar Wideman, Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Cade Bambara. I had never felt so at ease in my life. I had read writers that not only understood the form and structure of the short story, but writers who challenged that form and structure. These writers created new ways of understanding the black tradition while still employing literary traditions. I also learned from them the varying and diverse voices of blackness. The rhythms, the non-linear narratives, the intricately coded language, the dialogue in black vernacular, and the boldness that existed in their work captured me. Their lamentations on the plight of the marginalized black in America were my lament. The confusion that they felt about being both black *and* American—the fragmented self—I shared. These authors didn't shy away from the political, or discussing black folks as other and commodity; they wrote about the complexities of black life and were not ashamed of it. The short story form provides a space to be subversive, a space to outright reject ascribed identities.

In *Down Home*, Robert Bone says that, “pastoral and antipastoral are the “deep structures” of African American short fiction” (Bone xxv). He further contends that, “these literary forms spring from three primary sources, all intertwined, and all reflective of the black American’s historical tradition” (Bone xxv). Bone articulates further that:

First, his deep attachment to the Protestant tradition, and especially the Bible, whose pages are saturated, both in the Old and New Testaments, with the rhetoric of the pastoral. Second, his deep affection for the rural South, despite the terror and brutality which all too often were visited upon him within its precincts. And third, his deep anxiety concerning his future role in American society, which manifests itself on the emotional plane as a painful vacillation between hope and despair (Bone xxvi).

Although African American authors used various methods to discuss their marginalized position in society, the end goal was still the same: resist, deconstruct, and reconstruct a recognizable self. In doing this, I argue that they employed, as I will, the trope of the talking book. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*, argues that, “shared modes of figuration result only when writers read each other’s text and seize upon topoi and tropes to revise in their own text”(Gates 128). Moreover, “this form of revision is a process of grounding and has served to create curious formal lines of continuity between texts that together comprise the shared text of blackness, the discrete chapters of which scholars are still establishing” (Gates 128-129).

The process of reading and revising tropes is essential for the continuation of African American literature. While reading various authors I found that the tropes that they used spoke to me on some level. I also found that there was, as with reading white authors, a part of myself that was missing from the continued conversation on blackness. Ellison, Richard Wright, and Toomer wrote about creating a black masculine identity via a heteronormative lenses. They spoke of the “negro” condition and the pervasiveness of white culture on that condition. Their contributions to understanding what it means to be black in America were invaluable to me. Their short stories functioned much like the black sermon by reaffirming blackness, focusing on empowerment, and providing a map for living that is in line with Christian doctrine. However, their ideas of black identity, more specifically black masculine identity, were limited at best.

Ironically, the masculinity that Ellison, Wright and Toomer tried to eschew—traditionally European—found its way into their definition of black masculinity.

Therefore, what they wrote about, what became in a sense, a way of being for black men, was fortified with European values that still excluded black men. More importantly for me, their work neglected a part of me. Their revision of each other's text left me out of the equation.

James Baldwin and Thomas Glave, openly gay writers, use the trope of the talking book to revise the limited definition of black masculinity while also continuing the tradition of shared blackness.

In his novel, *Another Country*, James Baldwin uses Rufus, one of the main characters, and his self-destructive act of suicide, to reject the fixed definition of black masculinity. Rufus openly struggles with identity—as a black man and as bi-sexual—and decides to end his life because of this struggle. Having never seen a character like Rufus, Baldwin articulates his feelings about him:

Rufus, for example. There are no antecedents for him. He was in the novel because I didn't think anyone had ever watched the disintegration of a *black boy* from that particular point of view. Rufus was partly responsible for his doom, and in presenting him as partly responsible, I was attempting to break out the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven that way (to suicide) by white people (Clark 25).

While Baldwin asserts that he didn't want Rufus' suicide to be orchestrated by "white people" it is Rufus' inability to choose between his two white lovers—Leona and Vivaldo—that pushes him off the bridge. Rufus' inability to see himself with either one causes him confusion and makes him believe that he does not belong anywhere.

Therefore, his act of suicide becomes an act of terrorism. Rufus' self-destruction allows

him to break free of the rigidness of identity and gives him the opportunity, finally, to have a say over who he is.

Where Baldwin fails, I argue, is that he doesn't discuss the impact that the black community has on Rufus and his idea of what is an acceptable self. Baldwin's refusal to do so, I believe, is a refusal to discuss the homophobia that exists within the black church and its far reaching arm within the black community. In revising Baldwin's text, I will still discuss the idea of self terrorism while discussing the black community and its insistence on fortifying a static definition of masculinity within the black community vis-à-vis the black sermon.

In following with the trope of the talking book, I endeavor to revise the texts of Baldwin and revise the methods by which black people create identity. In my revisions, my characters terrorize themselves—physically and emotionally— to regain a sense of self, to rub away an already established identity.

## Terrorism, Black Folks, and the (Re) Articulation of Black Identity

I was a graduate student at SUNY Albany when the planes crashed into the towers of the world trade center. I was a 150 miles away, yet it felt like I was standing on the street, an innocent observer. There was nothing innocent about that event. In my department they rolled in a TV and we watched the attack over and over again. The images are forever etched in my brain. The courtyards were filled with students who could not reach loved ones, parents or siblings. Although I didn't have relatives who lived in New York, my best friend from undergrad worked in that area. I frantically called and was unable to reach him as there was no cellular service in New York. I spent the rest of that day, like those who knew and loved people in New York, on edge.

I eventually was able to reach my best friend and a few weeks after the attacks, I went to “ground zero” or as close to it as I was allowed. I stood in amazement at the destruction, the air still thick with smoke, frantic faces worked the crowd asking if we had seen their husband, wife, or child. Utility poles, gates, the walls in the subway station, anything that could hold a piece of paper, were filled with photos of missing people. Pictures that could identify those who may have survived the horrific attack.

During the weeks and months following the attack, the government and the media began labeling the event as a “terrorist” attack. Subconsciously I was aware of terrorism from events in black history—the assassination of Malcolm X, the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing, the murder of Emmitt Till—but, intellectually, I had not thought about it. I had never contextualized it the way that the entire country had began too. What I did begin to realize and see was that anyone that was not white was considered a terrorist.

This became apparent at airports—I witnessed the harassment of darker hued people—, and as I watched the news and witnessed the discrimination and accusations of terror against brown people. I decided that these act of labeling people of color terrorist was not a new phenomenon—it was something that I had grown accustomed to. I decided that I would leave September 11<sup>th</sup> in New York and that I would not think about it or write about it. It was too painful.

Fast forward a few years and I enroll in a class that focuses solely on terrorism in literature. That semester we read 15 books that dealt with the attacks, the aftermath and how Americans redefined themselves. That semester I was also enrolled in a fiction workshop class and as the semester progressed, I couldn't keep up the promise of not writing about September 11<sup>th</sup>.

My need to write about the attacks occurred simply because the books that we read—Jay Mcinerney's *The Good Life*, Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*, and Deborah Eisenberg's *Twilight of the Superheroes*— dealt strictly with upper-class white people who were concerned with putting their “good” life back together again. They dealt with superfluous things, worried over how to accumulate more wealth, how to live their privileged lives again. We did read *Harbor*, a novel by Lorraine Adams that dealt with Aziz, an Algerian, who hurt himself to have and be a part of the fabric that is the American identity. When we went over the book in class, I spoke up over the irony of an immigrant character terrorizing himself to have an identity. It was Ironic because Aziz risked death to come to America where people who looked like him were being targeted as “not” American and not deserving of the liberties and freedoms of Americans. There



were Americans who despised any and everything that looked liked, smelt like, felt like, terror.

That idea of terrorizing the self stayed with me and as I began my story for my fiction class, I wondered why black folks weren't talked about or lamented over in the literature of September 11? While there were many professionals that were killed in the attacks, there were also service professionals that were killed. These service professionals were mainly black or African or Caribbean. Where were they in the literature? Weren't they just as "terrorized" as the white bodies that burned up in the fire and wreckage? The service workers went to work that day to obtain the American ideal which translates into the American identity. Why is it that they were left out of the literary picture, the landscape used to understand, if not reveal, the complexities of life in a "terrorized" America?

This nagged me. And as a writer I decided to create narratives of terrorized black folks. Make political the absence of the black body, work to revise and move forward the struggle for black legitimacy in literature. I also strove to create text that functioned like sermons. Text that played with language, text resisted static notions of identity while providing alternative modes of thinking on what is identity. To achieve this I set out to create characters that are aware of their absence in the conversation, characters who 'terrorize' themselves and others to recreate an identity, to find a space to exist in the dominant society.

This process of creating stories of terror required me to define terrorism as such. C.A.J. Coady in *Defining Terrorism* defines terrorism as: "the organized use of violence to

attack noncombatants or their property for political purposes” (Halwani 290). This definition is relevant because in my stories my characters terrorize themselves and others to break free of an identity that has been constructed for them. My characters destroy their “property”, their bodies, and become the terrorist, to illustrate that they have control over how they are viewed. This act of self terrorism is political because it resists two norms: dominant society’s ideas of blackness and the black community’s idea of a set definition of blackness.

To that end, I sat down to write my first story about the terrorized black self. “The Woman Who Wept While Ironing” is a love story set in the midst of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. I made the conscious decision not to name the main characters in the story. I wanted the husband and wife to be representative of an absent blackness. By doing this I wanted to make apparent their absence, force the reader to pay closer attention to the details of their lives (the complexities of it), and ask the reader to place themselves at the center of the story. For this to be accomplished, the reader has to become a willing participant in the narrative—has to be willing to ask themselves, “What if this was me?”

The first sentence of the story, “and here he is—stuck in the belly of the black whale,” places this unnamed, invisible black man as the focal point of the story. Readers are asked right away to figure out why it is that he is here, and wonder why his presence is important. The rest of the sentence is allegoric. The reference to the “whale” is a direct reference to Christianity and its pervasiveness within the black community. It also serves as a metaphor of survival. Jonah’s survival in the belly of the whale solidifies his

Christian identity; his tale of survival in the face of eminent demise serves as a strong reminder of Christian belief.

I wanted to place the character in the ‘belly of the whale’ because I wanted to show how far one would go to create or recreate an identity. As the story progresses, we learn that the character has voluntarily stepped inside the metaphorical whale to confront and win back his wife. What is interesting as well as problematic is that in the midst of his destruction—being stuck under beams of concrete after the crash—he only thinks of reclaiming himself. The character doesn’t think of his life ending for his life ended when his wife left him for another man. His desire for a masculine identity is what keeps him alive not his appreciation for life. I used this to illustrate the devastation that can and will occur when black bodies struggle to erase an identity that has been created for them.

To discuss further the strong desire to reclaim an identity, I use the call and response technique. This technique has its origins in Africa and has been adapted and used primarily in religious settings, African American music, and communication among African Americans. In the story, the call—‘what, could you not watch with me one hour?’—comes from God and the response—‘I waited’—is an answer to God’s question from the still unnamed main character. As this portion of the story continues there are a series of call and responses and they illustrate the frustration of the unnamed character at waiting on *Him*. The answers that the character responds with are in direct contradiction to the black church and its idea of waiting on God to heal, save, and make situations better. Since the enslavement period, blacks have used the teachings of God and his inability to allow them to suffer for too long, to sustain them and help them survive the

brutalities of slavery. One such lesson came from Exodus which “recounts the story of the escape of the ancient Israelites from Egypt and their formation as a new people of Canaan” (Callahan 83). It is this story of escape and the “imperative phrase, “let my people go” that is repeated seven times in the drama that climaxes in the Israelites flight across the Red Sea” (Callahan 83).

Callahan further says that:

African Americas heard, read, and retold the story of Exodus more than any other biblical narrative. In it they saw their own aspirations for liberation from bondage in the story of ancient Hebrew Slaves. The Exodus was the Bible’s narrative argument that God was opposed to American Slavery and would return catastrophic judgment against the nation as he had against ancient Egypt. The Exodus signified God’s will that African Americans too would no longer be sold as bondspeople, that they too would go free (Callahan 83).

The belief that God was going to free the enslaved has been passed down from generation to generation. What the enslaved also passed down was the belief that being free would require one to be steadfast in their faith, endure persecution, and wait on God to deliver them. This thinking is oppressive because it calls for blacks to stay in bondage and wait complacently for the Lord to save them. This act of “waiting” created and sustained an identity within the black community. To counter this thinking, it becomes paramount that my character in “The Woman” relinquish, in a sense, his belief that God can do all.

As the story progresses, God calls to him again, and he says, “I didn’t have an hour. I needed to get there. Needed to tell him I was man enough.” This declaration of the main characters mission, I argue, is necessary for the character to come back to ‘waiting’.

If he is unable to reclaim himself—reclaim his masculinity—then the black church and its sermons on God and faith becomes null and void.

While his desire to reclaim his manhood supersedes the teachings of the black church, it doesn't obliterate it. There are people who have issues with the black church (like myself), however, it becomes almost impossible to separate totally from an institution that helped millions of black people survive slavery, oppression, and racism. Much like blacks who are at odds with the dominant society, it is difficult to divorce themselves from something that is as much a part of them as breathing. Nonetheless, they still rage against the dominant society—its constraints, its definitions— while still embracing it, much like my unnamed character.

In my dissertation, I have written characters that are nihilistic. Their outright refusal of identities that have been constructed for them manifests in the form of terror against themselves. The ability to terrorize the physical and emotional self is more impactful in that it makes a person pay attention to someone who willfully destroys themselves. I also felt that creating character that self-terrorize, would make urgent the needs of black people to have their own carved out sense identity that is different from but one not totally disconnected from the black community.

The opening story, Augustine, is a story of self terror. What distinguishes this story, "Augustine" from "The Woman Who Wept While Ironing", is that the rejection of the teachings of the black church via the black sermon is a rejection of heterosexual modes of operation.

I was purposeful in naming the character ‘Augustine.’ St. Augustine was the most powerful figure in the development of western Christianity. St. Augustine is revered; his name is mythical in Christianity and brings to mind a warm sentiment about the church. In my story, Augustine is revered, is mythical, and also brings to mind warm sentiment. He has achieved something that the other black people have not—transcendence. Augustine’s transcendence manifests in his ability to escape the ‘hood, move beyond poverty and attend college. He is heroic, much like St. Augustine, but his heroics are tarnished because he is a gay, black man.

I open the story with, “the day Augustine jumped from the 7<sup>th</sup> floor window of the King Kennedy Projects.” This opening accelerates the idea of the mythic—allows the reader to be a witness to Augustine’s self-destruction.

Augustine’s death is the backdrop, the means of starting a conversation that is inherently political, a conversation that is in direct contradiction to the Christian Church belief system. Augustine offers his black self, a sacrifice of sorts, to reject the idea that he is not masculine, to reject the notion that he can’t love a black man *and* still be a black man. By killing himself, he blatantly defies the teachings of the church on various levels. His first defiance is in killing himself—he chooses “an eternal hell” over not being able to live the way that he wants. He chooses damnation over a pigeonholed black masculinity. But I knew that the conversation could not end with his death—it actually began with his death.

Augustine’s death is witnessed by three junior high girls who still turn double-dutch. They are pivotal to the discussion because they, like most children, are still

innocent. However innocent, they are not ignorant to black culture or the way that black people are “supposed” to live—these messages are carefully constructed for them at church, carried forth and reinforced at kitchen tables and at card games. What makes them unique is that they have kept the childlike innocence until the end of the story. They are also important because despite what they had heard about Augustine that, “he had a little sugar in his tank,” it didn’t stop them from loving and respecting him. The narrator of the story is particularly affected by Augustine’s death because through his existence she saw love.

As the girls double-dutch at the end of the story they begin to lose their innocence. Terra starts to believe what the older folks say about Augustine therefore diminishing his heroic appeal. The narrator, despite what she has heard, makes the decision to continue to love Augustine even if he loved another man. In the end, the narrator’s violent action, “I slapped Terra across the face,” becomes a critique of the black community and its rigid definition of black masculinity.

As I continued writing and putting together stories I found that I was using the trope of the talking book within the collection. I found that I was creating stories that were revisions of the other story and that these revisions were like call and response. In *Running from Dogs*, another unnamed male character terrorizes himself emotionally as well as terrorizing his girlfriend physically to create an identity separate from that of his abusive father. He comes undone when he imagines being chased and eaten by dogs. These dogs, metaphors for the self that he is trying to disassociate from, are released by a white woman. I am attempting to show that his form of terrorism is cyclical: his father

abuses to assert his manhood and the son abuses to run from a manhood that he is afraid of. I saw this story in its early stages as a “call” of sorts, a means of opening dialogue about the dangers of not “knowing.” The destruction that occurs when one has no other method or means to break free of an identity that has been constructed for them. I knew that this story needed a “response.” What that response would be, I was unsure of.

As I thought about what type of response I could write about the need for self destruction to reconstruct the self, I decided to write the story from the perspective of the female terrorized body. As I sat down to write “Private Things,” I set out to have a public conversation about the private nature of abuse. I wanted to discuss the willingness to be terrorized and why that is? The narrator’s decision to stay in a relationship where she is abused stems from her desire to “not sit and wait at the window for her father” like her mother did:

And I saw her face like plastic eyes glued to the door and I knew that I  
had to let you back let you in because I couldn’t sit and rock couldn’t  
rock without you  
But I did rock and sat like her frozen by despair shocked into  
loneliness her appetite curved she was me I saw it as she sat  
as I sat I did I sat even when I tried not too And rocked like her and  
cradled my breasts and felt myself to make sure I was still still still  
there waiting like her wanting not to be her but I was her I rocked and  
rocked you

While trying to carve out her own identity by *not* waiting at the window, the narrator allows a man to abuse her. By staying with her abusive boyfriend, the narrator’s actions become terroristic in nature—she becomes the very thing that she is afraid of.

I am deeply connected to this story simply because I have watched women in my family stay in abusive relationships. As a child I didn’t have the vocabulary to express



how I felt about those situations. I wrote this story to illustrate that black men and women will go to extremes to carve out a type of existence, terrorize themselves or others to make their presence known. They want to exist at all costs.

I wrote the title story, *Can These Bones Live?*, last. I wanted to write a story that combined the black church, black folks searching for identity through God, and characters that terrorize themselves in route to freedom. As much as I use biblical illusions in my work, I was afraid to write a story that dealt directly with the black church and the power that it yields. More importantly, I was afraid of rehashing those feeling of helplessness that I felt when I left church. But I knew that if I wanted to really to bring this collection full circle that it had to happen.

Bringing the collection full circle meant that I had to take a character from an earlier story and flesh them out, and make them a major character. I decided to use Pastor Green as the focal point of the story. I selected him because he delivers God's instructions— via his sermons—on how to live accordingly. I also wanted him to be as conflicted as the two characters, Kidd and Patience, who “love him.” They learn that Green's love is hypocritical and, as he says, only God's.

After having sex with Green, Kidd tells Green that he loves him. Green laughs and tells Kidd:

Look at you. You are just a boy. You can't walk around here loving me.” Green sat up and looked Kidd directly in the face. “This means nothing. We were meeting a want, not a need. God takes care of our needs. Our wants? Those he will not take care of.” Green got up, stepped into a pair of white briefs and searched for his pants. “I love the Lord. I am his servant. We all slip. It's a part of life, the natural order of things.” A smile as wide and deep as the Lake Erie spread across Green's face. “Let him love you, too. Join the church; let God take care of your needs. We can take care of our wants.”

I wanted to illustrate once again the idea that one has to forgo what they want—in Kidd’s case the love and admiration of men—to receive what one ‘needs’ from God. What is implicit is that God knows what Kidd needs and is the only one that can supply that need. Green’s status as pastor reinforces this notion and Kidd is left alone and confused. As the story progresses, Kidd terrorizes himself emotionally over whether or not Green is going to love him for the gay man that he is.

This story forced me to think deeply about religion and its place within the black community. I stated earlier that I was unable to fully reject the black church and its teachings. Much like some blacks who have a disdain for American culture but understand how to operate within it, I found myself figuring out how to operate within and fictionalize the black church. I wanted my characters to reject the idea of what is deemed an appropriate self by terrorizing themselves both physically and emotionally. I wanted them to fight against the machine of religion and create new ways of thinking and being. But I realized, as my characters did, that they can never fully reject religion and that they can never wander too far into the valley alone. But they can constantly interrogate the black church and its implications.

## Conclusion

As I sit and think about the process by which this collection came about, I think about what motivates me to write the stories that I do. What is my aesthetic, and how do I move it forward, how do I use it to create my art while being conscientious of the political? I grew up during the “old school” hip hop era. I was doing the spider, cabbage patch, and the Kidd and Play (all 80’s dance moves) in my backyard. I listened to the beats and rhythms, the lyrics that spoke out about the oppression by the police (NWA) and about love lost and found. I lived by my radio and at night when I was supposed to be in bed, I listened to the “Quiet Storm,” a nightly radio show where the men and women sang their hearts out. I loved music and could dance my butt off.

I never realized how important those early life lessons were that I learned through music. I learned how to tell a story, how to use the rhythm of language as a mechanism for change. I learned that language is slippery, open, elusive at times, yet very necessary to tell the story of black people. I also learned that music gives space for people to begin, join in, and continue important conversations on black life. I learned the power of improvisation and its complexities. I did not realize then that what I was learning was something that had been learned, passed down, and revised to speak about the concerns of that generation of artist.

I structured my stories to express a jazz/blues aesthetic. I created stories that when read out loud are like music—the complex nature of notes, dropping, merging, breaking a part, and coming back together again to form harmony; other times coming together to form disharmony. My use of nonlinear narratives allows my characters to tell their

stories and allows the reader to understand their voices, in their key. More importantly, music as language, allows me to work in and through the complexities of identity while at the same time respecting that there are divergent identities. Jazz is not static, nor should identity or lives be.

To that end, I have created I feel, through my aesthetic, a new way of interpreting blackness and the differences within. I have created characters who interrogate this notion of a fixed black identity while proving that alternatives do exist. What I have done is create a different critical lens to use when critiquing masculinity and blackness. I am still afraid of sermons. I still tremble, slightly, when a pastor preaches. And at times I look to the sky for lightning bolts. But the days of allowing those sermons to define who I am are over.

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PART II

*CAN THESE BONES LIVE?* A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

## Augustine

The day Augustine jumped from a seventh floor window of the King Kennedy Projects, I was turning double- dutch on freshly shoveled concrete. Pam—cocoa colored and plump— was turning on the other end, and we waited, with our lips poked out, for Tara to jump her skinny self in. My arms started to hurt and the ropes made a thumping sound against the ground. Tara bobbed and weaved like a boxer trying to synchronize her legs with the rhythm of the ropes. When she finally jumped in—the bottoms of her feet matching the thumping of the rope on concrete—someone yelled, “Shit, man!” as Augustine’s body hit the snow-covered grass in front of the building. We didn’t stop turning at first; we heard cuss words more than we heard our names sometimes.

Pam and I stopped turning the ropes and Tara’s legs looked like they were stuck in a web. Tara folded her boney arms to protest, but followed our eyes to the body on the white grass. We didn’t scream or run away. We just stood there with our eyes glued to his arms that had now become wings.

Augustine Robinson was our hero. The golden child of the Projects; the one everyone knew would make it out of Cleveland, Ohio, alive. He wasn’t like the other boys who scared us but who we secretly loved. Those boys—ManMan, June Bug, and Tone—were mannish boys who smoked refers behind our building and grabbed their crotches every time we walked past. They had stopped going to school, drank wine out of brown paper bags and teased our little hearts. To us, they were tall giants, long and lanky, brown and red with hair cut close to their heads.

Ms. Germaine, who sold frozen icees, and cookies shaped like flowers trimmed in pink icing, squirrel chews, and Chic-O-Sticks out of her apartment, could see us from where she sat. She would scream out her window, “Little nasty boys... Face smooth as my granbaby’s ass, leave them little gals alone.” The boys would laugh, inhale more of the reefer, and stick their middle fingers up at Ms. Germaine. The depth of their laughter shook us and sent us running away every time we heard it. We weren’t scared of the way it shook us, but scared of the meaning behind the laughter, the message in it—the one that our little girl bodies weren’t ready to hear— that somehow we knew the laughter and what it represents tailor made for us, like the Easter dresses our grandmothers had sewn by hand in Memphis, Alabama, Mississippi, Maryland, and Arkansas.

We didn’t run from Augustine—his muscular, chocolate body shading us from the sun. Augustine stayed to himself most of the time and he walked like he was important. We would see him coming up the walkway, while we turned double-dutch, and drop our ropes hoping that he would stop for a minute or two, say something to us, acknowledge our clumsiness or lack of skill at turning the thick, heavy ropes. He never did. But somehow I knew that Augustine wanted to and that was good enough for me.

We lived in the Browns—the section of the King Kennedy Projects that sat across from Woodland Cemetery. Everything was dirty. The walkway to our building was littered with labeled bottles—Wild Irish Rose, Schlitz, Budweiser, Colt 45— we had seen on kitchen counters at Bid Whist parties we were too young to be at but not old enough to stay home alone. Cigarette butts wrapped in faded lipstick stuck out like weeds. Bodies—round, long, thin, brown, deep red, cinnamon, lingered like spoiled



meat. We didn't mind it when the kids at AB Hart Junior High called us the Project Girls. We got to play the way we wanted, when we wanted, and turning double-dutch was what we thought about more than the multiplication that whipped us harder than our mamas when we talked back to them.

We—Tara, Pam and Me—had fallen in love with Augustine even before we knew what love was. But to see him laid out like that broke our hearts and we sat around wood splintered kitchen tables and listened to grownups talk. Their words were not foreign to us. We had heard them talk real nice and soft to bill collectors, had heard them pick up their vocabulary with teachers, had even heard them when they had to tell someone bad news. But this time their words hid something that we didn't dare try to understand. After a while we grabbed our coats and walked outside. We had decided to turn double-dutch in Augustine's honor.

“My mama said that he was a *fag*.” Tara swiveled her neck as if it could screw off and on.

Pam stopped turning the ropes and they lay limp in her hands liked over-cooked spaghetti noodles. “He was not. And my mama always says that you don't talk bad about the dead.”

“I heard them say that he jumped cause he couldn't be with that boy he loved. Can a boy love another boy?” Tara stepped out of the ropes, twirling her beaded hair around her fingers, no longer interested in doing the jumping jack trick she had talked about all that day. “My uncle Rudy said that he always knew he had some sugar in his tank.”

“Why can’t he love another boy?” I asked. Pam dropped her end of the rope and looked at me.

I didn’t let my end fall. I held onto them and fixed my mouth like my M’ dear did after she made a final decision. I could understand him jumping out the window cause he couldn’t love some boy. My mama loved my daddy and he didn’t love her back. She would walk up and down the hallway of our apartment muttering, “He don’t know he love me. He don’t know it.” I looked at her wondering what it would feel like to love someone who didn’t know *it*. I let the ropes fall to the ground and started hop scotching, my feet making tiny, dog-like prints in the snow. I looked back to see if Pam and Tara were looking and once I made it to the end of my imaginary top square, I turned back around and suddenly felt like I needed to protect Augustine.

“He didn’t want to be without the boy, I guess.” I tried to jump back in the original spots that I had created before. “He needed somebody to love too.” It started to get colder and I looked at our coats that lay like dead bodies on the ground next to the ropes. We were hardheaded and knew we would get the switch if any one of our mamas saw us outside, in the middle of winter, jumping rope without a coat or hat on.

Tara picked up her coat and put it on. A small smile curving her lips. “He still was a faggot and faggots can’t love nobody. Shoot, you act like he loved you.”

I jumped closer to her and could still see the imprint of Augustine’s body, the tears that froze into icicles by his head, peace and fear that curled his lips. I knew then that if no one took up for Augustine then his death wouldn’t matter. I slapped Tara across the face. “He did love me.”

## We Were Boys Once

By the time he turned 17, Valentine had slept with three boys simply because they had beautiful teeth. Ten years before that, on the seventh day of April in 1980, he watched his mother, Eva, float away. When it finally registered that his mother was gone—that he had watched the hem of her blue skirt glide across the doorjamb—Valentine had moved in with his Aunt Ruth in a big brown house with green trimming on Eddy Road in Cleveland, Ohio.

Valentine grew up constantly thinking about the blue hem of a skirt and after sleeping with the three boys, he decided, at 21, to fall in love with a white man named Parker Rose. His Aunt Ruth, a devout Christian woman, found out about it and wanted it to end. She decided to send her nephew to the Pastor she had befriended on her way to Cleveland, in the Greyhound bus station in Louisville, Kentucky.

On the day of her decision, Ruth knelt in front of the sink on a braided rug, in prayer. Valentine walked in. “God is a forgiver, you know?” Ruth rose from her knees. “He loves you!”

“Do you love me?”

Ruth walked to the stove and turned the fire under a copper kettle. “Have no choice. I can’t get to Heaven if I don’t. Just don’t like what you doing to yourself.”

“I’m fine.” Valentine looked down at the spot that held his Aunt a few minutes earlier. The rug looked worn, sunk in; it seemed as if it were throbbing.

“*Fine* won’t get you to the Promised Land.”

He looked her over. Her gray hair pulled back into a tight bun. Her pecan colored skin matched his, and there was a huge wooden cross sitting on her breasts.

“You need to go to church with me and be around other young men your age... they can teach you some things.” She went to the cabinet and pulled down a saucer and cup.

“Teach me what? Come on, Auntie.” Valentine laughed to himself and walked over to the kitchen table. He slid down into a chair.

“It ain’t right. A grown man running around. I can’t even say it...”

“Loving a white boy? Well, that’s what I *used* to do.” Valentine looked Ruth in the face and shook his head.

Ruth walked back to the stove and grabbed the screaming kettle, turned and looked at her nephew. “It ain’t right. Trifling little boy. Don’t know what it means to be a man. Lord knows I can’t teach you how to be a grown - up man.” Ruth stepped away from the table with the kettle still in her hand. She looked at Valentine. “Can you at least meet with the Pastor?”

Agreeing to go see the Pastor was a mistake. Valentine knew this, but listening to his Aunt quote scripture was worse than sitting down with some Pastor. The truth was that Parker Rose had put Valentine out and the only place he could go was here. And while his Aunt pleaded for him to go inside a Church, he remembered not what she said but remembered sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at Parker’s mouth move but not

understanding the words that came out. Valentine sat there, fully dressed; Parker still in a towel, water beads on his milky skin. Valentine resisted the urge to get up and rub the beads, fully incorporate them. Touch him like they had just done, hold him. Try to make Parker take back what he was saying. Take back the disinterest in his voice. The words—“It’s been fun, but we need to move on. Find other people”—that held him to the spot on the un-made bed, made his legs tremble. Now, Valentine was back in his old room, and his Aunt had gotten rid of anything that had been his. The only thing left was an old silver metal framed bed, an oak dresser that had a bible opened to Psalms 20, a red area rug and a bedspread that smelled like mothballs. Sterile. Sterile like a hospital room or a room in an old folk’s home. Not lived in. That’s what it reminded Valentine of and he slowly sank down on the bed and laid his head back on a pillow.

Valentine’s mind went back to the door that opened and closed when he was younger. During those times he saw his mother and was sure that she was out there somewhere. He shook his head at the “somewhere” which was really nowhere to him, especially since he looked all around Cleveland for her. He went from corner to corner, old places they had gone together—the Hippodrome Theatre on 101st and Superior, Ricky’s Roller Rink, Save- More Grocery Store, MLK Park— to see if she just forgot to come back, if she was just sitting somewhere, thinking. Or if she was lost— lost would have done it, sustained him, since being lost meant that you could be found and brought back to the place where you were missed.

Parker was consistent and always there when Valentine came home to their tiny one bedroom on Shaker Blvd. That eased his mind, made him feel safe. And when they

lay in bed together, Parker listened to how the “why” of the leaving was the hardest for him to grasp. How if only he knew why she left, why it became so unbearable, then maybe he could forgive her, welcome her back home. Valentine lifted his head up from the pillow and realized that it was dead silent. He tapped his foot on the floor. Parker didn’t really mean it, he thought to himself. He didn’t really want me to leave for ever. He stopped tapping his foot and suddenly he realized that Parker did not intend to take him back.

Standing in front of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Ruth clutched her worn bible to her heart, her right hand at her side. She was wearing a blue overcoat that shielded her from the crisp autumn air and a clear plastic rain cap. Ruth told Valentine that she would meet him in front of the Church and was happy that he had agreed to see Green, the Pastor, and she said out loud as she walked from the number 10 bus, over and over again, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you!”

Ruth’s eyes gazed over the windows of the Church and caught His eyes. She quickly turned away. Ruth tingled on the inside, and it shamed her to think that she had once been a non-believer.

She clutched the bible harder—the worn gold letters peeling— to her chest. She had served Him and only Him since she gave up her life of nightclubs and men on the corner of Beale Street, in Memphis, Tennessee. That life had been intoxicating and when immersed in the filth, stink, lust, love, embrace, hustle of it, she was at her best: funny,

ambitious, and free. Ruth made Beale Street her home and dressed in painted-on- mini-skirts, fire- red lipstick, and burnt orange eye shadow.

On the day that she found herself on her knees, with a razorblade to her neck, she did something that she had never done before, she prayed. Ruth asked God to save her and she promised that if He spared her, allowed her to live that she would stop being in love with the corner and be in love with Him. After she realized her neck was still in place she pointed to the sky and thanked God for saving her life. Ruth got off her knees and ran through the alley looking and pointing to the sky as a reminder that it was *Him* and only Him who had spared her.

In the height of her newfound devotion, Ruth found time to visit her only sister Eva, in Cleveland, Ohio, who, in her eyes, was as sinful as the little baby boy she held on her lap. It worried Ruth when she saw the two of them together, son clinging to mother, as if he would fade away if she let him go. Ruth had warned Eva that it wasn't natural for a child to be that dependent on its mother. Desire outweighed the need and it showed in the grip that the little boy had on his mother's waist. Ruth could see the over dependency of both and fussed at Eva for spoiling a boy child.

“You know those kids are going to eat him alive you keep spoiling him like that.”

“Oh, yeah?” Eva shifted the boy from one knee to the other. She looked over his clothes, frowned and then tried to smooth the wrinkles with her hands.

“You act like he a baby doll or something,” Ruth said, looking at the little brown boy who rode his mother's lap. “Let that boy down. Let him play.”

“Why are you worried about my baby?”

“I’m worried about what he gone do without you.”

“That you don’t have to worry about. He will be taken care of.”

“Taken care of?” Ruth reached for the wooden cross that clung to her breast and shook her head at Eva. “Do you even know who the father is?” The words, shaped like the tip of a blade, aimed to cut deep.

“You know damn well I know who my baby’s father is, Ruth.” Eva bent down and scooped up a glob of yellow tinted Vaseline, rubbed it into the palms of her hands and massaged it into the baby’s hair. “Getting tired of you worrying over something you can’t control, Ruth. It ain’t about you today. It ain’t about you.”

“It’s about a little boy who is up under his mother too much. You gone make him soft... won’t know how to be a man.”

“Hell, Ruth, let him be a little boy first. Then we will worry about him being a man!” Eva turned her full attention to the baby and cooed softly to him.

Now, as she waited for Valentine to appear, Ruth realized fully what she suspected then: his mother had made him *that* way. Made him too dependent on her. Made him only know her—only want her—and when she left the thing that was stronger than the need consumed him. Ruth was now convinced that she understood his sickness. Understood how the need to be rid of what you loved the most makes you believe that you love what it is not. Yes, Ruth was convinced of it and prayed that the one person who she knew would and could help her rid her nephew of the sickness that his mother had caused in him when she left.



Valentine watched his aunt walk away from the Church. It wasn't until she turned the corner that he walked to the back alley. He went to the side door and pressed the bell. He hated the fact that he was going to see Green. His aunt talked about him as if he was God himself, and clutching that heavy cross with her thin fingers, she told him repeatedly how she'd found Green in Lexington, broken. Ready to give up his calling. Green had sat next to her and she'd given him one of her biscuits that she had packed for the trip. By the time they reached Ohio, she had convinced him that he was chosen and that *loaves* and *fishes* were not just His job, that God still loved him. Before they parted, Thaddeus Green told her that she had a friend in him and if she ever needed him he would be there.

Valentine pressed the bell again and when he got no answer, he pushed the door open. He walked in and the church floors were laid with thin red carpet and as he walked his footsteps echoed. There was a faint smell of turpentine. He walked down the long hallway and on either side of him were pictures of old men in black robes with bright colored sashes. Their dark skin looked like bruised plums. As he walked, Valentine saw the sign that read "Church Office" and went towards it.

When he got to the office, the door was open and brightly lit. No one was seated at the desk. When he looked up there was a picture of Jesus nailed to the cross in the place that a clock would have been.

He heard laughter come from a brown door and walked towards it. He knocked and a minute passed without an answer. He knocked again and the door opened. Thaddeus Green was six feet tall, with large hands that Valentine noticed right away. He

had broad shoulders that blocked the doorway, a bald head, and slanted eyes that made him look like he was squinting.

He smiled at Valentine and it seemed like his eyes and nose spread. He reached out his hand to Valentine and asked him to come in. Thaddeus stepped aside and watched Valentine walk in. “Son, please sit down.”

“I am nobody’s son.”

“You are the son of God. This chair is open to anyone.”

Valentine sat down.

“Your Aunt tells me—she’s a fine Christian woman, yes she is— that you have some demons in your life?”

Valentine laughed out loud. “You’re as batty as she is.”

“No. Not at all. Just in love with the Lord and He with me. What types of demons have a hold of you?”

“A white man named Parker Rose.”

“How does this white man *possess* you?”

“We love each other, you know. I feel at home with him.” Valentine closed his eyes and thought about the time he met Parker in Woolworth’s downtown. The times they spent holding each other, protecting each other from what was out there against them and the people that they had become. Valentine looked up into the Preacher’s face and his eyes—clear, calm, oceanic—made him feel at ease.

“Home?”

“You know. Home.”

“Are you at home with me?”

“Why should I be?”

“The Lord is home, my son.”

Valentine laughed again. “You don’t get it. You are just like her. No wonder.”

“Son, the only home I know is with the Lord.”

“Have you ever been in a place where you felt like nothing could get you?

Somewhere that helps you forget the thing that you were running from? Valentine gripped the arms of the chair and leaned forward. “I feel like I am going in circles, sometimes, like I’m swallowing myself looking for my mother. Did my aunt tell you that? Did she tell you that I can’t find my mother and that when I’m with Parker, I don’t feel like looking anymore; don’t feel like I’m eating myself up? I’m tired of reaching for the hem of her skirt.”

“Have you reached for God, son? Have you given Him a chance?”

Valentine turned his head and rubbed the palms of his hands on his pants legs.

“Do you know what my Aunt says? That God is a forgiver. But she don’t really think God can save me. She don’t.”

Thaddeus stood up, walked from behind the desk, and knelt beside Valentine.

“Pray with me.”

Valentine was startled by the insult. Prayer, in his mind, meant that his Aunt was right. “I don’t pray.”

“Then you will never be saved.”

“Then I never will.”

Thaddeus started to sing in a sweet tenor voice:

*Take me to the water. Take me to the water.  
I want to be baptized. Oh take me to the water.  
I want to be baptized!  
Take me to the water. Take me to the water.  
I want to be baptized. Oh take me to the water.  
I want to be baptized!*

Valentine tried to drown out the sweet tenor voice. He placed his hands over his ears and shook his head. He stood up abruptly, knocked over the chair, and ran out the door. Once outside he still heard the sweet tenor trying to take him to the water and as he ran he felt the water swell around his legs.

Ruth opened the front door and called out his name, “Valentine?” She could tell that the house was empty but she had hoped that he was there. She had waited nearly an hour for him to show up and even though she was angry that he didn’t, she wasn’t surprised. The wicked don’t have no master, is what she thought as she untied the rain cap that was on her head. Ruth folded it into a square and placed it in the right pocket of her coat. She took off her coat and laid it on the banister then kneeled down and united the Pro-Keds that she had worn. Earlier that day when she realized, no, knew that Valentine wasn’t coming, she decided that *she* didn’t need to smolder in Hell. Ruth decided to talk to Green even though her nephew would not. As Ruth walked down the corridor to Green’s office, she stopped in front of the wall that held the dark, proud, smiling faces of the past preachers. They were old; had spent the rest of their adult lives herding flock in robes to regal for grass. At the end of the row, there was Green, shining

brightest as if he had mastered both the regal robe and grass with the herding of his flock. As if he held the secrete that made it easy.

Ruth looked at the picture hard and thought back to when she first met him, his eyes glued to the same page of the bible. She herself was newly convinced of God and Green looked like he was trying to find an answer in between the lines of the good book.

“You want a biscuit?” She nudged him and then put it between his face and the bible. ‘Didn’t have no bacon to put with it, but it’s from scratch so I think that make up for it.” Ruth took a paper towel from her brown bag, wrapped the biscuit in it, and handed it to him. Green looked up.

“Thank you.”

“You know,” she said, after taking a small bite of her bread, “God will come to you when it’s time. You can’t put a timeline on His word.”

Green turned around and looked at her fully. He sniffed the bread, took a bite, and then shook his head. “I know, but I don’t have a lot of time, Miss... God needs to speak to me now. I have a church to lead and they waiting on me to have the way. I can’t show up and expect them to have it laid out for me.”

“You a preacher?”

“Yes. I been called.”

Ruth held the bread in one hand and used the other to wipe crumbs off her lap. “Then you got the way. He gave it to you. You need to trust that it’s you. That’s all, Preacher. Trust in Him.”

That was so long ago, and now, as she walked down the hall, she knew that God had always given her the answer for Valentine but she had refused to see it.

In the kitchen, she put on a pot of water for tea. Ruth sat down at the table and put her head in her hands and as the smoke rose from the copper kettle, she thought about what stopped her from going into Green's office. She had walked down to his office and the door was wide open. She was about to knock before she walked in but stopped in midair. Green was kneeling in front of a sad-eyed Jesus, rocking back and forth saying, "*Everyone in Thine House must be cleansed! Everyone in Thine House, Lord.*" Ruth placed the hand that she was going to knock with over her heart for it had just broken in half and she was trying to catch it before it fell to the ground. She knew then that Valentine would never be able enter *His* house if he wasn't cleansed of his sins, of his ungodly ways. And as she held the two halves of her heart in her hand, she mourned for Valentine's soul. And wept silently for hers.

After Valentine left Ebenezer Baptist Church, he ran across the street to catch the number 2 bus going toward Woodland. Once it arrived he got on and looked only at the metal box that swallowed his change. He walked to the back of the bus and sat in an empty seat by the window. Sitting across from him was a pink-faced lady with a wide-brimmed hat laced with feathers. She raised her voice over the hum of the motor to talk to another pink-faced lady who sat across from her. Valentine watched the bus eat up the road and thought of only two things: the Ocean-side eyes and the water that was sure to drown him. He couldn't shake the way he felt under that gaze and he wondered what the

water would feel like? Coolness enveloping him along with the darkness? It wasn't until the bus jerked to a stop that he looked up to see that he was at 55<sup>th</sup> and Superior. He stood up and moved past the wide brimmed- feathered hat and left from the back door.

After he got off the bus he walked to the corner and made a right hand turn onto Lakeview and started towards home. His pace was brisk. Sweat dripped lightly from his forehead. He passed a corner store with a poster of bikini clad women smoking cigarettes on the door and wanted a cool drink. He slowed down and turned to go back. As he walked toward the storefront he saw four teenage black boys staring at him. He stopped and lowered his head. He felt naked under their eyes even though he was fully dressed in khaki pants, a blue long sleeved shirt and brown penny loafers. When he looked at them again, they grabbed their dicks and spit in front of them. Still standing in the spot where he stopped, he remembered the boys even though he didn't know their names. They were the same boys who tormented him and called out to him: *black faggot, suck my dick*—joking when they really meant it—and slapped him around after he obliged. He knew those four boys. He knew them well and lived with them his entire life.

He knew those four boys. They were all the same. Easily forgotten boys who only came to mind when bad things happened. Robbery in progress, drug deal gone badly, child abandoned by father, black man kills black man. They were thought of then and only then in those moments when it felt better to blame than be blamed. But once the injustices were righted, they were forgotten or stored away for the next time a finger aimed to point.....

He knew those four boys. Knew that they hated him for challenging what manhood really was—for saying what it really couldn't possibly be.

Valentine looked away from them—they were dressed in blue jeans, long-sleeved t-shirts, and dusty tennis shoes—and started towards his house. When the first one hit him in the back of his head, he flinched. He turned around to see the boys running toward him. Before he could turn to run, a rock hit him on his temple. He screamed. Blood trickled down his face. He started to run. It seemed that with each step that he took his body shook with pain. Rocks from the boys continued to hit him and by the time he got close to his house he was on his knees behind a parked car. He called out for help. His voice was barely above a whisper. Valentine measured the distance between the parked car and the gate of his house. Five cars. It would take him five cars to get there. His body was in pain and when he stood to run, his knees buckled under him. He stopped for a second and then pushed off the back fender of the car and ran towards his gate. He saw his Aunt Ruth as he got closer, standing on the porch with her hands in the pocket of her flowered housecoat. He called to her but she didn't move. It was as if she was looking somewhere else, across from him, to the left of him, but not at him. Valentine felt them beside him. He felt his head hit the concrete.

The boys chased Valentine down the street and Ruth placed her hands into the pockets of her flowered housecoat. She didn't move. At first she didn't know what Valentine was ducking from, but as he got closer to the gate, she saw clearly what it was



that he is trying to dodge. From the hands of the teenage boys came rocks. She didn't know where the rocks came from. She imagined blue-jean pockets filled with rocks, weighing down the people trying to do damage with them. Earlier, she thought to herself, the boys looked for rocks with the most girth and the sharpest angles; the ones that would cut at first contact. Ruth imagined that they talked amongst themselves, on the corner, their hands wrapped around brown bags and burning cigarettes. Then they saw him; hated him for what he represented. Hated him for not being macho, for not pulling at the budding breast of girls, while playing hide and seek. For not looking, smelling, or acting like them. For not being man enough—even though they had only dreamt of manhood—never tasted it. They had seen him before. Had studied his soft angles, his lightness to their darkness; his limp hands to their callused ones. He represented what they didn't want to be seen as: weak men.

As Valentine got closer, Ruth saw a rock hit him in the head. Her face twisted in pain and she took her hands out of her pocket and ran to the gate. In an instant the rock-throwing-weighed-down-blue-jeaned-boys were upon him. All Ruth could see were his arms and the sharp angled rocks that hit, stuck, and then ricocheted off his head.

## Running from Dogs

I scream at the window that we both used to stare out of hang out of when we were in love after we tangled our bodies into a knot watching the lonely old men on the corner in front of Carl's Barber Shop praying and hoping that they find the love that we had love as hard as we did not feel pain not feel lost but found like shoes left at the beach after a long day in the sun you scream down at me from the window your deep deep eyes peer down on me right through me in my favorite shirt the one that fits you perfectly that falls just right over your waist covers your nipples that I love to suck like my mother it reminds me of her and how she loved-suckled me and you are saying in the red shirt that is my favorite that you hate me and that I should leave and that you have a new baby boy love who understands you laughs at the way you dance and doesn't follow you around and make you feel bad when you open your legs I love it when you open your legs you scream in that voice that I love so much that caught me in Aunt Monica's Corner store on that warm summer day that made me leave my mother's side made me forget that she was even there to look at where it came from deep and honeyed relaxed confident made me follow it and try to record it for later Marvin Gaye *Let's Get It On* I say when I found you remember and you laughed deep honeyed and said that I was crazy where is your mother you asked then I remembered that she was still there in my space in my time waiting waiting I asked where did you come from where were you hiding you grabbed your throat with dainty lemon drop hands and caressed it like the keys of a piano and said you had always been there everywhere and I returned to my insecure self that gained confidence with that deep honeyed laugh and thought I can't have her if she is here there

everywhere and you stopped me in my tracks and touched me with the lemon drop  
fingers that held the deep honeyed voice and set me on fire and I whirled into you and  
never wanted to let you go remember I yell at the window as you look down and drop my  
clothes making them look like rain stop that people will think we are over over how will I  
explain the rain no clouds no moisture you shut the window and pull the curtains you  
bitch I hate you I scream at your back as you walk away your shadow dressed in red from  
me you walk further into the baby boy love that is not me I can't be blamed I say he made  
me do it I think love made me do it I learned from him the way a hand would fit over the  
eye I watched him watched her sit there while he did it while he smashed the smile from  
her face the pride that she used to have took away the lightness in her steps the order in  
her day his hands steely weapons her face target practice she sat there I sat there couldn't  
help her wanted to help her kill him but my arms wouldn't leave my side couldn't do it if  
I really wanted to cause he was my father and I was his son and sons can't kill their  
fathers cause fathers have a hold cause fathers are what sons want to be what I wanted to  
be and my mother knew that she could not compete with fatherlove and she turned from  
him and turned into me and my mother was there always there after that I couldn't  
breathe without her there resented her wanted her to take back her smile take back her  
sticky love erase the scars that filled up her face like paint red blue green on her skin skin  
like yours like what I loved to touch and remember lodge in my brain cause I knew it was  
only a matter of time before it would be lost on me marred by me hated by me me I said I  
was sorry would get help you told me it was okay held me as I cried and blood dripped  
from your face and blended with my tears in my favorite shirt he is to blame I say leave

him leave my mother who suckled me to her breasts when her eyes swelled when her  
throat was torn from her her laugh so far gone that yours deep and honeyed was what I  
was looking for wanting needing I float to the corner and watch your shadow looking at  
me I raise my hands as if to surrender to let you know that I know that I can't help it  
don't leave me I say on the corner with the old lonely men who try and pass me a pint of  
Wild Irish Rose I can change you said you would help me I mouth to you can you see me  
someone joins your shadow is that the baby boy love you threw in my face now I know  
how it feels how a gloved hand feels against open flesh against lemon drop skin against  
open heart my mother whispers to me her voice like gravel angry that she let her throat  
be torn away I walk towards her and the sun hides from me ducking beneath the shadows  
dark grey red is that you are you following me with that baby boy love hand in hand  
behind me taunting me playing with me like run spot run see spot run to Jane see Jane  
smile what is Jane smiling at little black boys run from spot from Jane from her shadow  
her hands long and thick you held me in my dreams protected me from spot in Jane's  
hands on his leash towards my face teeth extended jaws tight on my leg don't give up on  
me not now when I need you see spot run large white towards me I run from spot into  
your arms my mother's arms like fluid not sturdy like my father's hands that are grafted  
steel bone under leathery brown flesh against her liquid face like what I wanted all my  
life you took love away don't leave me now I float in her liquid glide into steel don't go I  
love you love me too

## What Do We Do?

### I

Midnight Asudo hands betray him. They shake even as he tells them to stop. Midnight folds them behind his head trying to look causal, calm, but it doesn't work. He thinks of Clarice, his wife, her cancer weary body. Earlier Midnight told her that the call had been someone who had seen Zahid that they could tell him where Zahid was. As he put on his hat, Midnight heard the phlegm in Clarice's voice as she sang:

*Nearer my God to Thee  
Near to thee  
E'er though it be a cross  
That raiseth me  
Still all my song shall be  
Nearer my God to thee  
Nearer to thee*

Now the white cop in a blue uniform with shiny gold buttons comes closer and pats him on the back. Midnight is sitting adjacent to the silver doors that made his hands shake when he first saw them. He takes his hands from behind his head and stands up. Then sits down again. Midnight doesn't have the courage to move forward and so he just sits there shaking his head and looking at his large brown hands. The sight of the smooth flesh frightens him even more. When was the last time that he had touched his boy? The last time that he wiped away Clarice's tears?

"Mr. Asudo?" The cop says as he places the tips of his hands on his shoulders. "I know this is difficult... but we need for you to ID the body."

“Ok.” Midnight stands up and walks towards the silver doors. They go in and walk down an aisle surrounded with large silver containers. Midnight tries hard to focus on his shaking hands but all he can think of is the fight that he and Zahid had the other day. Midnight only told him that he couldn’t live in his house for free; that Zahid’s shit didn’t stink. He didn’t tell him to get himself killed.

The cop stops abruptly and Midnight bumps into the back of him. Embarrassed, he mumbles “Sorry” and looks at the floor. The cop sighs and pulls back a white sheet covering a body. When Midnight sees Zahid’s face, his legs buckle under him. The cop holds him by his elbow and walks him back out the silver doors.

“Are you ok, Mr. Asudo?”

“What happened? What happened to him?” Midnight slides onto the bench, his shoulders slump.

“They found him behind the Pick-N- Pay on Kinsman about 5:00 am this morning.”

“How did he die?”

“He was shot, Mr. Asudo.”

Midnight looks back at the door and without looking at the cop he says, “Can you call Majestic Funeral Home and ask them to pick him up?”

A few hours later, while sitting in his car, Midnight thinks of Clarice again. He knows that she is lying in bed—in their red brick house on 75<sup>th</sup> and Hough—sickly, tired, worn out from the years of struggling with the cancer and with nothing to do with her fingers. Once she was a seamstress—known for the way she held her needle, the intricate

stitch that held hems, the ease in healing ripped pants, delicate beading on wedding dresses...

Midnight remembers that Clarice was once very beautiful: full lips, almond shaped eyes, long black hair, and lemony skin. Midnight had been attracted to her then, but as she got older and sicker, he turned away from her. Now all they did was argue over how to save a seventeen year old who thought he was a man. That night after Midnight kicked him out the house, three days ago, Clarice came down the stairs in a cotton robe opened at the middle. He could see her dingy slip and the skinny legs that used to be shapely. Midnight turned his head at the sight and waited for her.

“What are you yelling at him about? She reached the bottom of the steps and began coughing.

“Clarice, go back upstairs.”

“What did he do to you?”

Midnight watched her from the steps and wanted her to cover herself up. “He don’t act like he living in my house.”

“How is he supposed to act? And talking to him that way won’t make it better.”

“He can’t stay here and not clean up after himself. And he can’t come in here at anytime of night. This is not a hotel.”

“A hotel? Come on, Night. He just wants to have fun. That’s all. Why can’t you do that? Why can’t you let him have his fun?”

“You need to stop spoiling him Clarice. That’s his problem. You have spoiled him since day one.”

“He’s my child.” She coughed loudly and walked down the stairs into the front room. Clarice’s hair is covered with an old Brown Sugar stocking. Her feet are bare.

“You need to go back up those stairs and get under some cover.”

“Where did he go? Did he say?”

Midnight walked over to her and untied and retied the robe, covering up her legs.

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask.”

“So, just like that you put him out? Our son. Where is he going to go?”

“I don’t know Clarice. I don’t know.”

## II

*“Zahid used to need me once. When he was a kid. A boy. A ginger-colored boy with wide eyes and a head full of curly hair. You know how boys love their fathers? How they walk around and do everything that you do? Well, he used to do that. He used to watch me shave in the mornings, holding my legs, staring at me with those wide eyes. He would come down the stairs with my uniform shirt on telling me he was going to deliver mail, just like me. Zahid would sit in the front room right up under me, watching the Cavaliers, yelling at the T.V. just like I did. He loved me and I felt it. I knew he loved me and I ate it up. Back then I was everything to him. I used to go to the Lowdown and play pool on Monday’s after work with the fellas. I would come home after ten and he would*



*be right there on the couch waiting on me. Waiting on me. I used to grin like a Cheshire cat, my chest out proud that my boy waited for me. I was real proud back then. I loved him because that's all I wanted to do. My daddy wasn't there when I was a kid and I felt left out a lot when I was growing up. So I told myself that I wouldn't do the same. If I had a son I wouldn't make him feel left out. I would always make him feel wanted.*

*And I did just that. I would ride him hobby-horse on my knees, his body flying like a rag-doll, laughing like I was tickling his insides. He used to hold on like I was really going to let him go. He would scream through laughter and tears saying "Let me down," and when I stopped, he wanted me to do it all over again. Those moments were good for me.*

*Any extra money that I had left after I paid the bills I spent on him. If we were Downtown and he saw something in the May Company Department Store window, it was almost as good as his. Even if I had to save for it. I would and did. I remember the time he wanted one of those Schwinn bicycles—a red one with silver handlebars that he saw in the Plain Dealer—he cried and asked for it. I got it and we spent a whole Saturday putting it together. A whole day for a bike that he didn't even know how to ride. But it didn't matter. I wanted him to feel like he meant something to me even though I didn't feel it from my own daddy.*

*I tried hard to be strong for him too. I didn't want him to feel the type of pain I used to feel as a kid lying in bed with my big brother, Juney, asking him if Daddy loved us. If he was coming back? If he knew that we were waiting for him to come home? Juney didn't know and I didn't know and my momma didn't know even though she tried*

*her best to convince us that he was. She would sit at our kitchen table, ladling Pinto Beans into our bowls, telling us that our father was coming back; that he was just away for a little while; that he wouldn't be long. That he couldn't let himself forget about us because we were important to him. But I didn't believe it. Neither did Juney. And we wondered how she could?*

*But my boy Zahid, one day when he was six, came to me in tears. I thought someone had hurt him. And I jumped up ready to kill someone. I grabbed him by his shoulders and asked him what was wrong. Through all the tears I heard him say that Polk, our dog, was dead. He wanted to know what happened to him. He wanted to know why Polk would leave. I looked in his eyes and saw a pain that I was trying to keep him from ever feeling. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't look back into those wide eyes because they were filled with something I had been running from all my life. Something that I felt every time I sat at that table, playing in those beans, feeling and knowing that my father wasn't ever coming back. The pain of those days coming back again as I watched Zahid. I just held him and told him that it would be ok.*

*That entire week after Polk died, Zahid sat out back. I would sit back there with him and no matter what I did he wouldn't leave. He would fall asleep back there waiting for Polk to come back. How could I explain to him that the dog was gone forever? How could I tell him that the thing he loved more than himself at times was lost to him forever? I couldn't tell him. I didn't know how. I couldn't even explain it to myself—could not convince myself that no matter how many things I made up that my daddy wasn't coming back after work to play catch with me and Juney; or run around our yard*

*with us playing, “it”, screaming until the back of our throats were sore.. My father wasn’t coming back. I would go out there and look into Zahid’s little face, his eyes sad like my eyes used to be sad, longing for the same thing that I longed for, and there was nothing that I could do. There was no answer that I could give because I didn’t have one; I couldn’t work through my own confusion so how could I help him through his?*

*It felt like after that that things started to change. I felt like Zahid stopped believing in me, stopped needing me. He changed and turned from me.*

*After that night, when I would come home late from the Lowdown, Zahid would be in his bed. Not sleeping on the couch. Not waiting. I used to think that maybe he was just too tired. Over time he stopped watching the games with me and stopped coming around me as much. When he was older, I would rub his head and he would snatch away from me like I had a disease or something and say, “I’m not a kid anymore,” in a voice that I didn’t recognize: one that had changed without me knowing it. It was then that I really looked at him. The little boy with the wide eyes and curly hair sat at my table with a Caesar cut and was lean. He was someone that I no longer knew and it hurt. It hurt me that he didn’t need me or seem to need me anymore. It got to the point where I stopped even looking for him when I came home. I would go straight to the front room. Not caring if he was home or not.*

*One day, when he was thirteen, I walked into the house and saw him in the kitchen with his mother. She was standing at the sink holding her hands under running water. She was looking at him and telling him something and he sat there glued to everything she said. He looked at her the way he used to look at me. Right then I got this*

*feeling in the pit of my stomach, an uneasy feeling, like I was falling under water and somebody's foot was holding me there. My lungs were filling with water that I couldn't get rid of, and it spread through my body. It was swallowing me and at the same time taking me under, and I hated Clarice for that. I hated her for being outside of the water; for being able to swim while I was drowning. She was taking my place and I felt that left-out feeling again. Felt that pain that glued my body to a chair and my hands to a spoon that I couldn't raise to my mouth. Afraid to let him go because I needed him more than he needed me.*

*I didn't know how to act. The more he turned from me, the more I turned from her. The more he stopped talking to me, the less I had to say to her. When they found the cancer I sat there while Clarice cried. I kept my hands at my side and I felt silly. I felt really silly about hating the mother of my child because she was doing what a woman is supposed to do. Love her child.*

*I needed to feel like he needed me still. I figured since his mother was sick that he would need me. But it didn't work out that way. He got even more distant and the only way that he talked to me was when I was yelling at him. If he left a glass on the table I screamed at him; if the milk carton was empty, he was to blame; if there were clothes left in the bathroom I made him sweep the whole house; when he came in after curfew I took away the phone. I tried to find ways for him to even say anything to me and most times, when I yelled at him, he yelled back.*

*I picked at him and she picked at me. I yelled at him and Clarice would scream at me. Then she started to get weaker and needing me more and I wasn't always there for*

*her. But no matter how weak she was, she still fought for him; and I hated it even more that she was sick and still they were a team.*

### III

After leaving the hospital, Midnight drives along Wade Park. He passes the Hough Branch Library and sees little kids in bright hooded jackets—some with fur around their hoods, some without—on the front lawn. Black and tan dogs run around the edges of the grass, barking, threatening attack. Midnight watches them out of his rearview mirror as he drives. He can't go home yet. Not yet. And even if he did what would he say? How could he tell her? Midnight drives until he reaches Superior that intersects with Eddy Road and he smells the fish without seeing the Shrimp boat restaurant. It is across from Ebenezer Baptist Church; the homes surrounding it are as manicured and stoic as the church itself.

Midnight reaches Eddy Road and turns left. The Lowdown Bar is at the end of the narrow street and once he gets there he parks his car in a slanted parking space. It is 7:00pm and the lot is crowded. Walking towards the door he sees his reflection in the window: his once bright skin is two shades darker, and the hair at his temples is thin. Midnight's face looks older than his 40 years. He takes off his cap and wipes lint out of his hair before going in.

Inside, bodies lean over dusty pool tables while fingers dipped in chalk handle pool sticks like surgical tools. Balls like oversized marbles hit each other. Long-legged

women in skin-tight mini- skirts and painted on faces, arch their backs, like calico cats, on the juke- box. Newport's, Virginia Slim's, and Winston's dangle from their lips.

In the background, a voice sings the blues while black bodies sway like shadows—the words of the song becoming their own—: Love gone wrong. Heart ready to explode. Man got you down. Woman ran away. Paycheck a long time away.

When Midnight walks in he sees Ollie bent over a glass. His jet black curly hair makes him stand out. Ollie is wearing the same thing that he had on the other day: a red blazer with one pocket instead of two, a pair of blue jeans that have a hole in the right knee, and a white shirt with dirt spots on the cuffs. Midnight walks over to the bar and sits on the stool next to Ollie. He rests his hands on the counter. It is sticky.

“Still running from trees?”

Ollie looks up at Midnight, picks up the glass, drinks and swallows loudly. “I’ve been calling you all day. Where you been?”

“Had to run some errands. Needed to get out of the house.”

Ollie looks him up and down. “Talk to Clarice, though. She didn’t sound too good. And she was acting crazy saying you kicked Zahid out.”

“She always worried about that boy.” Midnight studies his hands and thinks of his boy wrapped up in the white sheet and the way it contrasted against his dark skin. The way it made death seem formal. “I told him to leave if he was too grown for his britches.”

“What he do?”

Midnight calls Larry the bartender over. He is a bear of a man with his sleeves rolled up to his massive elbows. Larry still wears an afro and his eyebrows are as puffy as his hair.

“What you having, Night?” He asks taking a rag and wiping at the bar top.

“Let me have a Jack on the rocks.”

“On the rocks?” Larry’s puffy eyebrow lifts and he shakes his head at Midnight before picking up a glass. “Long day?”

Midnight lowers his head and then turns back to Ollie.

“Well, why you kick him out?”

Larry sits the glass in front of Midnight and walks away. Animated, Midnight turns to Ollie and says: “I came home from work and he was sitting there.”

“Ok... that’s it?”

“Yeah, man. And then I walked into the kitchen and there was a bowl full of dirty milk on the table with little cereal flakes floating in it. The sink was full of dirty dishes.” Midnight pauses then looks back at his hands. “I lit into him, man. I’m at work all day to take care of him and he can’t even clean up after himself. Can’t even put a bowl in the sink?” Midnight reaches for a peanut, shells it, and tosses it into his mouth. “He didn’t even say hello, Ollie, not a word. And when I was yelling at him he just stood up and walked away. While he was ignoring me I told him to get out.”

“Over a bowl? You put him out over a bowl?” Ollie leans his head back and laughs. “You are a strange man, my friend. A strange man.”

“He didn’t even speak. Not a word, you know.”

“Where he go?”

“Don’t know man. You know, I would kill to know that my daddy even cared enough about me to fuss at me. That’s all it was Ollie. I was fussing because I care about him.”

“Did you tell him that?” Ollie looks at Larry leaning back against the ice cooler and asks for two more rounds.

Larry sits the glasses of dark liquor in front of them and Midnight looks at him and points to him. “Larry, listen. If you came home every day from work and your house was a mess...a mess... and.... and nothing was done...how would you feel if your boy didn’t speak to you? Didn’t part his lips to say a word?”

“I can’t call it, Night. I can’t call it.” Larry walks towards another customer tossing the dirty rag across his shoulders.

Midnight watches Larry then turns back to Ollie. “What do we do when we can’t do anything at all?”

“You got to tell him, Night. It ain’t enough to show ‘em. You got to open up your mouth and tell ‘em.”

Midnight swallows the Jack and looks at Ollie. He pats his friend on the back. “Get home soon.” He gets up from the bar stool and walks back to his car.



#### IV

*“How can I tell her? How will I find the words to tell her? How can I say that I was jealous of the little boy that changed into a man that I didn’t see? How can I tell her I died the moment I saw her hands under the running water with his eyes glued to her mouth? How can I tell her that I didn’t want to touch her because I knew that she had touched him and stroked his head, leaned over his shoulder as he sat at the kitchen table and rubbed his face? She loved him up-close because she could. Because he let her.*

*She’s already too weak. Refusing to stay up under the covers, buried. She refuses and the doctors don’t give her much time to live. I don’t want to hear the phlegm in her voice while she says, “What’s wrong with him? He’s ok, right, Midnight” The fingers like chopsticks holding onto the banister as she stumbles down the stairs, up from under the covers. Her body smelling like Vicks Vapor Rub, the Brown Sugar stocking on her head, her feet bare. Always bare even though she complains that the floor is too cold. Clarice walks around with bare feet singing hymns in that voice that makes me think of sorrow and deep sadness. And weary people who live only for other people and not for themselves. I can’t bear it today; can’t handle the heavy coughing, the pale skinny legs, and the bones jutting out of her robe. I can’t do it. I don’t know how to tell her that he’s dead.*

*I see her, always see her, sitting, waiting on me and I don’t want to see her. Don’t want her to know that I used to watch him sitting by her side, early in the mornings,*

*rubbing her hands that used to be strong and agile. I used to see Zahid tucking her under quilts she made. I see him even when he isn't there. But I can't tell her about that boy who rubbed her aching, idle hands; who loved her, who listened to her scratchy throat sing death songs. Songs of redemption; songs of forgiveness. Songs that I heard him singing when she fell asleep buried deep under the quilts that her hands made.*

*I can't tell her. Not yet. Not without feeling like I let him down like my daddy did me. Like he did every time I went to sleep and prayed real hard that he would walk up the stairs with a big smile on his face.*

*I can't tell her that the boy was just a boy; a boy wanting to play stick ball in the street. A boy who wanted to run behind fast girls, the boy who rolled up the sleeves on his lean, ginger-colored arms, to pitch the ball, wait for the stick to connect with the ball, connect with him so that when he caught it, he was charged; the boy who hung out on corners trying to impress anyone who walked by with his new deep voice—the one that changed without him even knowing it—and silly new dances he learned in the school yard after school instead of coming straight home like I told him to. That boy who was beyond my reach, that boy. That boy who sat, mesmerized by lemony hands under running water; that boy free to make his own decisions, make up his own mind about who he wanted to sit up under; who he wanted to give his love too, wanted to smile at, talk too. That boy, who I loved, who she loved, was dead. Dead on a table and covered with a white sheet. Stuck behind silver doors, silver doors, and dead.*

## V.

Sitting outside of his house, Midnight turns the car off. He has been gone since the phone call early this morning. He sits. Midnight looks up and sees the light from his bedroom window slicing through the branches of the trees. Clarice is up. Waiting. In her robe. Not tucked under the covers. Midnight takes his finger and traces the steering wheel then rubs his hand up and down the dash. He knows she is waiting and as soon as he comes in, as soon as the key clicks and the lock turns, Clarice will be at the top of the stairs. Hair under a stocking, bare feet, always bare, waiting on him to tell her something.

He grabs the keys from the ignition and gets out of the car. Midnight walks up his walkway and sees Ollie's wife, Cecilia, sitting on her porch. He waves and goes into the door. He is startled when he sees Clarice. She is standing in the doorway.

“What took so long?”

“Can you let me get in the door good before you go jumpin on me?” Midnight takes the key out of the door and closes it. He walks past her into the front room. She follows him.

“Did you find him?”

“What you doing out of bed, Clarice? Didn't I tell you to stay under the cover?”

“I can't sit up there not knowing about Zahid. And you know it.”

“Why is it so cold in here? Why didn’t you turn on the heat?”

“I ain’t cold.” Clarice coughs and her body rattles like a tambourine. “Where is he, Midnight?”

“I’m cold and I need heat.” Midnight walks over to the thermostat and listens as it clicks on.

“Did the person see him?” Her voice gets louder and she walks over to him and grabs his arm. “Was he where they said he was?”

Midnight looks at the chopstick fingers, the dark splotches on her hands, and the eyes that look as if they are floating outside of her head, and knows that Clarice can’t handle it. He understands that this one last thing would kill her for sure. Midnight grabs her hand and kisses it. He then holds it in his. “No. They didn’t see him. I will look for him again in the morning.”

## The Voodoo Man

Celia Page saw the sign, “*Want to live again? Call the Voodoo Man—788-2563,*” and knew that he could heal her legs. The sign—written on large cardboard that looked like someone had chewed at its edges—sat in the window of Webb’s barbershop on the corner of Superior and 123rd, in Cleveland, Ohio. Celia, walking slowly to catch the number 10 bus, wouldn’t have stopped to see the sign if Webb hadn’t poked his head out of the shop that morning.

“Where you going with all them legs?” Webb, in his early sixties, widowed since Jesse ran for president the second time, was short and stocky with dark circles under his eyes as if he never slept, smiled at Celia and bowed down several times to her legs. The bald spot on the top of his head reflected the early morning sun each time he bent over.

“These old things ain’t been up to no good.” Celia reached down and smoothed the brown fabric that covered her legs. Some mornings it took her hours to get out of bed and when those days started to become more frequent, Celia tried hard not to remember the muscle that she watched disappear each year she was away from dance.

“Well, they sho look like they up to something.” Webb smiled in remembrance of the shape of Celia’s hidden legs. His smile reminded Celia of the talk show host she hated to watch but always had a hard time turning from. His guest crazy and imperfect, his smile wide as any mouth she had ever seen. Celia wondered then, as she is now, “Why smile so hard? What will be left for the real thing?”

“They taking me to this here bus I’m about to miss fooling with you, old man.” Celia laughed and waved Webb away and when he ducked his head back into the door, she saw the sign, read each word twice, then picked up the pace for the bus that was taking off without her. When Celia sat down, she looked at the veins in her forty five year old hands and tucked them under the black purse she was carrying. Celia thought back to the sign and couldn’t quite figure out what made her keep recalling it in her mind—“*live again?*” She herself had died twice—the first time when Henry Page, her husband of 15 years walked out the door for a pack of Camel’s and never returned. The second time Celia died when she fell at a dance recital and couldn’t get her legs to act right again. Those were deaths; complicated deaths that she hadn’t recovered from. So if this Voodoo Man could help her live again, even after both of those, then maybe it was worth something.

The Saturday after she read the sign, Celia woke to a dull throbbing in her legs. She sighed heavily and cursed herself for forgetting that she was old. To live again. Those words rose up like mist and settled on her like a blanket. If only she believed in such foolishness. If only she could wake up with new, fresh legs that could pirouette at the snap of the fingers, not after agonizing hours of trying. Celia lay there wishing that the throbbing would go away on its own and when it didn’t she forced her legs to the floor, her feet into powder blue slippers, and slowly walked down the stairs to the Aloe Vera plant that sat in the windowsill in her kitchen. It was the only thing that seemed to help her legs—to sooth the ache— and she kept a plant around at all times. Cutting a leaf open with a pair of dull scissors, Celia sat at the table rubbing the Aloe into her legs

wishing that she had memorized the number. Something had to be done she thought and all this rubbing and rubbing only for her legs to resist—her hands alone weren't enough. Suddenly she realized that the Voodoo Man was the only answer. Celia stopped rubbing, put on clothes and walked to Webb's barbershop.

As Celia walked to Webb's, she thought about the time she tried to make it as a dancer again. Trying to make a comeback wouldn't have been all that bad if all the girls around her weren't really girls—young, muscular, taut with breasts and perfect buns that highlighted their perfect alabaster skin. They surrounded Celia with legs sharp as toothpicks, satiny tippy-toe's on the only thing as dark as her—the oak colored Ballet Barre. She was 33 then, still trying to convince her legs that they still had it in them. Her frame wasn't as strong as it was before the accident, but Celia still looked like, even if she wasn't, a dancer. Her 5'10 frame in the leotard would make any man whistle still.

The teacher, long like a gazelle with muscles that rippled as she walked beside them, had a pale oval face with painted on eyebrows that made her look like the Mona Lisa; her black hair was in a perfect bun as well. Celia was good, on the verge of great, before she fell then watched Michael, her partner, fall on her already aching and rapidly swelling legs. As Michael tumbled down, Celia saw the end of her life and the beginning of something she had been running from since she had memory: an oppressive mother who ate pig's feet floating in jars, put cracklings in cornbread batter, choked pork chops in oil; walked around the house in flowered housecoats that were never buttoned all the way up, exposing secrets, with pink sponge rollers in her hair. Celia saw Teeney, Tomato, and Kenya, girlhood friends, sitting on red milk crates in front of Aunt Monica's

corner store, lips curled, sucking their teeth because they always knew that Celia's high nosed self would be right back where she left them. Right there to take a seat next to them to eat peanuts out of grease spotted brown paper bags, throwing the shells at alley cats that ran in between their legs. Celia saw all of that and it hurt—a pain that shook her to the core— worse than the cast and physical therapy.

Charlie Parker, known as the Voodoo Man, didn't know how to live himself. But he worked hard to help other's figure it out. Or at least he pretended to. Charlie Parker was a fraud. He spent his days in his house, mixed herbs and water, shook a rice filled ball on a stick over the mixture, and handed it to people as they sat in front of him. Seated in a high backed wooden chair, Charlie sat and listened to old women who wanted to call their dead husbands back, young men who dreamed of untapped fortunes, lonely women who wanted to catch the young men who whistled at them as they walked past stoops, old men who couldn't figure out how to keep their women happy *and* home at the same time. Their wants gave Charlie a power that he was unable to hold on his own.

They came to him holding out hands shaky with folded bills; some with coins wrapped in handkerchiefs, and reached out to him to be reassured that what he advertised was what they would get. Charlie knew that all they wanted was the show, pomp and circumstance, the illusion. Not the real thing; a truth that would cripple them further—that there was nothing that they could do to make their situations better, no matter how hard they tried.



These were evident truths that Charlie saw in their eyes, felt in their hands as money was passed, and he sometimes wanted to shout to them to wake up and realize that life was already over for them. But to do that would mean that Charlie had to admit, come to terms with the fact that his life, too, was over. That his life hadn't been much of anything but a false reality that he had constructed to give his life some meaning. That everything he tried—being married to Ida; working at the phone company; trying to take care of his mother—had all gone to shit simply because Charlie had nothing to offer.

Charlie couldn't afford to see his own truths so he made himself ugly to disguise the fear that he felt about his own powerlessness. Charlie stopped bathing regularly so that his dark skin had a hardened glaze to it. His hair was unkempt and down to his back and only allowed the slivers of his eyes to be seen. Charlie's nails, large and flat, no longer had the health and shine of his youth; now they were dull, caked with dirt. He wore a cracked brown leather jacket fringed at the sleeves throughout all seasons. Charlie's truth was that he had no truth(had no place in this world) and the look in his eyes—empty, sometimes ravenous—made people feel that his elixir was there for the taking.

Some days it was a burden, the hollering, chanting, shaking of sticks over herb juice that he could pour over a chicken breast, cook, and eat. When a customer wanted something more elaborate, like blood for example, he would cut the neck of a rat and let the blood drip in front of them. Charlie's stomach turned at the site of the blood dripping but his face was as cold and still as stone. Sometimes when the days seemed longer and the nights never ending, the Voodoo Man would take the "*Come In,*" sign off his door

and sit in the darkness and silence of nothingness. It was during one of those moments—a cool day in October—when she walked in without even saying hello.

“Can you really give me back my legs?” Celia asked as she stood in front of him.

“Well, can you?”

“I can only do what you allow me too.” Charlie stood up and walked towards her.

“Charlie Parker.” He did something that he had never done before: he reached out his hand to her while bending at the same time.

“I want my legs back.”

“I can give them to you. What is your name?”

“Will it help with my legs?” Celia looked at the hair. It must be a marsh under there. Water rushing to break free.

“No. But it would be nice to know who I am helping. Makes the process easier.”

“Celia—Mrs. Celia Page.”

“Humph.” Charlie looked at her ring finger and made a mental note. It was bare.

“What can I do you for? I have herbs to help you lose weight. Tonic for a cough.”

“I want to dance again. I want to wake up in the mornings and not cry because my legs are in pain.” Celia rubbed her legs and saw something move in the wilderness. Was it pity? Did he pity her without even knowing her?

“You was a dancer, huh? Where you dance?”

“Mr. Voodoo, is it?”

“Naw, call me Charlie. That’s the name my mama gave me. These fools round here call me Voodoo. Call me Charlie.”

“Charlie. How does knowing all of this help me?”

Charlie saw the same look of desperation in her face like the countless others. The layered pain, shook confidence, desire to make something that may not be wrong, right. But with her he wasn't bothered. Charlie felt something for Celia the moment she stood in front of him. “What's wrong with your legs?”

“They are ugly through and through.”

Charlie walked towards her and reached down and ran his index finger over her right leg. “They pretty to me. So what's wrong with them?”

“If I tell you will you fix them?”

“I will fix them.”

Celia sighed heavily and thought about telling him about her past life, the years she tortured her legs on tippy-toes, the years she neglected them only to see them turn on her. Celia looked into the wilderness and saw the danger expand, become more perilous.

“They broke. Now can you fix them?”

When Celia walked into her home she thought about the nerve of Charlie Parker to grunt when she called herself Mrs. Page. Yes, she was still married even though Henry had been gone for years. Celia stopped herself from thinking about him after a year and it had been some time since she thought about him in any way that mattered.

When it did matter, Celia wondered why Henry gave up on her. Why cigarettes? Why not leave for a million dollars or a ruby from the queen's crown? I couldn't even compete with wrapped tobacco on white, slick, licked-closed paper. I was his jewel,

Henry told me one time. Said he knew he was rich when he found me because I was shiny like a real jewel knew how to be. I believed it, lived it, tip-toed in satiny shoes in it, rolled in it; made it one of the reasons why I didn't fear coming home. Home. My home now that he walked away.

Dinner. It was dinner I was working on—roasted baby lamb with mint jelly, new potatoes with parsley, french green beans. Table set, fork, knife and spoon—they glimmered in the dining room light— for plum pudding dessert. We didn't eat in the kitchen like Henry said he and his people did. There were no jokes, or whiskey in Mason jars. Just fresh, clean cups and glasses for wine that I had heard of, never tasted myself— suggestions from the other dancers I worked with. They didn't actually tell me directly— no— I had to listen while I stretched.

Henry walked in that day, came into the kitchen and opened the oven. “Uhm...lamb?” He kissed me on the cheek like he had for the past 15 years, and then went to the front door. “Be back, Celia, going for a pack of Camel's.” I let the lamb sit in the oven too long so that it was rubbery; the new potatoes with parsley became old and the plum pudding became sour. The place settings were never moved and I sat in the open living room—French furniture with grand legs, end tables with exquisitely carved lamps with shades that had brass trimmings, and a wooden floor kept polished for satiny, pointy toes—and waited for Henry to walk through the door with Camel's.

It took me five years to wonder what it was that took him away. I had lamb on every anniversary of the day that Henry left and on the fifth anniversary, as I bit into a piece of lamb dipped in mint jelly, I knew what it was that sent him away. The lamb no

longer was edible, it no longer had any flavor—it was soulless—Henry had watched himself lose his soul every time we sat down to eat. No kinfolk slapped him on the back in the dining room—none ever came or were invited. I didn't have mason jars full of sweating ice and whiskey; he wasn't anything more than what I had made for him. Henry wanted his life back, his kitchens with the laughter, deep fried foods, and turnips soaking in pot liquor. Henry needed to find his soul and the lamb wasn't the answer. I wasn't the answer. I had lost that battle each time I served him like we were at a fancy restaurant; each time I yelled at him for drinking out of jars instead of cups, each time I twirled my little brown self out of reach.

It had been a week since Celia had began drinking the hot green drink with black speckles. She was leery at first when Charlie Parker handed her a fistful of tea bags with what looked like grass in them. Not even a bag to carry them home in. Just, “here, steep these once a day for at least ten minutes to get the full affect.” “And how am I supposed to get this home?” Celia asked. “The same way you got your hands here. In your pockets.” He then got up and led her to the door. Celia had followed his directions to a tee, using her old egg timer to make sure that it steeped in hot water for the full ten minutes. The Voodoo Man also told her to drink it without sugar so as not to dilute its strength. After that first morning, her mouth tingled and she tasted vinegar and pepper the entire day. If she didn't want her legs back so badly, a few cubes of sugar would have

found its way in. Celia, trying to fully believe the idea of herb healing, used the same cup and spoon everyday to hold and stir the drink.

Celia stood up from the table and walked the cup and spoon to the sink. She then went upstairs, and for some reason felt like sitting at her Vanity again. It had been years since she sat there under its lights. Her application of makeup was so skillful that she could have been paid to do it. Under those lights Celia saw the star that she was, what others could not see. Celia flicked on the switch and when she saw her face she quickly turned the lights off. She wasn't that old really. But the crow's feet lingered around her eyes, her skin was multi-colored, not the once rich mahogany that it used to be. Celia sighed. She would never be a white woman or be like the young women she saw as she rode the bus to work: breasts hanging out and long legged with brightly painted pouty mouths that called to men like silent whistles. They were ordinary women to Celia, but she saw them in magazines, TV shows; saw men dying to get to know them. Even other women languished over the effortless beauty that these women held. Celia was told without even looking in the mirror that she had to take a back seat, that she was a part of the old that kept getting older, not better. So Celia turned her head from the sassiness of youth; decided that if it didn't want her, then she would not play it for what it was.

Celia turned the light back on and stroked her legs. Celia was pain free and she remembered that she was once one of those women. Celia went to her dresser and opened the last drawer. In it were her ballet shoes and leotard. Celia picked up the leotard and held it against her body. Her heart fluttered. This is what life is, she thought to herself as she grabbed the shoes. Life is about the real second chance.

The old dance school hadn't changed: red brick with a white awning that had rust spots the size of nickels on it. The name, "*La Petite Madame*," was written in large, white script letters. It was the same building Celia used for her first comeback. Celia walked into the front door and a blond woman with hair cropped to her ear sat behind the desk. Things had changed on the inside. Celia didn't remember a day when she came to practice that she wasn't greeted by a cheerful, more sophisticated woman. The woman behind the desk was frumpy, wore a black smock-like shirt that was hanging off one shoulder exposing her freckled skin. There was nothing in this woman's face that was inviting. She looked up at Celia after she had been standing over her for five minutes.

"May I help you?"

Celia was apprehensive but spoke. "I want to sign up for classes."

The blond lady's gaze took in all of Celia and when it returned to Celia's face, her nose turned up like something smelled funny. "Our classes are for, uhm..."

"I used to be a dancer so I don't have to start at the very beginning." Celia absentmindedly touched the bag with her leotard; her shoes hung from their laces around her left wrist and they knocked lightly against her thigh.

"Miss I'm not sure that we can help you here."

"I went here before. Check your records." Celia reached to take out her wallet from her purse and the swinging shoes hit the desk. "It's been awhile but I paid on time and I can pay now."

The lady shook her head and breathed in slowly. “Look, you can work with our intermediates. They are about to start now.” She pointed to a door that was familiar to Celia.

Changed, Celia walked to the door and almost couldn't walk into the room. The same perfect little bodies from before were lined up at the Barre. The teacher, a different gazelle with burgundy hair, didn't say a word to her but looked annoyed that she wasn't already lined up. As she walked to the end of the Barre Celia heard snickers. She went through her warm-up exercises ignoring the laughs that became louder as she went on.

After the warm up, Celia smiled to herself because her legs felt like they did before the accident. She told herself to make sure to thank the Voodoo Man. He indeed had magic in his fingertips. He had made her whole again, made her viable and worthy. The burgundy gazelle motioned for her to come to the center of the room. Celia held her head high as she stood in the perfect turn-out position. Her heels touched each other and her hip joints were in a perfect 90 degree position.

The teacher started with the first command, “*Arabesque.*” Celia bent her right knee, extended and lifted her left leg off the ground, and did the same extension with her right arm. This simple command any ballerina could do and it had been so long since Celia could that she broke out into a wide grin that made the other girls around her stop laughing.

“*Jete... entrechat....*” Doing both of these without a quiver of pain in her legs, Celia looked at the now silent girls and smirked at them. They would one day feel the emptiness that comes with the absence of youth. Men who only looked at them because



the young thing they ran after didn't want anything but their money, not affection. They would feel it too. The teacher called out her last command, "*Assemble,*" and Celia prepared for it, for this jump, by sweeping the air with her left leg. As Celia swept the air she felt something like a gathering in her left calf. It was a familiar feeling, but she kept up her movement preparing her right leg for the jump. Celia told her legs to push off, to jump in the air. But they would not move. Celia's smile now became strained and in her mind she was chewing the Voodoo Man's fingers off. He had done this to her; and now her legs wouldn't move. Celia calmed herself, lowered her head then brought it back up. Celia saw the pouty mouth girls whose breasts seemed to shut out the sunlight, whose presence seemed to take the rejuvenated life out of her legs. Celia had to prove that she was still one of *them* despite what they said, despite what she saw. She did one more sweep with her leg then pushed off. In midair Celia felt herself breathe again, and when she prepared to land on both feet as the movement called for, her legs buckled in as soon as her feet hit the floor. Celia didn't scream in agony; she screamed for them to leave her alone.

Charlie had been waiting on Celia to come back. He had purposely given her only enough of the mixture to last a week. When Celia left he took the sign out the window and turned people away when they walked onto his porch. Charlie needed to see and help only Cecilia and he knew that she needed the same. And when he realized that to be the case, Charlie smelled himself for the first time in a very long time. Death and musk is

what he smelled like and he was repelled by his own scent. In all these years, life didn't mean much therefore what he looked like didn't mean much. The day Charlie realized that he wanted to mean something to Celia he gargled with some mouthwash and pulled his hair back into a ponytail. He realized as she stood in front of him that first day that he vulnerability was real, not forced. He wanted to fold her in his hands and protect her. Charlie did this for an entire week, practicing what he would say when she came back.

Charlie didn't even go through this much trouble with Ida, his first and only, wife. Ida had given up on their love after she realized that he was incapable of any form of reciprocation. Ida stopped needing him when he finally realized that she needed taking care of. He was too late; had ignored her for so long that when Ida left he closed up himself for good. It became plain to Charlie that his failure as a good husband was the culmination of every other thing that he had failed at. Until last week, until Celia walked into his house. Charlie waited because he believed that he could stop the need that outweighed the desire; stop it before it took over her completely. Charlie saw her walking up the porch; he checked his clothes and pulled his hair back tighter into the band that held it in place.

Celia limped into his front room and stood. Her eyes were half screaming, half pleading.

“You said that this would work! You told me you could save my legs.”

“I did save your legs. Do they hurt?”

“I tried to do turns,” Celia tried to do one and almost fell. “See, I can't even do a basic turn. How is that healed? Huh, tell me.” She was screaming now.

Charlie looked at her and put his hands in his pockets. She believed that he could save her with ground up tea leaves soaked in vinegar. Charlie believed that he could save her another way. “You need more,” he said, trying somehow to reassure her, calm her down. “It’s better the second week.”

“Second week? You think I am going to give you more of my hard earned money so you can play the fool game with me? Not again.” Celia was visibly shaking now and had to lean onto the wide back of a blue and white plaid accent chair.

Charlie walked towards her and reached out his hand to steady her. “Don’t touch me. I am a married woman. My husband would kill us both if he knew you touched me.”

“Where is your ring? Where is this Mr. Page?” Charlie was irritated now and he let his hair out of the ponytail.

“That is none of your business. Matter of fact, Mr. Parker, I want my money back. I want it all because you don’t make people believe that they will be better when you know that they can’t.”

“You made yourself believe that. You believed it before you even asked. Before you even knew if I could.” Charlie started pacing back and forth. “What do people want from me? What do you want? I can’t change back time. I can’t give you back something that isn’t lost. You live in a place that doesn’t exist, Celia. I can’t help you with that. I can’t.” Charlie stopped, realized what he had just said and a crease of concern folded in his forehead.

Celia opened her mouth to say something and closed it quickly. Those pouty mouthed long legged women were on his side as well. They danced around him, pressed

their breasts against the wilderness, their muscled caves like blinding fire. “Thank you for your time Mr. Parker. I have to get home and fix dinner for my husband.”

Charlie followed her to the door. He reached for the “*Come In,*” sign and hung it on his front door. Charlie took off his leather jacket, dropped it on the floor, and he watched her limp down the street knowing that she would never dance again.

## The woman who wept while ironing

And here he is—stuck in the belly of the black whale. Will they look for his black body amongst the blue-white ashes? He thinks of this as his arms tingle, stuck under a beam of concrete. His fingers stuck to the railing that he held as he walked up the stairs to confront *Anton*. The elevator was out of the question. It would make him seem weak—like his wife said he was the day she placed his things on the stoop two months ago in July. His neighbors in Fort Greene, Brooklyn looked at him as he tried to push his way into the front door. While he banged his body against the door, he watched his clothes fall from the sky—red and blue flannel shirt, basketball shorts he coveted because he hadn't worn them since he got married, and a white shirt whose sleeves flapped like the wings of doves.

Now, he tries to cough the flames out of his chest—they have eaten away at his lungs and he tastes the remnants of charred tissue. Tastes regret, feels the same heat he felt when she told him in July that she was leaving him. It was hot. Steamed rolled off stoops like waves into windows cracked far enough to catch the little bit of air that swirled. It was July 2001 and the heat was oppressive and he was sitting in his blue and white boxers at the kitchen table. She—dressed in a red skirt that did not hit her knees, and a white tank top that refused to hold the sides of her breasts or hide the tips of her nipples. She stood across from him, her eye shadow like glow in the dark stickers, washing over him as she blinked her eyes rapidly. He knew she needed to say something—had always been that way, the rapid blinking of the eyes when she can't find

the words to say what she had been trying to say for some time. When they first got married at City Hall in downtown Brooklyn, they talked about kids, and she smiled at him with blinking eyes. Three weeks later, he felt dizzy every time he looked at her because of the way her eyes moved. That day he grabbed her by the waist and covered her eyelids with his right hand.

“What is it?” he said as he held her.

“I don’t want kids. Never have.”

He let her go, leaned back against the raggedy stove—grease marks like scars on pale flesh—and watched her walk away. It was July and when she said, “I’m leaving,” he got up, put on grey sweatpants—in all that heat?—put on his red flannel shirt and walked out the door. He went to the train station, took the number 2 train to Grand Army Plaza, and took the B train to Prospect Park.



She is glued to the red upholstered chair that they had shared once. Earlier she had gotten the phone call and cleaned out the corner of her eyes with her pinky finger before she really understood what was going on. The voice on the other side—loud and shrill, Anton’s sister, Lela—, asked her if Anton was there with her. She had to do a double take because he was just there, she thought, in her dreams, maybe. *Not* there—no—he was there, earlier, right? Or maybe he it was in her sweet dreams that he had flowed freely like her breath through the phone to her new man’s sister, Lela. Lela, her girlfriend from Stuyvesant High School on Chambers Street. Her girlfriend who could not live without

weave or a pack of Kool's. Her girlfriend who told her about Anton, her brother, even though she knew she was married. Her girlfriend with legs like chopsticks, skin like creamy peanut butter. Her girlfriend.

She digs harder at the eye-crust that is gone and sits in the chair as it replays. What is going on, she thinks? The smoke and debris is in her throat now, strangling the scream that is trying to make its way up her larynx, to her windpipe, out of her mouth. Her new man, Anton, is there in the burning, crumbling building, and her old man told her he was on his way there to stomp Anton, grab him by the tie, *that punk*, to tell Anton that he was taking her back. Her fingers finally let go of the chair to go straight to her colored hair.

It was April 2001 when she found her new man. Fulton Street Mall. Full sidewalks. Heads lowered to the ground. Bodies. Black bodies, yellow bodies, brown bodies, long bodies, taut bodies, short bodies vibrating like a lost rhythm they are trying to recapture. A beat that orders their lives, warns them, somehow. She watched the bodies while she was in Bakers Shoes, trying on red pumps. Lela stood over her shoulder. "Girl, those look good on your feet." She got up and walked across the room. Looked at her feet in the mirror, she saw his face: caramel, long, angular. Thick eyebrows. Goatee. She smiled despite herself.

Lela rolled her eyes. "That's my brother."

She looked away then looked back again. Something dropped in her and she was empty again like before. Like before City Hall. Like before when she walked the edgy streets of Manhattan, The Bronx's, China Town, Brooklyn. She was empty and then she

was on her back. Anton inside her. Her eyes closed and Anton is looking deep inside her. She rubbed his eyebrows with her thumb. He pushed her thumb away. Muscled legs pinned her to the bed. Her hair—Honey Brown # 9, was bunched on a down feathered pillow. Anton is strong, she told herself. He is strong enough for me.



*What, could you not watch with me one hour?* He tries to lift his head. It aches. I waited. *Not for me?* He is at the Lake in Prospect Park. It is his reflection. Nothing. Nothing was there anymore. It seemed as if he had lost all of himself on the train ride. With each stop, the automated voice of the operator peeling off pieces of him, leaving them behind as each door closed, until finally he was here standing, seeing nothing of what he used to be. Shit, he thought that day in the Park. She was right. Had to be right. She told him he wasn't man enough for her anymore. Man enough? *Watch with me one hour?* I didn't have an hour. I needed to get there. Needed to tell him I was man enough. Was ready to take him down to show him I was man enough. I didn't have an hour. Number 2 train, express. Straight to Wall Street. Who has an hour anymore? One second is all it takes for life to be different. For life to change, be something totally different from when you left it, turned from it a second ago. Tick. No Tick and Tock. Just a Tick and she was not mine anymore. Was his. Saw him in her eyes, they did not blink when she said his name, Anton—they did not move one time when she said he was there. Time was not what I had. No sir. None at all. *One hour?* I told you did not have an hour. *People always in a rush to go where they not wanted.* She wanted me. I just had to make



her remember. That is why I could not wait and watch for that hour. I lost her in a second, you know, a second and I don't really know how. I just know that one day she was mine, in my arms, eyelids fluttering like hummingbird wings. I turned my back and she was different. It was a second and she was different and I didn't know who she was, couldn't know who she was so I got silent. Quiet trying to find out how I lost her so fast, in a second, and wondering how I could get her back. I thought I knew how to do it and now I am stuck, you see. Splintered beams holding me down from him, Anton, so I can tell him that she is coming back to me.



She weeps for Anton at the ironing board. She licks the tip of her index finger and tests the plate. It burns slightly and she leaves it there a little longer. She weeps for Anton. Anton made her better, she thought. Better than her old man had in a long time. Anton was fresh, hot, fresh and hot, and now she weeps for him. Earlier she laid her dress across the arm of the couch. Now she reaches for it and weeps for Anton. Then suddenly she thinks, who will weep for me now? My old man is gone, too. Anton never wept for me. Not him. Barely got him to come out the house with me. Was always tired from work, he said. Tired of fighting, tired of the neck ties tied too tight by someone else's hands; tired of conversations around him, but not for him. Tired. Too tired to fight with me too. He wouldn't let me touch his eyebrows. Couldn't even touch him after he was inside of me. But he made me better right? Made me better than my old man had in a long while. But, who will weep for me now? Who?

She picks up the dress and pulls it over the tip of the ironing board.



Do grown men cry? He thinks to himself as he hears the voices call out. They are scared, he thinks, scared of death, scared of dying alone and unfound. The regrets they have, the names they call out of people that they didn't tell that they loved, breaks up the steady flow of whimpering. He hears them struggle. Hears them fight against death, its grip tightening. Death doesn't scare him, doesn't make him cry silent tears. The thought of Anton, out, with his wife, scares him. Anton. Anton should be here. Not there, but here with him so that he can take his wife back. So that he can tell him that men don't take what isn't theirs. That men don't love another man's woman, doesn't make her dress differently, or make her wear eyes shadow that glows in the dark.

And she won't ever know. Won't ever know that I rushed here for her, not Anton. She won't know that I am stuck in the place, underneath these beams, surrounded by people who have regrets. She won't ever know that I am not afraid of the walls that tumble down, not afraid of the fire that licks at my skin. She will never know that I walked up the stairs for her, that death is easier than being without her. No, she won't ever know this and they will never find me so that she can kiss my forehead one last time, be my wife one last time. No, she won't ever know.



She is in black. Lela is in black. The brownstone in Park Slope is black. The sun is bright outside but inside is black. She stands at the mantel staring at the picture of her Anton in his suit that he wore to Brooklyn while she clutches a wallet-sized picture of her old man who went marching for her honor. Who went marching to a death he didn't know was happening to save her from herself. Across from the mantle, there is a table full of food. Pots of mustards and turnips; pans of fried, baked and barbecued chicken, bowls of potato salad, tins full of cornbread and white bread, macaroni and cheese in flowered casserole dishes. Coconut, red velvet, and caramel cakes sit like anchors on each corner of the table. A blue plastic cup holds forks and spoons; knives sit like paperweights on napkins folded diagonally.

It is meant to be a balm, meant to sooth the grieving, but she feels no comfort. Her eyes are bare, empty as she looks at the mantel back down to her hand. She realizes that the thing that she was running from—the deep darkness that was inside of her had grown— and it was nothing that anyone could do to stop it from taking her over completely. Anton, she believed, could do it, had the strength to pierce through the darkness. She was wrong, knows this, makes up her mind to go, and stuffs the wallet picture into her black purse. Lela comes up behind her and rubs her back with sweaty hands. Her back is now damp and she wonders if Lela can feel that she is rubbing through to her skin?

“Girl, how you doing?”

“As best as I can, you know?”

“I wish we could have waited longer but my mama...it would have killed her to wait until they found him.”

She wrings her hands and looks towards the door. “I need some air.” She walks past Lela and out the door, down the steps, and to the stoop. Before she can leave, she feels the hands on her back again.

“Don’t go. We need you here. And you don’t need to be alone.”

“Didn’t you know I was married?” She turns and faces Lela. “Didn’t you know I had a man at home that I left every day to be with your brother? Didn’t you know? Didn’t you know that my man sat and watched my back leave his home so that I could go lay on my back at somebody else’s?”

“I didn’t get into his business. He’s a man. I didn’t get into his business.”

“He was a man. I am a woman. Does that change it? Does that make this easier?”

Lela looks up and stares hard. “Didn’t you know that *you* were married? Was I supposed to remind you?”

She stands there.

Lela places her fingertips on her girlfriend’s shoulder. “I wanted to wait and see if there would be a body. I needed a body to make it real somehow. Mama, she knew when they called her. I didn’t know and I realized that I was the only one that didn’t know and I figured that if I found someone else who didn’t believe it was true, then it wouldn’t be. You didn’t believe it either. I heard it in your voice. Don’t stop believing it.”

And here they are—lost in a self that they know nothing about. Had forgotten, really. It didn't amaze her that she had lost them both—it startled her into clarity: she had lost herself while trying to find a new thing. Now she stands on Flatbush Avenue. Her arms folded across her aching breasts. Far away, they come in droves. She worries if the bridge can hold them all or if it will swallow them up to protect them because it seems as if no one else can. She stands there, her earrings sparkle in what remains of the stingy sun. Her eye shadow no longer matters. She tries to see him.

## Life in Bebop

A cop shot Donald in the eye as he be-bopped on the corner of Prospect and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in downtown Cleveland, Ohio and he so happen to be there be-boppin and bumpin his gums when the cop rolled up in his black and white the sirens wailing like hungry babies and when Donald looked up he felt the cop burn holes in him and Donald turned his head as if the cop wasn't there but when he looked up the cop was out of his car hand on his

pistol John Wayne like asking them what they were doing and Donald cut his eyes sideways then shook his head and continued to be-bop years later Donald would tell Juney, Sandman, and Bayboy that on the inside he was shook up and that it felt like the cop had his balls in his hands squeezing them each time he walked closer and Donald would tell them through liquored teeth that his mouth was dry and that be-boppin was the last thing on his mind but it was all he could do to stay calm but—

no one knows what really happened after that just that Donald was shot and that he lay on the ground wriggling like a worm whose head or tail had been cut off and that the cop who held the pistol John Wayne like was thick with chalky hands and didn't really care about Donald but how could he? How could the chalky hand cop care or know unless he asked: *why are you be-boppin on this corner, not yours?*

But the John Wayne like cop didn't and if he looked closer he would have seen the nice blue suit that was too big for Donald but it was the only one he could borrow at the last minute with the grey and white polka dot tie that fell too far over the belt—he never learned how to tie it right—with holes in it made by the tip of a butcher knife from his kitchen and the beat up dusty shoes that Donald wished looked black instead of cremated grey in the light but—

The cop with chalky hands didn't ask and if anyone dug deeper they would have known that Donald had just won an award from a job he had been at for twenty years fresh out of high school pushing a mop up and down up and down a long lonely hallway where people walked past him every day without a hello without a grunt without a *move the hell out of the way* and if the cop or somebody had asked they would have known that Donald was just as shocked as his wife Sharon when he got the letter in his

paycheck that was stapled with an extra staple that pricked the sides of his index and thumb and with bloody fingers he found the letter that said he was selected as the employee of the Year and that he was going to get an award at a fancy banquet and when Donald sat down at his lopsided kitchen table and thought about it he realized that he had no idea how to hold a teacup or a fork the right way or how to unfold the napkin the way that would signify that he should really be there surrounded by silver that he only looked at in catalogues that

would blind him and startle him and make him numb with craziness so when the time came to say the thing that Donald had practiced in his hallway mirror: *thank you for noticing me thank you for seeing the shine on the floor thank you for not bumping me thank you thank you* but he sat there frozen at the fancy banquet numb with craziness so he needed to let off some steam and as he walked Donald saw them there snappin and O man he loved to be-

bop now after he was shot in the eye and rushed to Mt. Suicide and his wife Sharon was called she called Midnight to give her a ride and she sat in silence on the way to Mt. Suicide and when Sharon got there—not by Donald's side but the front door of the hospital— she was thrust in front of a reporter who smoked heavily and was told to tell *his* story and Sharon was stiff as air dried sheets in front of the camera because she has never had this much attention on her and because the reporter

had the best looking shoes Sharon had ever seen and they were pink with a pencil thin high heel that Sharon wondered how the reporter walked in *and* smoked at the same time because Sharon knows that she would have to think hard just to wear those pink shoes and look good and walk without falling in them and when she finally loosened up Sharon bat her big brown eyes and told Donald's story and said to the world that her husband had been shot by a

white cop for no reason and that she forgave him and when the cameras were off the reporter thanked Sharon and with a nod the reporter went on her way the pink heels clicking on the concrete as Sharon watched and wished she could wear them wished that Donald wasn't laid up in a hospital room with his eye hanging out and Sharon wondered how she would feel when she saw the blinding white over his black empty socket and Sharon tried to calm herself as

she walked towards the door because now she was cold with fear and rage and when Sharon pushed open the door Donald was in the bed his fingers locked into the metal the walls like cotton his grandmother had picked Sharon's face flat like paint trying to figure out what to say how to say it although words cannot compete with the hurt deeper than the wound and Sharon smiled and caressed his steel hands but she looked away from the white/black eye because Sharon knows it hurts more for him to be left like this and Sharon

thinks *Oh hell* what about the boys the boys she stifled a scream and thought harder about the pencil thin heels attached to pink shoes that looked like real leather like a second skin only more comfortable but really not really and suddenly ashamed Sharon realizes that she can't really save the boys so what could she do with them forever? Will herself to stay alive to make sure that they survived the boys the boys and not get their eyes shot out because surely



they will the boys the boys will want  
to be like their fatherfather have his  
genes his eyes his sharp nose eye  
brows thick as lamb's wool  
connecting they would and Sharon  
knows and she looks back at Donald  
and wonders what she will tell her  
boys how to let them down easily  
easy easy about life and the dangers  
of it but Sharon knows how to  
comfort a grown man already done  
with the simple things in life but how  
to ease it

to the boys so that the imagination  
won't go right away so that they can  
still play vroom vroom with the  
orange metallic Tonka Trucks what  
about Sharon? She knows that she  
was the carrier of muscled boy bones  
soon to be man bones can she  
function in Donald's limitless light  
gone but still blinding throbbing on  
the sidewalk and Sharon holds  
Donald's steel hands trying to figure  
out how to be whole again after holes  
were put in her—

and Donald is glad that it's just the  
two of them because he knows what  
she is thinking and Donald wants her  
to stop needs to know what to tell  
Sharon tell anyone? Anger Donald  
thinks would be the thing to tell his  
sons that he felt when Donald finally  
sees them scared he knows that they  
will be clinging to Sharon afraid of  
the emptiness behind the white white  
bandage holding onto Sharon sons  
sons like at night when they are  
scared to sleep in the dark boogey  
man if Donald looks at them too long  
but anger—

*I'm angry about this space about this  
opening that's already open and  
empty but they can't know of the river  
of space that was always there made  
deeper by the hallways that were  
littered with ease for me river of  
space that had no boundaries that I  
tried to wade through for them sons  
sons for them help them O Lord help  
them see past the emptiness the  
spaces let them come to me still come  
not afraid of the fatherfather not  
afraid of the boogeyman eagleman*

*horseman that my face has  
become O Lord let them come to  
me yes let them come to me and  
see—*

Now as Donald lay in that room  
in that space afraid to piss  
thinking about brightness and  
instead of pissing counting the  
individual burst of light the  
chalky hand cop named Thomas  
sits in front of his sergeant  
looking into the sweaty palms of  
hands like rivulets of mirrors  
and the sergeant in a sergeant  
voice gruff and worn out by  
Newports tells Thomas to keep  
his head up and stay alert

You need your mind he says in  
a Newport laced voice to protect  
the law always the law was  
made for us to protect the body  
from wrong harm danger the  
excitement went away when  
Thomas learned there was no  
*real* danger no *real* threat to

to his existence and something had  
to give someone had to give and take  
the disappointment away from being  
protected and cherished and  
someone needed to replace that with  
the admission that fear brought fear  
for self fear from the ordinary and on  
that corner Thomas saw fear bottled  
up in a black body and ordinary went  
out the door up through and out the  
handle and nozzle of the gun

But Thomas did think about that  
singing black man and knew that  
there was much more for him to fear  
with grief at home with a wife who  
hates ordinary and didn't think that  
Thomas was much a of man until he  
joined the force—and Thomas knew  
that his wife who is blond tall with  
blue eyes and hateful ways got it  
honestly from a mother and father in  
Covington, Kentucky who lowered  
their eyes and refused to send Lily  
with a dime to Ohio because he  
wasn't more than what they were  
and they knew it but Lily with the

blue eyes Lily said to Thomas that any black who stares down the law of the land get's what's coming to them and she tells Thomas Lily with the blue eyes at many a meal on many a night and exclaims that in Covington blacks don't live like *they* do now in a two level green and white house with five bedrooms where only two get used with 2 ½ baths with the ½ bath

downstairs in a dank corner contrasting with the otherwise brightly painted house with red carpet that looks like blood and Thomas hates the feeling of floating in blood and while Thomas is driving he sees the eye hanging out of the socket like a Yo-Yo waiting for someone to pick it up handle it make use of it but Thomas knows that it ain't so that no one can put it back together again and he can't think about it keep his head up the sergeant says and he drives and drives—

—and blue eyed Lily sits on the phone with her other blond friends talking about the shooting and she is worried about Thomas and Lily asks her friends if they saw the news if they saw that the blacks almost took away her only reason for living and that the blacks almost took away her right to worry about her man who was protecting all of them from scum like the one

Thomas shot *and* did they see the black bitch who said that she didn't know what her husband did to be shot but that she forgave Thomas with her kinky hair and bag lady dress looking like a black deer Lilly reminded her friends and they sat in silence and Lily went on and on about Thomas saving the world from mongrels and street thugs and suddenly Lily drops the phone because *Just In* flashes across the screen and there is breaking news about a cop killed while chasing a

a thug and right then Lily hears the doorbell ring and she gets up and closes her robe that she got from J C Penny's and Lily hesitates because because even though it is her duty and her right to be the wife of a dying cop and even though she would be ready to fall and cry a fallen husband's cry Lily wonders why she is this prepared this excited and the doorbell rings again

pierces her like a needle at the base of her long white neck and it scares her that the bell is still ringing and Lily unties then re-ties the knot of the J C Penny robe that is scratchy and more for comfort than pleasure and Lily pushes her hair back checks her face in the mirror by the door just in case just in case she has to be prepared and Lily walks slowly towards the door and she thinks of the black bitch she called a black bitch and her stomach tightens and for a moment Lily is sorry

sorry and thinks about calling her friends back to tell them that she didn't mean it but changes her mind because she doesn't want to seem weak or that she cares for the blacks and so Lily walks closer to the door places her hand on the knob opens it and is disappointed that Thomas is standing in front of her with a crooked smile because he forgot his key—

## Private Things

I did I did I did love you once on that warm day in June in Aunt  
Monica's Grocery before I knew you before I knew the you that hid behind the sun's  
rays skin like silk hiding behind the yellow blending with the fire red apples the  
green leaves that you held in your hand as you held your mother with the other

You dressed in plaid pants with short sleeves the color of tea hair nappy at your  
ears eyes squinty like mice hunting in the night She fair as a white woman on West  
Blvd scared to come to Cleveland hair black as tar frail it seems dependent  
pensive fingers like straight pins piercing your skin hands squeezing like a nutcracker  
on your sweet aching bones stuck on every phrase sentence word stuck on the green  
leaves that you held

And you moved like the ground was air towards an airport you never went to  
only dreamed of eyes closed dreaming of flight as if you had wings to fly away to  
leave her side only to be swept back by the wind that was her friend back to this space  
her space back to holding onto green leaves and an old woman who led you to me

In front of me in that garden where I looked in your eyes and saw the birds  
flying in them saw you flying with them and my breath was taken I grabbed my throat  
to try and pull it back try and pull you back from the flying birds that wanted to take  
you away from me when I just found you found you in flight even though you were  
standing in front of me

In front of me you walked your hand guiding my hand your back long and lean and something that I wanted to stroke to caress to let you know that I was safe with you safe in the park that we walked through children painted on benches the swings that reminded you of flight

The silver chains like wings captivating you stopping you in your tracks so much so that I slammed into the leanness of you at each swing each leg each brown saddled shoe that goes higher and higher you wanting it to be you right then I knew but didn't want to know couldn't risk it not for you I wasn't able to love air wasn't able to love something that I couldn't hold onto

And when we lay in each other's arms I thought of lilies and you I thought of how good you were to me and I thought of the white ladies with long hats and flowers behind their ears with wide grins and dogs with glass teeth and how you talked about them in your dreams as they chased you right to me and I was thankful for them thankful that the birds left your eyes thankful that they sent you to my bosom to my arms

We loved and twisted into each other like vines growing against a wall hungry for each other starved when one was gone and I smiled happy that I could hold onto to you hold onto the sweet bones that cracked in her aged hands ached to be free

Then you changed turned your back to me took your love cried to the moon hide from the sun but you still swore that you loved me that you needed me but then it changed

The first time the first time you did it you slammed my head against the wall  
that was your prison my prison for I loved you and was unsure of how to do it  
unsure of how to keep you grounded when I knew you were meant for me

But that all changed I got tired tired of the blood tired of the pain that ran  
through my body like a pulse a beat through my arms legs heart my throat on fire  
the tips of your fingers a part of me

I did I did let you come back said you were sorry I was sorry that my  
daddy left my mama sorry that she had to sit by the window and cry at night her  
eyes deep like wells in the valley covered in green and yellow and wild flowers  
watching for his boots the ones that laced up to the top the top of his muscular calf  
that I rode when he used to come home

Boots long boots muddy boots the only thing he had left after they asked  
him to that office filled with their whiteness bore holes in him made him think of her  
sitting at that window eyes that never fill tension rose in his shoulders his body shook  
but he did not move grins all around him sorry they said too many of you such a  
valuable worker hate to let you go maybe next winter they made him understand his  
place made him see his blackness and when he came home to us daddy there she sat  
and rocked

And I saw her face like plastic eyes glued to the door and I knew that I had to  
let you back let you in because I couldn't sit and rock couldn't rock without you

But I did rock and sat like her frozen by despair shocked into loneliness  
her appetite curved she was me I saw it as she sat as I sat I did I sat even when I

tried not too And rocked like her and cradled my breasts and felt myself to make  
sure I was still still still there waiting like her wanting not to be her but I was her I  
rocked and rocked you until

That day in June while you cried to the moon and wedged your heart I watched  
the birds leave you for good when you sat out with the old men who we laughed at  
prayed for when we were in love not in pain and I saw them leave one by one  
feathers blue white black red the tips leaving and each time they did I saw a  
piece of you leave after that the white women got stronger meaner their hats longer  
blocking the view of the birds stealing them from you I watched and knew Cleveland  
becoming less and less apart of you apart of us the streets blurring into one  
HoughWadeParkCedar EddySuperiorKinsman

He loves me my new man that's what he says with teeth like ivory lips like  
caverns that I can live in hands like rivers that swallow me bath me he protects me  
watches me like I am one of his own yes he does love me smiles when I do the  
funky chicken strokes my hair asks me about my dreams where I want to go far from  
you I say he smiles a beautiful thing sings to me not like you cares for me like I  
am one of his own

Plays with my wrist holds them delicate is what he said at first when he  
reached I jumped mind raced back to the iron that was your hands to the grip that bled  
them dry he smiled reached for me again held them nice delicate kissed them ran  
his fingers up and down them loved them let them breathe



At night when the wind blows melodies through the open window and I am  
asleep only not asleep in a dream that is you that has been seared into my mind he  
traces my temple memorizes the scar the length of it the contrast of it on my skin  
the way it curves like a smile and he knows and he sighs and I sigh and I grab his  
hand and trace it too and I think of you and sometimes sometimes when I am outside  
of myself outside I see his face I see the frown the way his eyes goes blank when  
he sees the smile that is lighter than me

## America

The day that America Jones robbed Top's barbecue joint over on Eddy Road, he wore a mask that covered everything but eyes as shiny as marbles. If Joe Turner, the owner of Top's, had seen America's hair—the unruliness of it legendary on Cleveland's Eastside—, he wouldn't have blown him away with his shot gun. After the police pulled the ski mask off, Joe Turner shook his head and said out loud, “Aww man, what the hell he do that for?”

The Saturday afternoon of America's funeral, Joe closed Top's. Saturdays were his busiest and most profitable days but it was the least he could do. Joe figured that if he didn't make some gesture, that people would think that he was okay with killing America. Joe sliced up some brisket and sausages, put two containers of cole slaw, a container of barbeque sauce, and a loaf of white bread in a brown paper bag, and took them to America's house. Joe was about to knock on the door but stopped. He had killed a boy, a boy who lingered on corners like cigar smoke. A boy. Joe decided he didn't want to go in and when he turned to leave he bumped into Ethel Waters, president of the usher board at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

“Where you going, Joe?”

“Can't do it Ethel.” Joe had on his black suit that he wore when he ushered at Ebenezer, a grey fedora he kept firm in a hat box, and black wing tips.

“You owe her that.”

“I know. But I can’t. Give her this for me, ok?” Joe handed Ethel the bag of brisket and sausage and walked to his brown Cadillac with butter cream leather seats. He got in and tipped his hat at Ethel and started the car.

On Tuesday—a week after America’s funeral—Joe Turner went to Webb’s Barbershop to get his usual trim and shave. The shop was filled with a mixture of old men and young boys. A few of the younger ones talked and laughed to themselves; some of the older ones sat around a table in the back of the shop playing chess. One boy—lanky with yellow skin and freckles that looked like the tips of flames—who Joe had refused to give a job to—, leaned against the old Pepsi Machine that hadn’t worked since 1980. Paul, the barber who had the chair by the back door that no one ever sat in, was eating a bag of plain Lay’s; the crumbs littered his beard like dandruff. The TV was set to Donahue.

“How you been, Joe?” Webb shook hair out of the black cape, placed it around Joe, and snapped it shut. He then took a bright white neck strip and covered Joe’s neck with it.

“Why the hell did he try and rob me?”

“Why do kids do anything these days.” Webb took out his clippers and punctuated the air with them. “I been trying to figure these kids out since I got here. They ain’t changed, Joe.”

“If I had known it was him...”

“What would you have done?” Paul crumbled the empty Lay’s bag and stuffed it in the pocket of his uniform jacket. The tops of his brown hands had white splotches on them, as if someone had sprinkled bleach on them.

Joe turned his head toward Paul.

“Joe Turner. Keep your head straight or you will walk out here with a chili bowl cut.” Webb turned Joe’s head back and chuckled.

“I could have told him to sit his narrow ass down, you know? I saw that boy all the time. I saw him when he was doing wrong.”

“Hell, he was always doing wrong. You know Sheila, the one who work at the Lowdown at night and Cosmos Beauty Supply over on MLK Drive?” Paul didn’t wait for anyone to answer. “Well, she said that America robbed them a week before he came to you, Joe. Said it felt like she was shitting bricks when he put that gun up in her face. He got them for over five hundred. He asked for it if you ask me.” Paul now stood closer to Webb’s chair.

“Ain’t nobody ask you, did they?” Webb took the neck duster and brushed off pieces of hair on Joe’s head. “I didn’t see you at the funeral, Joe.”

“Webb, you know I am a simple man. I get up in the mornings. Make barbecue, go home and Usher when I have to. Why he have to try and rob me? I don’t bother nobody.”

“How you know he cared it was you?”

“He could have been my grandson.”

“But he wasn’t.” Paul reached inside his pocket for the crushed bag, pretended it was a ball, and aimed it at the trashcan.

“I know he wasn’t. But he was somebody’s, and I took him away.”

“You can’t bring him back, Joe Turner.” Webb adjusted his chair so that Joe was looking up at him.

“I should have saved him.” Joe closed his eyes as he felt the warm lather on his neck.

As he drove home, the soft leather seats reminded Joe of how far he had actually come. He moved here from Roanoke, Virginia, in 1968 right when Carl Stokes became the first black Mayor of Cleveland. When Stokes was elected, black folks all over Cleveland were shocked, scared, and excited. Scariness ruled their hearts the first year Stokes was in office; they feared for his life more than their own. Once Stokes made it through that first year unscathed, they celebrated cautiously. Joe came in the middle season of fear and decided that he didn’t want any part of owning fear. He wanted to run around it, avoid it, like he did most of his life in Roanoke. Cleveland was better and it gave Joe more space to be who he knew he should have been in Virginia. Joe Turner played and dated any woman that he wanted. He played craps in damp alleys on St. Clair and ran the streets until the wee hours of the night. Joe did this for five years and when he discovered that he liked to cook—and was good at it—, he opened up his own barbecue joint. Now, at 50, he was the only one of his friends that still had a head full of

natural black hair, a build like a basketball player who stopped working out, a handsome oval face the color of stadium mustard, and a house that he owned.

Joe lived around the corner from Top's on the end of Eddy Rd that was closest to the freeway, and spent his nights with his woman, Vera Washington. Joe had no desire to marry; Vera lived with him and worked beside him at the restaurant. The neighborhood wasn't as kept up as he would have liked. Youth, Joe decided, at 40, had no room for peace. That's why the houses on Eddy didn't look cared for, but ruffled and busted, like they were in a perpetual boxing match. Joe figured that he would be an example, keep his house painted—green, always green—and his yard up. Vera planted forsythias and tulips.

Joe drove past Top's and remembered that he had given America a barbecue sandwich one time. Joe tried to get him to eat it inside, tried to get him to leave those knuckleheads he was with alone. But he couldn't. Joe slowed down and almost stopped but remembered that he promised Vera he would take her to Silverman's in East Cleveland. He looked up at the sky—it was turning a pale purple and the clouds looked like they were attacking each other." Lord", Joe thought, "why me?"

Joe was in the back preparing a rib dinner. He turned back from getting the slaw from the cooler, and on the table were locks of hair. Joe looked around. He was the only one there. That hair Joe had seen before, had tussled, had watched go limp as the owner slid to the floor. Shit.—Joe said out loud and closed his eyes. When he opened them, the locks of hair were gone. "What the hell? Joe, you ain't crazy. You ain't seen nothing."

A few days later, Joe walked into the kitchen and barbecue sauce was splattered all over the floor and walls.

“Vera?” Joe pushed opened the swinging door.

“I’m taking an order, Joe. What you want?” Vera stood at the counter; the back of her shirt had a yellow smiley face and “*Top’s*” in large, cursive letters.

“Did you spill sauce and not clean it up?”

“What you talking about, man?” Vera turned to Joe and raised her left hand with an order pad in it. “When did I have time to go in the kitchen?”

“Somebody is playing. Come look at this.” Joe opened the door wider so that Vera could see in.

“Joe, I have a line out the door. You gone clean it up or keep showing it to me?”

“Somebody is playing and it ain’t funny.” Joe let the door close and he could have sworn that he heard a chuckle.

That same night, while Joe was in a deep sleep, he heard someone calling his name.

“Joe Turner.”

“Huh? Vera, I’m sleep. What you want woman?”

“Joe Turner.”

“I said what you want?”

Joe felt a slight tug at his elbow and he jumped up. “What you....” Joe looked down at Vera. She was dead asleep on the other side of the bed, her body wrapped like a

mummy in the cream and red down comforter. Joe saw something at the foot of his bed and jumped off the bed.

“What the hell you want? Why you in my house?” Joe walked towards the thing. It moved towards him and Joe started swinging wildly. Joe felt like he was suffocating; something solid and cold touched his skin.

“Get out of my house! Get out of my house!” Joe was out of breath when Vera sat up in the bed and looked at him like he had lost his mind.

The next day at the restaurant, Joe stayed in the back. He hadn't been able to sleep after what he saw and his eyes were red and stinging. He spent most of the day making dinners, mixing slaw, dipping ribs in sauce, and slicing 7up pound cake. He kept as busy as he could and made sure that his eyes didn't focus on one thing, or spot, too long. So when Joe finally let his eyes rest, the thing that woke him out of his sleep, stood right beside him.

“What's going on with you, Joe Turner? I called that order back to you ten minutes ago.” Vera looked at Joe over the counter. He was standing at the fryer, the metal basket still in his hand, the catfish fingers turned soggy.

“Huh?”

“I said, what is wrong with you? I need those fingers.”

Joe didn't move. “A'ight, Vera. It's coming. Don't rush me.”

“Rush you? You want to get paid, right? Then I suggest that you rush it.”



Joe Turner dropped the basket and the sizzle of hot grease drowned out the voice that he was hearing. It didn't blot out the face with the glorious, unruly hair that stood beside the fryer.

"Why you shoot me, Joe?" The head and face were the same—hairless, box shaped. The hair like what he had seen on his table a week ago.

Joe tried to look past the head, the face with skin the color of black licorice; he wanted to ask Vera if she saw anything. But he knew better. He was just going crazy. 50. He was only 50, he thought to himself. It shouldn't happen this early. When Joe saw the curls of smoke, he took his eyes off the boy and saw Vera standing next to him.

"Go home. Just go home, Joe. You about to burn up our future."

Joe sat in his den with all the lights on. He got his old, heavy bible and placed it in his lap, the black covering wrinkled like parchment paper. Joe closed the bible and said a prayer. "God, Lord, please, I thank you. Please take this spirit away from here. Away from this place. I can't do nothing for it, Lord. Tell it, Lord. Tell it that I can't do a thing. Please, Lord. Amen."

America sat across from him in the pink La-Z-Boy Vera insisted that she had to have.

"Why you shoot me, Joe?"

Joe leaned forward. "Why you try and rob me?"

"I had to. They told me to."

"You were a good kid. You didn't need to hang with them."

“I needed them. We needed each other. I didn’t have a gun, Joe. Why you shoot me?”

“Paul said that you had a gun over at Cosmos. Why would he lie?”

“People lie all the time, Joe. I didn’t have no gun, Joe.”

“Leave me alone.” Cold spread in Joe’s chest and for the first time he realized that he was talking to a dead boy

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t you? I ain’t done nothing to nobody. I go to work, church, home. Stay to myself. Please leave me alone!” Joe’s voice echoed throughout the empty house.

When he stopped, America was gone.

It was bright and sunny outside when Joe woke up. The shades were open and he reached for Vera. She wasn’t there and before sitting up, he whispered, “Go on, now.” He sat up and saw nothing. Joe put his bare feet on the wood floor and walked downstairs. Vera drank coffee from a silver cup. Her skin glistened like dirt after an early morning rain. Her silver streaked hair was in a ponytail; she still had on her red housecoat with outlines of bunnies on it.

“Glad you joined us this morning.”

“Don’t start, Vera. I had a long night.”

“I know.” Vera stood up and walked to the cabinet. “You want some coffee? Eggs? We late, Joe.”

“Vera, look, my head ain’t been right since...”

“You scared me the other night. Real bad.”

“You was scared?” Joe laughed. “Shit, I almost pissed on myself.”

“I watched you for the rest of the night. You kept mumbling. You going crazy on me, Joe Turner?” Vera placed the cup in front of Joe. “I ain’t got time for you to go crazy. So let me know in advance.” Vera laughed and poked Joe in the side.

“Ain’t nothing that funny, Vera.” Joe played with his hands and wanted to tell Vera, hell, anyone about what he saw. They would think he was losing it, would think that the shooting had gotten to him. But Joe knew he wasn’t crazy. He knew that he saw America. Hair and all. And Joe remembered seeing that gaping hole where he shot him. Clean. The hole was clean and menacing.

What would Vera say if he told her that he had a conversation with the boy that he talked to him like they were friends that just picked up an old conversation? How in the world, Joe thought, did it come to this? And what, Joe Turner thought, did America want with me? After America left that night, Joe Turner paced back and forth and contemplated talking to Pastor Greene. But somehow he knew that blessed oil and Holy Water would not free him from this boy.

“When did you get grey hair?” Vera stood over Joe and pulled at a few strands.

“What are you talking about?” Joe reached up and felt the spot that Vera played in.

“Move.” Vera moved Joe’s hand and pulled out one of the strands. She handed it to Joe. “look like a grey to me.”

“I be damn.” Joe Turner rolled the strand around in his fingers and jumped up from the table. “Let’s get ready. We have to open the restaurant.”

On the drive over to Top’s, Joe replayed that night over again—the night he blew a hole right in the chest of America. Business was slow that evening; he sent Vera home early. He was behind the counter, wiping down the fryer. The grease needed to be changed and the kitchen smelled of an old house that needed airing. Joe dipped a rag in a bucket of ammonia and Murphy’s Oil, rung it out, and then turned to wipe down the counter. He was there. Joe must have forgotten to lock the door when Vera left. Dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt, jeans with slits in both knees, and a black ski mask, the boy raised his pocket straight at Joe. Was it a gun? Joe didn’t know and he didn’t know what made him move so fast, grab the shot gun that he only kept to make Vera fill safe, and pull the trigger. Pull it as if he knew at that moment that he was meant to do it. The pop of the gun sounded like firecrackers in Joe’s ear; he thought he tasted sulfur and raised his fingers to his lips. Joe watched the boy fall backwards and instead of calling the police, Joe walked through the swinging doors and stood over the body.

As Joe turned onto the intersection of Eddy and St. Clair, he wondered if America would have killed him before he did. Joe turned into the back driveway of Top’s and saw trash strewn on the ground. He got out and put the trash in the green dumpster that shaded him from the sun. Joe shook his head and reminded himself to scold Richard for his carelessness.

Despite the trash everywhere, Joe thought about Richard, and smiled. Richard had worked for him since he was 15 and now, three years later, Richard was headed to

College. Why didn't America run with Rich? Why didn't he hang around here more? What was it that was so important about these streets? Those boys he hung around with? What were they offering? What was the pull? Joe walked to the back door and stopped. America never had a chance, he thought. Not a chance at all.

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By the time Joe Turner made up his mind to ask America what he wanted, word around the neighborhood was that Joe was crazy. It started with the story that Paul told sitting on a milk crate in front of Webb's.

"I'm telling you, Joe Turner is as good as cracked up. I know we don't talk about the crazy, but Joe was so crazy that he scared me and you know I don't scare easy." Heads around Paul—some with Caesar cuts, fades, and cornrows—nodded in agreement as if they had witnessed the crime itself.

"I was trying to get a Polish Boy, and Joe just kept talking about get it with the slaw, when he knows I don't eat slaw. Joe was in midsentence when he started yelling at something behind me and asking why I was there. I tried to tell him that I was here for my Boy. He kept looking past me and, I swear, his eyes rolled into the back of his head. I grabbed my food and got out of there. Wasn't no need leaving what I had already paid for, you know? I thought he was about to come over the counter for me. Yes I did."

The other story Ethel Walters told as she sat under the dryer at Wendy's Hair Salon. She told the other women sitting next to her that she had seen Joe Turner in Save-More's, by the apples, swatting and mumbling to himself. Nothing or nobody was around

him. And he didn't look embarrassed either. "I would have been. But not Joe Turner. He acted like what he was doing was what we all do every day," Ethel took her head from under the dryer for emphasis. "At usher practice, I couldn't get him to come down the aisle. Joe stood back there waving the offering plate like a fly was buzzing round him or something. He a plum fool if you ask me. I always knew he was a few steps from crazy." Ethel put her head back under the dryer and shook it.

Joe being crazy was all over Eddy, St. Clair, and even on MLK Drive. He knew he wasn't crazy because Joe remembered that his grandmother, Pie Turner, believed in ghost. She told him about ghosts that broke things, ghosts that jumped out at you when you walked through the house, ghosts that shattered hallway mirrors only to put them back together before you got there, ghosts who only showed you the heels of the shoes they had on when they died. Joe Turner's grandmother knew all types of ghosts and she told him that he should never be afraid of ghosts that make their presence known.

She told him to always, always, be wary of ghosts who made no sounds. The ones who stood and watched, didn't really disrupt your life as much. Those ghosts wanted to talk, tell you something that they didn't get a chance to tell before they died. It wasn't the idea that they wanted to talk that was scary, his grandmother had told him. It was what they tell you that disrupts your life; that really scare the shit out of you.

Joe figured that what America had to tell him could not be any worse than what he was doing to Joe now. Since seeing America, he looked over his shoulders more; found himself doubting everything that he did. He never had to count money twice; now he counted it 4 times. He didn't sleep much anymore. Sounds that never registered

before—the floor board when Vera walked; the heaviness of a cricket’s chirp— rattled him. He needed America as much as America needed him. Joe needed his life back, the goodness of it. So he waited these days for America to show his face.

In itchy pajama’s that Vera gave him, Joe walked down to the den and turned on the lamp on the end table. He sat in his recliner and took a few deep breaths.

“Where you been, America?” Joe leaned forward towards the pink La-Z-Boy  
“When I want to talk you ain’t anywhere to be found.”

The room was as still and quiet as Top’s the day Joe shot America. He didn’t even hear the door open and close or America’s footsteps. Joe sometimes wished that America made more noise, made more of a ruckus. “Damn,” Joe whispered fiercely. “I know you here.”

“We got a lot in common.” America was sitting in the La-Z-Boy.

“We ain’t got nothing in common”. Joe leaned back in the recliner, relieved.

“A lot. We do.”

“You dead. I’m alive. Ain’t nothing common bout that.” Joe was surprised at how even and calm his voice was.

“Old people think they so far away from young people.” America was no longer in the chair; he stood a few feet in front of Joe.

“Y’all don’t listen to old people. If you had listened.”

“To who, Joe?” Now America sat cross legged directly in front of Joe. He looked like he was waiting on a book to be read to him, a magical tale to be told.

“I gave you a barbecue sandwich. I didn’t want you on the streets.”

“The streets.” America played with the dirty laces of his black converses. “The boys I ran with. They mattered.”

“I tried. You wouldn’t listen.”

“We the same, Joe.”

“I told you we ain’t the same, boy.” A hardness that had not been there before crept in Joe’s voice, his arms, and his back.

“I killed a boy. You killed a boy.”

Joe leaned forward. “Why you telling me this? Why me?”

“Cause we the same. I didn’t want to do it. You didn’t want to kill me, did you Joe?”

The hardness that enveloped him started to dissipate and Joe’s face softened at the memory. “I...I didn’t know it was you. I had to save my life. Protect myself for Vera.”

“I saved my life too. I killed to save myself. We did it. Got away with it. Nobody cared. He...” America sat his head in the palms of both of his hands. “He just made us mad.”

“Being mad ain’t no reason to kill nobody. Black men mad all over the world and we ain’t just killing people.”

“He walked past us and we grabbed our dicks. We spit at him. He was pretty. To pretty for a boy. He pranced right past us. He didn’t flinch and we thought he wanted us to fuck him in the ass. He looked at us like they all do. Them faggots. You know how they look at you. It made us mad and we knew we could get away with it. Nobody wanted him. We just wanted to scare him. Tell him to leave us the fuck alone. Man-up;



grow some balls, Joe. I didn't want to kill him but he made us so mad. And if I didn't they would have thought I was like that faggot. That I liked what he wanted us to do to him. Fuck him in the ass. They would have done the same thing to me if I didn't do it. Then you killed me."

"What you want me to do? I already got your blood on my hands. You're really trying to make me crazy."

"Tell somebody, Joe."

"What? You want me to go to the police and tell them the boy I killed came back to tell me that he killed somebody?" Joe shook his head back and forth. "They gone lock me up. They gone lock my black ass up." America was gone.

Joe stood across the street from the 5<sup>th</sup> District police station on 152<sup>nd</sup> and St. Clair. He could have gone to 3<sup>rd</sup> district, but he knew them. Joe knew that he couldn't just walk into a station, tell them about somebody being killed, and not get locked up. This was Cleveland; he still remembered who he was. When he made up his mind to tell, Joe wrote it down, put it into an envelope and drove to 5<sup>th</sup> District. Joe knew this was dangerous but he needed his full mind back. Joe felt sorry for the boy America killed and if, by telling, he could get his life back and get rid of America, then Joe had to do it. After he dropped off the letter, Joe's hand, and heart, would be clean.

Joe walked up to the counter. An old white man with a red mustache that curled at both ends, sat with the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* opened. Joe cleared his throat.

"Can I help you?" The cop folded the paper closed.

Joe didn't move. The note was in his right pants pocket and he stroked it with his hand.

"What you need?" Visibly irritated, the cop leaned forward. "Are you one of those mutes?"

"Sir." Joe pulled the envelope from his pocket and played with it. "I need...I uhm..." Joe lifted the envelope and put it on the counter. He mumbled yes, and turned and walked away.

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"Joe, you didn't tell."

"I did what you wanted. Now leave me alone." Joe untied the red apron and sat in a chair in Top's. "Leave me alone."

"You said you would. You said you would tell." America walked around the island that was in the middle of the kitchen. His head got bigger and bigger as he got closer and closer to Joe. "Why won't you tell?" As America's head got bigger, he lost his balance, knocked over large silver serving spoons, pots, jars of pickles and mayonnaise.

Joe jumped back and grabbed his chest. "Get back demon. Get back."

America stopped in front of Joe and before he could form words, his head exploded.

Vera found Joe the next morning. His hair was entirely grey, face covered in barbecue sauce.

Can These Bones Live?

(For Stevie)

*“Do you know how “Crazy Jackie” became crazy Jackie?”*

*“Who the hell is crazy Jackie, and why the fuck should I care about her ass?”*

*“You cuss like we ain’t just come from the church house.”*

*“The church house? Kidd, stop playing. Who the hell is crazy Jackie?”*

*“Crazy Jackie lived on 71<sup>st</sup> and Hough, during the Hough riots. That was about 20 something years ago. 68, right?”*

*“I don’t want no history lesson, Kidd. Get to the point.”*

*“Anyway, she lived right there and before she became Crazy Jackie she watched her husband burn up in the street, like a whole bunch of people. But that wasn’t it, people said.”*

*“What is it, then? Man, you dragging this along. I know my Nana making some slave food up in that kitchen.”*

*“Hold on, Patience. You see, what made her leave Hough was the little baby.”*

*“Wait, you ain’t say she had a baby.”*

*“Cause she didn’t.”*

*“But....”*

*“I said the baby—there was a baby in the middle of all those burning black bodies and nobody saw it... they say that Jackie watched the baby roll around and burn to a crisp. After that she moved over to 127<sup>th</sup> and Superior.”*

*“Is that what made her crazy? Shit, that would make anybody crazy.”*

*“Naw, that wasn’t it. So, after she moved over here, she would walk up and down the street, looking for nothing. One day she stopped at Webb’s and looked in the front window. Walter Jackson, you member him?”*

*“Where would I know him from? Do I go to Webb’s, Kidd?”*

*“Well, Walter Jackson was looking at Jackie and she saw herself in the reflection of his eyes. She saw another person than the one who watched that baby burn and roll around on Hough.”*

*“Ok, and...?”*

*“I’m getting to it. She fell in love with him, he loved her and they got married and moved into the apartment above Webb’s. One day they went to the old Hippodrome Theatre on Euclid and Jackie caught Walter looking at another woman.”*

*“Ha! What’s new? Men. Dawgs.”*

*“That wasn’t it. See, after Walter looked at that woman, Jackie couldn’t see the person she was after Hough. Cause he looked at her differently. And when Jackie looked in his eyes, she saw the Hough Jackie and she couldn’t take it. They say she cut out both of his eyes and carried them in a black taffeta bag around her neck.”*

*“Get the fuck out of here, Kidd. You mean to tell me that that crazy bitch carried his eyes around her neck?”*

*“As God is my witness.”*

*“Shit. I wouldn’t want to be her.”*

*“Jackie didn’t want to be her.”*

1990 /August

Patience Bledsoe is standing in the doorway of her grandmother’s kitchen. Her grandmother, Ethel, is pouring yellow meal into a white bowl decorated with blue and yellow flowers. Ethel put two spoons of sugar in a bowl, adds a tablespoon of Clabber Girl baking powder, and cracks two eggs, then pours in buttermilk. As Ethel beats the batter, the steady rhythm makes Patience sway a bit.

“Did you enjoy the sermon today?” Ethel looks up from the bowl; sweat drips lightly from her amber colored forehead. Gray hair is pulled back into a tight, unforgiving bun. Still in her usher’s uniform—stiff, white blouse, black skirt—, a red apron covers her

“Did I listen?” Patience comes further into the kitchen and sticks her finger into the cornbread batter. She sticks it into her mouth. “Needs more sugar. Maybe buttermilk.”

“When did you learn how to cook?” Ethel rolls her eyes at Patience. She then sticks her pinky into the mixture. “Its fine the way it is.”

“Whatever.” Patience pulls a wooden chair from the table and slides down into it. She crosses her legs Indian style.

“You have been sour ever since you came here, girl. What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m bored, Nana.”

“It’s a lot to do in Cleveland. You got to decide if it will be good or bad.”

“Let my mama tell it, I don’t know anything good. Only bad shit.”

“Watch that filthy mouth of yours. And your mama don’t know anything.” Ethel walks over to the stove and pulls out a smoking cast iron skillet. She pours the smoking oil into the batter, sets the skillet back on the stove, and mixes the batter. “She ain’t done all the right things either, you know. Don’t let her fool you.” Ethel pours the cornbread batter into the skillet and places it in the oven. “Why she put you out?”

“She scared I’m gone take this one.” Patience unfolds her legs and scraps the bowl with two fingers. “She swears up and down that I always take her men. Tolliver came on to me. I was 15. She just slapped the shit out of me and let him keep coming by.”

“Well, God put you where you need to be.”

“God? Nana, you know I ain’t thinkin about God.”

“When you gone finish school?” Ethel takes a beige towel from the oven door and wipes her hands on it. “You been up there for about 5 years. Shouldn’t you be done by now?”

“Shouldn’t you stop feeding me all this slave food?” The subject of school always made Patience defensive. Her mother had told her she wasn’t good for anything but picking up somebody else’s man; that she couldn’t even get her own if she tried. Going to

school was Patience's way of showing her mother that she was more than what her mother thought of her. Getting in was easy. Finding her way out was the problem.

"This slave food is all we got." Ethel leans into Patience and grabs her chin. "I ain't the enemy, sweetie. When you gone learn that?"

"I will finish school, Nana. You know I do stuff on my own terms. I can't let anybody tell me what to do."

"Well, there are things to do at the church that will keep you busy. And I don't mean Kidd. That boy."

"It's 1990, Nana; 'boy' went out when we left the 60's. He is a grown man. *And* the only thing worth looking at around here."

"Leave him be, Patience. He works for the Lord and he ain't got time to be playing around. And neither do you."

Patience goes to the stove and opens the lid on a large black pot. "What's this, Nana?"

"Black-eyed peas."

"I will leave Kidd alone if you get some McDonald's."

Ethel taps Patience's hand. "Put my lid down and get out of my kitchen."

In that place, where she kept secret things and pieces of her real self, Patience had a fire smoldering. It started when she was 15, at the base of her throat. Then it traveled down to the lower part of her stomach until it found a place and settled. Patience could never explain the fire, the burning that she could never cool. But, when Tolliver blew in

between her legs, it subsided—if briefly. And when it came back, that burning that she could never explain, Patience let him do it again. Then it smoldered, and when it became unbearable again, Patience found another man to help put out the fire. By the time she reached the age of 21, Patience didn't like sex, nor did she crave it. She couldn't bear the fire that rested in her; and men, she realized, could put it out. Now, as she is lying across the twin sized bed she hasn't slept on in years, she feels the fire moving up her thighs. She was truthful when she told her grandmother that she was bored; even truthful when she said that Kidd didn't matter. Patience left off the truth about the sermon.

Patience wasn't listening to the sermon for the reasons that her grandmother did. Her grandmother put all her hope in the scriptures that she had memorized like cake recipes. Patience's grandmother had lived her life accordingly: never missed a Sunday service—morning and night—or Wednesday bible study. The Usher board had become Ethel Walter's strong hold on the garment of Christ, sure, so very sure, that her obedience would be the thing that opened the gates wide for her.

Church never moved Patience. The words from the Pastor, filled with answers that people craved, never swayed her like they did people around her. As a child, when she saw people run up and down aisles, turn in full circles in front of her, Patience was more amused than frightened into belief. Earlier during service, Patience didn't fully understand what Green was saying but she held onto his words like slips of paper. She felt herself being cooled after each word he spoke, after each incantation. Now, she imagines Green in his robe, between her legs, his hands, large, tender like butterfly wings, spreading her thighs. Blowing lightly until the fire smolders, the blue-grey smoke



rising up and through her. Her breathing heavier as he pushes on and swallows her trembling lips, grazing her tightening walls. Patience's breathing is shallow now and she moves her hands. They are wet and she wipes them on the folded blue blanket at the foot of the bed. She realizes, as Green's hands disappear, that she knows nothing about Green. Nothing at all and if she is to have him quell the fire that is growing again, she has to find a way in. Patience laughs out loud. "Hell, Kidd walks behind this man every damn Sunday." She gets off the bed and walks towards the bathroom.

"Where you been?" Kidd opens the door wider and inside incense sticks are burning in a flower pot on the floor.

"You know I had to go home after church. That woman insists on us being a family."

"At least you got that. I come home to nothing."

"Where is your family?" Patience is still standing in the doorway. "And what did I tell you about letting a lady just stand in your doorway?"

"When I see one I will let her in." Kidd moves aside and ushers her in with a wide sweep of his left arm.

"Where the good men at when you need them?" Patience plops down on Kidd's brown tweed couch.

"I got some Colt 45 and some Newport's. Will that do, Queen Elizabeth?"

"Fuck you." Patience laughs and throws a large red pillow trimmed in gold with gold tassels. The hardwood floor shines her reflection back to her; catty-corner from the

couch is a set of black fold out chairs, a 13 inch black and white TV, a card table with envelopes piled on it, has bent legs. There are no drapes at the large windows and the sun is eating Patience's back up. "When are you going to get some curtains?"

"Can't afford it. I ain't living for free like some people."

"Hell, that ain't free living. I should have stayed in Columbus. At least I had a little freedom."

Kidd pulls out a Newport and lights it. He takes a drag, holds the smoke and lets it roll out his mouth. He then hands it to Patience. "What you want anyway?" Patience grabs the cigarette.

"Damn, can't a sista want to come over and see her friend?"

"Not you, Patience." Kidd laughs and reaches for the Newport. "I don't have any money."

"I don't understand, Kidd. Don't you work at the church? I see you running behind that Pastor. Don't they pay you for that shit?"

"They pay me enough for me."

"Well, I don't want money. I want Green."

Kidd chokes on the smoke that he inhales. "Pastor?"

"Tell me about him. How can I get him?"

"He is the Pastor, P. I don't think you can just get him." He is trying to push back the beating that has left his heart and traveled straight to his head. "He ain't your type, P...he ain't married."

“Oh, don’t start this shit with me, Kidd. Any other person I tell you about, you are fine with it. Just tell me what I need to know.”

“I told you he ain’t your type. So let’s move on. Let’s play Gin rummy.”

“Let’s talk about Green.”

“Look, his wife ain’t been dead that long.”

“What does that have to do with me? I ain’t trying to marry him.”

“Then leave him alone. It ain’t worth the trouble.” Kidd stands up and walks into the kitchen. Inside he opens the refrigerator and pulls out the Colt 45. He pulls back the tab and the *swish* startles him. He jumps and when he turns around, Patience is standing in front of him.

“So, are you going to help me get him or what?”

“Patience, I said leave it alone. Let it be.”

“I take that as a no. Aight then. I will get him.”

“Patience, don’t do anything stupid. Don’t get yourself hurt. Kidd moves past Patience and walks back into the living room. “I have to go, P. I will talk with you later.”

Patience walks to the door and places her hands on the doorknob. She turns to face Kidd. “Fine. I will leave him alone.”

As soon as Patience closes the door, Kidd remembers the ringlets of black, shiny hair that frames her graham cracker colored face. The jaw line, sharp; cheek bones high enough to set objects on. The softness always in her eyes. She is beautiful and dangerous, he thinks. Kidd knows that she doesn’t know how to leave anything along. Never has

been her style, and in the past two years since he has known her, Patience hasn't let anything go. Kidd sighs deeply. Green was his, somewhat. Or rather, had been his at one point. They had sex in the Sunday school room on the third floor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Once.

When Kidd first started working at the church, cleaning, he had been impressed with the Pastor. Green wasn't handsome. But he carried himself like he had had counsel with God. When Kidd met Green, he stood there and looked in amazement at the height of the man and the large, large hands that enveloped his when they shook. It seemed like the suit that the pastor wore was an extension of the plush robe he wore on Sundays—the charcoal suit with light grey pinstripes, blended with his plum colored skin. The Pastor's nose, wide and pronounced, spread when he opened his mouth to speak. As large as Green was, Kidd expected for his voice to be heavy, rough. Instead, his words were as light as egg whites. That was it; that was when Kidd really knew that this man was something worth being interested in. The lightness in Green's voice was soothing. Melodic, as if Green himself sang the gates of heaven open.

Kidd was cleaning the pews right before it started. Before then, Pastor would watch him, making Kidd's face flush. Or give him compliments out of nowhere. "That's a fine sweater, son," or "I didn't know pews could shine as bright as the sun." Kidd stored those moments away in his mind; maybe it was his imagination, maybe Greene didn't really pay him that much attention. Kidd was 20 then, still young and not afraid to lust after a man. Love was out of the question; no one stayed around long enough for it to happen.

On that day, as Kidd sprayed and then rubbed Lemon Pledge into the pews, Thaddeus Green stood three feet from him and admired his work.

“You work so hard to make Ebenezer look good. Are you sure you aren’t a messenger?” Green’s arms were at his side.

Kidd was startled because even in closer proximity, the voice was airy. Kidd was always amazed on Sundays. The air in Green’s voice became hard, strong, as if it rested all week for its moments to shine, come to full bloom. “I do my best, sir.”

“God loves a man who works for him.” Green walked closer to Kidd and stood directly in the pews opening. “Doesn’t your arm get tired, son?”

“I’m strong.” Kidd didn’t look directly into his eyes.

Green reached out and squeezed Kidd’s right arm. “Yes, you are.” Green’s fingers pressed lightly on the muscle and he smiled. “I used to work out myself. No time for it now.”

Kidd’s body was tense; he looked at the fingers as they pushed down on the muscle. “Uhm... I don’t work out, sir. I just...” Kidd’s face was hot again and the pit of his stomach was pulsing. He didn’t know if Green had taken all of the air out of the sanctuary, but Kidd couldn’t breathe. His stomach pulsated harder and he felt himself falling forward. When he opened his eyes, the plum colored man was holding him in his arms.

“Are you ok?”

Kidd shook his head, “yes.” He tried to get up but Green held him down.

“Lay here for a minute. You passed out,” Green said as he looked not in Kidd’s eyes, but at the roundness of his cinnamon face, the arch of his eyebrows, the glowing soft skin; the lips that looked wet even though they weren’t. Green took a deep breath himself and rubbed a white handkerchief across Kidd’s forehead.

Kidd’s eyes got wider as Greene lowered his face to his. The sweetness in the kiss surprised Kidd—the mint on Greene’s breathe was welcomed, just like the arms Kidd let himself go limp in.

Kidd had never been kissed before. The other men barked commands; shoved their hardness in his mouth until release. Afterwards, they would push Kidd aside, or pat the top of his head and twirl the wedding ring back and forth. Kidd would watch them walk away, like most things in his life. His mother, Doreen, when he was 12; his father, Hutch, a year later. Kidd hated backs—the hardness of them surprised him every time. That day that Greene held and kissed him, Kidd was entered for the first time. Kidd felt ripped apart, torn almost in half. But Greene talked softly in his ear, the mint mingled with his warm breath. Kidd whimpered in pain and dug his nails into the soft and flexible back of Green. “It’s alright,” Green said as he slowly thrust his manhood into Kidd. “I won’t hurt you.”

After, in the Sunday school room, Kidd’s body was slick with sweat. Kidd sat up on his elbows and stroked a faded scar that ran from Green’s left elbow to his forearm. Kidd shook him. “What happened to your arm?”

Greene opened his eyes and smiled at Kidd. He reached up and traced Kidd’s lips with his index finger. “Old. I got it as a child. Playing in Mississippi dirt.”

“When you come from Mississippi?”

“Boy, way before you were born. I’m an old man.”

Kidd laughed. “I like old men.”

Green stiffened. He rolled his head away from Kidd. “Old men ain’t good for you, son. *No* man is good for you.”

Confused, Kidd squinted and looked around the room. Bibles, packed like sardines, lined an oak bookshelf. The faded letters on the spines looked foreign. The walls had faded grayish wallpaper with strategically placed crosses with blue-eyed Jesus’ glued to them; the curtains were red velvet. Underneath them was brown carpet with worn spots on them where knees heavy with sorrow had knelt. It was suddenly cold in the room and Kidd realized that they were completely naked. “What do you mean?”

Still on his side, Green looked up at Kidd. The look in Kidd’s eyes was familiar, like the eyes of the boy that he tried to save years ago. Valentine. Thaddeus had seen the same look of love, hope, and excitement that men could *not* have for men. Men could not love each other—not in the way they were supposed to love women—, Green thought. That got you killed. You could lust after men, see them in the nighttime shadows; love them there without fear of reproach. But not in the open. Not on open blocks where manhood was conceived, nurtured, and validated because of the number of women you walked down the block with. Sustained by the amount of ass you could palm or the amount of times you held your dick when a woman walked past. Made legendary by the number of times you yelled, “Come here and let me play with that cunt,” or “I got all the pig meat you need right between my legs, baby,” or, “Come on, let daddy play with you,

baby.” When would these young people get it, Green thought, when will they learn that they can’t love freely, can’t love anyway that they want.

“Son, God is watching us. What we do *is* an example of his love.”

“Let him watch.”

Green laughed. Low at first—the way he started the crescendo for his sermons. Then the laugh got louder. “Look at you. You are just a boy. You can’t walk around here loving me.” Green sat up and looked Kidd directly in the face. “This means nothing. We were meeting a want, not a need. God takes care of our needs. Our wants? Those he will not take care of.” Green got up, stepped into a pair of white briefs and searched for his pants. “I love the Lord. I am his servant. We all slip. It’s a part of life, the natural order of things.” A smile as wide and deep as the Lake Erie spread across Green’s face. “Let him love you, too. Join the church; let God take care of your needs. We can take care of our wants.” Green walked out the room and closed the door lightly.

The next day and the others after that, Kidd tried to contact Greene, to talk to him. He wanted to tell Greene that he was his need, that when he kissed him, Kidd forgot about the rushed and empty encounters with men, forgot about the days that he sat and watched people walk out of his life. Green avoided him and was never alone with Kidd. Never let others see them alone.

Kidd worked slower in anticipation of catching the Pastor around the church. His arms grew weary and he polished and re-polished the wood pews until he could see the darkness under his eyes. One time, a month after, Kidd thought that Greene kept his gaze



on him longer than normal. Kidd lifted his head higher, smiled a little then lowered his eyes. When he looked up, Green was gone.

Kidd joined the church in hopes of getting closer to Green and when Green needed an assistant, Kidd jumped at the opportunity. When Kidd got the job, he felt that God really did take care of needs. He chuckled to himself as he sat in the Pastor's office. When Green entered, Kidd sat straight and looked at the picture of Jesus nailed to the cross.

“God has brought you to us for a reason, Kidd.” Green sat behind the desk flipping through a worn bible. “I asked God to heal you, to make you whole again. He led you back to me.” Green got up and stood behind Kidd. His large hands started to massage Kidd's shoulder blades. At first Kidd tensed, but then relaxed at the memory of the fingers.

Kidd let his neck roll forward and let out a deep breath. “I missed you.”

Green's fingers kneaded harder. “You can't miss me, son. I am not yours. I am God's. You have to understand. You have to. We can't have it any other way. I can't serve the Lord and the flesh at the same time. If you love me,” Green stopped kneading and stroked Kidd's neck. “If you love me, then you have to love the Lord.” Green took his hands away and walked back behind the desk. “I am here every day by 9am. Out by 10pm. My meetings are kept in this planner. I pray each day at noon; never let me be disturbed. I write my sermons long hand; your job is to type them and have them ready by Sunday morning service. I will see you tomorrow.” Green lifted his hand out to Kidd.

“Thank you, Thaddeus.” Kidd stood up and grabbed the hand. He held onto it longer than he had expected to and Green snatched it from him.

“Pastor Green. You will call me Pastor Green.”

That was five years ago. And Kidd waited patiently for Green to come to him again; waited for him to realize that Kidd was his need, also. That he could be a balm, a healer for their love.

1990/October

“Jeesus!” Thaddeus Green shouts his voice deep and scary like the throat of a volcano. Sweat drips from his face so fast that the handkerchief in his hand is soaked. “Jeesussss!” He says louder, his face twisting into sweet misery. Thaddeus steps away from the pulpit, opens his mouth wider and shakes his head. When he leans back, it seems as if his eyes move closer together. His congregation sits in silence and waits for him to move. Earlier, his voice was so soft that they had to lean forward to hear what he was saying. Earlier, before he shouted, “Jesus,” he told his congregation that Jesus was a love song.

“Yes, Brother Turner. Jesus is a love song.” He closed his eyes then wiped his forehead. “A sweet, sweet love song. Just for us. But not for us to just sit around and listen to, Sister Walters, no, not just for us to shake our backsides like we do up until the wee hours of the night, saints. Noooooo! His song is for us to memorize, for us to commit to heart, saints. He sings for us. Words so sweet, so perfect, that it hurts. It hurts, Brother

Webb. It hurts when we don't follow the beat of Jesus. It hurts when we ignore the sweetness so deep, the sweetness of his love for us. But, I tell you what Church, I tell you," Thaddeus ran in place, outstretched his arms and shook them at the people who sat memorized. "A love song so good, so good, that we aren't really worthy of it. So sinful, yes we are, but Oh, Oh, Jesus sings for us. Sings for us to follow and learn what it truly means to be righteous. A love song, saints." Thaddeus stopped, nodded at people in the congregation—Tony James who held his paper-thin wife Eunice, by her hand; Shirley Morrison who craved a cigarette; Portia Today who sat on the end of the pew, ready to jump up and run when the Pastor did. He nodded at each of them, whispering, "Love song. Jesus. Love song. Jesus." And just when they thought that he was done, he arched his back, took in a great swallow of air, and screamed, "Jeesussss!"

At the end of his sermon Thaddeus stares at his congregation and puffs out his chest. He looks into their eyes and knows that he is what they held on for; knows that despite the fear, the problems that crippled them throughout the week, that they had waited for him. Waited knowing that he is God's messenger and that he would be able to answer the "Why's?" that damaged them the longer they thought about them. Pastor Thaddeus Green, baptized in the muddy river of Mississippi, can save them.

Thaddeus closes his eyes and sees fingers of all shades—deep, deep, brown, lemon, almond paste, pink—reaching for him. Fingers not satiated by his words. He feels them grab at him, ripping pieces of his robe to get to his majestic, dark skin. Thaddeus closes his eyes tighter, for he cannot show his flock that he, the man chosen to save them, is weak. But the fingers scare him, make him take in quick gulps of air. His heart beats

faster and he feels as if he is about to explode, about to let himself go. Then. Then, he thinks. They will eat him. The fingers will curl themselves around the pieces of him—the blown up pieces—and bring them to their mouths, feed off of him, take away what God has given him, to fill themselves up. Then. Then what? Then they will come back after he puts himself back together and eat him again; eat him again, fill up; go away, come back, the pieces like shrimp on their fingers, peel, peel away what is charred by the explosion, eat him, like the boys did. Like they all did when he fucked them. When he let them see his weakness, feel the scars he made—with thin needles at first, then sharp kitchen knives— on his majestic, dark skin after he fucked them. The lines that refused to fade into his skin. The boys as ravenous as he, the boys a secret place. A hollow place, he can see them, waiting. Waiting on him as he drives down 10<sup>th</sup> and Prospect Avenue, calling him even after he passes them. The boys who lower their pants like night shades. The boys who love him before Thaddeus touch them. They tell him he makes them feel good, daddy. Makes them believe. And Thaddeus folds like new sheets and loves them back; let's them play with his scars as his heavy body falls and rises on theirs.

Then. Then, he is back in Mississippi, tucked underneath wet hay. Harrison County; in a barn, arms thin and tight; buttocks like steel. James loves him. Holds and rocks him steady as a breathing horse. Inside they are safe. Outside. Outside, the river—delicious—perfumes the air, smothers the stench of boy sweat. Love you, love me. Love us, please. I can't. Not like this, James says; we can't love like this. Then shoulders sag. Hearts beat faster as naked legs finds the mouth of cotton pants. Then the crunch of hay; the snatching of thin, tight arms. Love runs away, outside, outside, the river swallows

him. Inside Thaddeus dies. Heart folds into itself. Has to be re-born, his father says. Has to let the river claim you, his father says. Take your soul then re-birth it in you, his father says. In the river, his father says. In the river Thaddeus goes. Eyes closed to the watery death and when he opens them again they are still there. His flock, still where he left them. Hands at their side or holding open a bible; hands bunching up wrinkled tissue paper, palming red and white mints. Thaddeus walks back to the pulpit and raises his arms. “Let the doors of the church open.”

Patience watches Pastor Green and as he opens his mouth wider, the fire that has been smoldering, flares inside of her. She told Kidd that she would leave him alone, promised not to linger too long after service. Promised not to sweep her eyes over his large body when she passed by him. Since she couldn't have him, Patience sat four pews away from him, behind the elderly women in white rayon suits and nacreous pearl necklaces, and marveled at his manliness. The weight of his words, like daggers, punctuates the air. Each time he yelled “Jesus,” Patience's legs trembled; her belly warmed. Each time he tilted his head back, his Adam's apple danced seductively. And Patience danced with it. Her body moving back and forth, waiting on him to reach the height of his sermon, the pinnacle of which she needs to reside. The sweat that drips from his head, seeps through her panty hose, slicks her legs. That is what a man does, she thinks, as he walks from behind the pulpit. A man makes you feel like you are swimming without water.

At the end of service, Green stands in front of the Altar shaking hands. Patience is behind a woman in a purple skirt suit holding the hand of a little girl with red bows in each of her shoulder length braids. The little girl, whose round face reminds Patience of prunes, smiles at her and waves. Patience smiles back and the woman in purple yank her daughter closer to her hip. As the line moves, Patience pulls out a compact and smooths her skin with a powder puff. When Patience is in front of Pastor Green, she moves in for a hug but he sticks his left hand out instead. She grabs it reluctantly and feels the smoothness of his flesh.

“I hope that the word inspired you, Patience. Sister Walters is sure glad that you are here again.”

Patience holds onto his hand and stares at the richness of his skin. “I was.” She does it. Sweeps her eyes like she promised not to. Shows more teeth; lingers.

“God loves you always. A love song, child.” Thaddeus takes his right hand and cups Patience’s hand before he removes his from hers.

“Pastor, do you do private sessions to help with understanding? My grandmother wants me to learn the bible better, but,” Patience leans in closer and feels the heat from his skin. “I can use the help and who better than the man who talks about it each week?”

Thaddeus smiles and looks beyond Patience. Just a few more, he thinks. “Make an appointment with my assistant. He can let you know when I am available. Bless you in the name of the Lord, my child.”

Before she leaves, Thaddeus is reaching for the person behind Patience. And if she hadn’t felt the heat from his skin, if she hadn’t seen the way he smiled at her, then

Patience would have thought that he was brushing her aside. But he didn't, really. And he didn't tell her to come to bible study like her grandmother did. No, Pastor Green agreed to meet with her. Agreed to help put out a flame that racked her body each time she came into church; every time she heard him proclaim his greatness, his affinity, closeness to the Lord. His manliness was on display when he stood at the pulpit and pulled from his gut the words that Jesus himself had given Thaddeus. Now Patience has to decide how to meet him and get him alone with Kidd knowing. Because she promised.

The show that Green put on didn't move Kidd. He had been the one to type each and every word, put in the markers where Green would lower his voice more, and raise it at the perfect moment. Kidd knows exactly when to think of mundane things—like the polishing of wood, or the folding and unfolding of newspapers— so that he isn't captured by the performance. So that he isn't caught up in the tide each week like they are—the thought of it dizzying.

Kidd watches him, his eyes not moving, his breathing even. He remembers the feeling, the hunger so intense that it made his head throb. This is what he does, Kidd thinks. He fills them up to bursting, sends them home, and when they are empty again—to the point of delirium—, they are hungry enough to eat him on sight. And they don't even know it. The power of his words, the verbal acrobatics—pauses that create space, loops—the physicality of it, draws them in, erases worry, deepens security. Green's love is Jesus' love; Green's sweat is the sweat of Jesus' brow. Kidd's eyes fall to his hands. He sees that the church program has wet spots as large as quarters and the ends are curled

from the strain of his fingers. When Kidd looks up again, Green is back behind the pulpit and it is as if someone has opened the mouths of each and every person and breathed life into them. They rush to him like ants after chocolate. Kidd folds the program and places it in his bible. He walks out of the sanctuary and stands in the foyer.

“Did you enjoy the service Sister Walters?” Kidd reaches to hug her and they embrace.

“It was fine. Pastor really preached a word today.” Ethel smiles and looks back through the doors. She sees Patience and sighs.

Kidd turns to look at what Ethel is looking at and the smile that was on his face disappears. “I take it Patience loved the service.” He laughs now, loudly.

“I guess so. Has she said anything to you about joining the church?” Ethel turns back towards Kidd and reaches to pull a piece of lint out of his hair. “If you had a nice young lady she would make sure that you came out the house always groomed.” She smiles and places the lint in the left pocket of her black skirt.

“Thank you, Sister Walters.” Kidd shifts his bible from his left hand to his right. “Patience hasn’t said anything to me about joining the church. I know that she only comes because ....” Kidd catches himself and smiles brightly.

“It’s ok, Kidd. I know... but lately she has asked about whether or not the Pastor can lead her to salvation.” Ethel moves closer to Kidd and tightens the knot on his blue and white polka dot tie. She then smooths the wrinkles out of the blue suit that hangs loosely on Kidd. “You need to eat, son. Come by the house sometimes.” Ethel’s hand rests at Kidd’s elbow. “I have plenty.” Ethel turns when her name is called. Ushers, clad



in black so deep and dark that it feels like death, surrounds her. She moves closer to them and says back to Kidd, “Please, come by. I always have plenty.”

Ethel watches her granddaughter’s body move back and forth to the music that is in Pastor Green’s voice. The rise and fall of it, the deep timber of it moves the entire congregation. But there is something different in Patience’s movement—something that Ethel doesn’t want to acknowledge. Ethel imagines that her granddaughter’s baby-girl heart is beating rapidly; the fabric moving as if fingers are ruffling it. Ethel takes her gaze off of Patience and her eyes fall on Pastor Greene. Now he stands like a stone figure. He doesn’t move for a minute and it seems as if he is destined to stay rooted in that spot. Ethel looks around the church; everyone is as still as he. The calm over the room doesn’t feel natural, real to Ethel. A shiver crawls down her spine like beads of water. This man thinks he is God, Ethel thinks to herself. And they all think that he is, too.

After the minute is up, Greene hisses, “Jeesus!” and the bodies in the church come alive again. Sweat drips down his face. Ethel wonders if he is really calling to Jesus or claiming himself to be. Ethel is at the back of the church, left arm tucked behind her back like a chicken wing. Her stiff black skirt strangles her thick thighs and she wishes that she had worn those Control tops. Her white shirt is as sharp and clean as the white gloves on her hands. Her fingers, stiff from folding sheets at Jamison’s Nursing home on Cedar Hill, throb under the intensity of the thick cotton fabric. Ethel stands in the middle of the door to the church; she guards the door during sermons to make sure that no one

interrupts. The other ushers she directs with quick and deliberate head nods; when she nods, they scatter like gnats, the gold offering trays like fragile wings...

For twenty years Ethel has stood watch during Pastor Green's sermons. And for twenty years she has seen women in this church move to a different beat than the other members of this congregation. Married, single, divorced, committed, they did not care. She saw it, put it away in her memory book, prayed harder for the Pastor's soul. He was a man, too, she told herself as she watched those women lose themselves over him. But this time it is different. Patience is a part of the confusion. Ethel sees the desire so deep, so acute, that it startles her. She had known it in herself; had seen it in her daughter. Now she sees it in Patience. The poor child, Ethel thinks, she really thinks that these men will replace what is missing. Ethel puts her left hand in her pocket then takes it out when Patience gets closer to Green. That man, Pastor or not, isn't the one that she should lean to. Ethel has heard what people have said about Green. She tried to ignore the rumors, tried to walk away when conversations ended up on the subject of Green and why he hadn't married again after his wife died; or she would think about II Corinthians when she heard that Green had been seen on Prospect Avenue. The danger, the hint of malice in those conversations, is enough to keep her focused on the Lord.

Ethel also knows that somehow she has created this in her daughter and granddaughter. She kept men away, made them pariahs in her kitchen. She never said anything good about a man, never admitted or acknowledged that a man was sometimes good. Because Ethel kept men away, her daughter, and now granddaughter, wanted to keep them close. No matter what the expense. No wonder. No wonder her daughter

spread her legs for just about any man that offered her any type of attention. No wonder her daughter chose a man—repeatedly—over her own child. And is it any wonder that Patience would hunger for the thing powerful enough to make a mother turn out her own child?

1990/November

When Kidd comes back from lunch, he hears laughter coming from Green's door. Kidd checks the open appointment book and the space before noon and after one, is empty. The laughter becomes louder and Kidd goes to the door and places his ear to the brown wood. Pastor hasn't laughed this hard or long since Kidd has known him. A slight wave of jealousy moves through him and he has to catch himself before he barges in.

Instead, Kidd knocks and before Green can say "come in," Kidd opens the door. He sees Green sitting on the edge of his desk and Patience sitting catty corned in a beat up chair. Kidd's eyes fall straight to the legs that grow like stalks out of Patience's skirt. It is too cold for a skirt with a slit that high, but Kidd knows that Patience knows this. He brings his eyes back to Green's face and it has not moved, has not acknowledged his appearance.

"I am back from lunch, Pastor. Don't forget that you have a board meeting at two."

“I didn’t forget. I was just talking to Patience about her finally joining the church.”

“Good luck with that, Pastor. I think us church folks scare her.”

Patience looks at Kidd, her eyes become narrow slits. “Thanks friend. Some Christian you are.” She flares her nose then turns back toward Green.

“I don’t know. I think I may have convinced her of the right *and* only way to go.” Green stands and smiles so hard that Kidd imagines lying in the bridge of his mouth, resting. “Well, if you will excuse me Patience, I do have a meeting to get ready for. I will see you same time next week?” He asks her this while sticking out his hand.

“Of course, Pastor.” She uncrosses her legs then crosses them for emphasis and then stands up.

“Kidd, close the door and make sure that I am not disturbed until the meeting.”

Patience walks out the office and down the corridor. Before she reaches the door, Kidd grabs her by the arm.

“What the hell, Patience?”

“Oh, now we pick and choose who can cuss in the house of the Lord?”

“Patience, I’m not playing with you. What are you doing here?”

“Getting spiritual guidance from my Pastor.” There is a glint in her eyes that unnerves Kidd.

“In a skirt that shows your entire leg?”

“You know I like to look good, Kidd. Stop tripping.”

“Tripping? You been coming here on my lunch breaks, sneaking here talking with him.”

“I haven’t been sneaking. I just came when you weren’t here.” Patience lowers her eyes as she says this and kicks at a lint ball on the floor. “Look, I’m sorry Kidd. I know I told you that I wouldn’t go after him but he came after me.”

The skin on Kidd’s forehead folds back and forth like an accordion. “Pastor didn’t come after you.” He hates her right now. Kidd hates the lies; the desire that accumulates like sweat on her top lip.

“Ok, ok. He didn’t exactly come after me. But he was open to me coming for help and I took him up on it.”

“You hate church. You hate anything associated with it. This is not something to play with, Patience.”

“I hate people like you, Kidd. Who think that God is just theirs, that he can’t belong to anyone else. No, I don’t like church. And you know how I feel about old ass church folks toting their golden bibles. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t like the Lord.”

“You are playing with fire, girl.”

“He isn’t what you think he is. You just work for him. I have spent time with him, gotten to know him.”

Kidd moves closer to Patience. “You been to his house?”

Patience draws back, her face distorts. “Back up, man. No, I haven’t been to his house. But I feel like...” Patience now sees hurt in her friends eyes. Lying to Kidd was wrong, but she told him little lies before and he had never reacted like this.

“You feel what? You think that he is going to marry you? Let you be his helpmate? Raise his children?” Kidd backs away from Patience. “If you think that, then you are just as silly as I always thought that you were.” Kidd turns and walks back towards his office.

1990/December

He thinks: Did she love him better? Kidd inhales the Newport, walks back and forth in his living room. Nina Simone’s “*Let It Be Me*,” plays in the background.

*I bless the day I found you,  
I want to stay around for you  
and so I beg you, let it be me.*

Early Friday morning Kidd sat waiting for Thaddeus. When he heard the heavy footsteps, Kidd jumped up and opened the office door. Thaddeus walked past him without speaking and Kidd grabbed him by the elbow.

“Are you fucking her?”

“Son, we still serve a vengeful God!” Thaddeus snatched his arm away.

“I don’t really care about God right now, Thaddeus.”

“Watch yourself.” Thaddeus’s jaw muscles tingled.

“Is it because you can walk with her in public?”

“Walk with whom, son?”

“Stop it, Thaddeus. Just stop it.” Kidd laughed then raised his arms in amazement. “You walk around here like nothing you do is wrong; like everything you do is so damn holy, so damn sincere.”

“I am nothing but the servant of the Lord, and that is it.”

“You weren’t thinking about God when you were screwing me.”

“I said watch it, boy. I am still your Pastor.”

“You are sleeping with my best friend. You are parading her around like you really care for her.”

Thaddeus smiled that smile that still took Kidd’s breath away. He put his large hand on Kidd’s shoulder and kneaded it lightly. “What did I tell you, huh?” Thaddeus applied more pressure to Kidd’s shoulder. “Son, I can’t walk around holding your hand in public. I can’t kiss you on the lips when people are around. I can’t give you security. Is that what you want? Is that what all this is about?”

“She’s a whore. She don’t even love you.” Kidd regretted what he said after it came out. Patience had been his only friend; had entrusted him with the little things that made her who she was. Now all he could think of, all he could muster in the face of pure and honest rejection was to disparage his friend.

“I don’t love her.” Thaddeus’s voice grew softer, quieter, like at the beginnings of his sermons. “Jesus. Love song. He is my only love. She is just somebody I can show off. You....” Thaddeus’s eyes perused Kidd’s body. “You were a good thing. A real good thing that was never meant to last...I need you to clear out your desk. This is your last day.”

Now the Newport stings the back of his nostrils and he tries not to choke on the smoke. Clean out your desk. Not only was he tossed aside but he was also fired. Kidd put the cigarette out on the arm of his couch and furiously lit another.

*Don't take this heaven from one,  
if you must cling to someone  
now and forever, let it be me.*

The smoke curls itself around his face. Kidd draws in two quick breaths and lets the smoke linger at the back of his throat. I pleased him with these lips. Kidd throws the cigarette on the hardwood floor and stomps it several times. The sound of his foot is foreign to him. He looks at his feet and doesn't recognize them at all. I am not different from her. I am no different from any of the people he took from Prospect. I am just as lonely and confused as they all are. What, if any, did I think I could do for him? I couldn't even make him look at me twice; he didn't even respect me enough to look me in the eye. That is what men do when they respect you. They look you in the eye. And now I have nothing. She is gone. He was always gone and I can't get either back. And he lives. He lives and breathes for a God who has left me. Who has forsaken me; led me to a man who couldn't love me. Now he will stand behind the pulpit, sing his love song and not mean it at all. Not mean it for anybody but himself. Not one note will burn itself into his esophagus; not one note will reside permanently in his brain. And he will go on, and tell others that his soul is pure, that he is without sin. And they will believe him. They will revere him. Place him on their shelves; lower him onto their kitchen tables during dinner. And he will crush my bones and leave them. And not bless me. And not ask while he walks away, can these bones live?



Kidd is in the foyer. He hears Green's voice and knows where the Pastor will end his performance. He typed the sermon before he was fired. Sister Walter's is standing guard; the back of her hair is stiff, unmoving. Green's body stops jerking and he lifts his arms.

Sister Walter's opens the door and Kidd hesitates. He tastes the remnants of the many cigarettes that he smoked earlier. Kidd's body tells him to move forward, to act before the adrenalin wears off. For a brief moment he thinks of Green's well being and when Green opens his arms to the congregation, that feeling evaporates and Kidd runs down the aisle.

"Why can't you love me, Thaddeus?" Kidd's face tightens.

"I love you, son. I love all of God's children." Green grips the arms of the pulpit.

"I let you inside of me." Now Kidd turns to face the congregation. "I took him in my mouth."

"I am a man of God!" Thaddeus pounds the podium three times. "No such thing happened. You are going straight to hell." Green is shouting and he marches down to the Altar. "Stop this nonsense. Ruining my name won't get you back in the graces of the Lord."

Kidd turns back towards Green. "Fuck the Lord. I'm tired of waiting on the Lord to save me. He should have saved me from you."

Kidd runs to the opening of a pew and lays his hand on the top. "I polished these. I did and kissed me right here, right here." Kidd looks at Bro Turner who is sitting across

from where he stands. “I played with the scars on his arms. I traced them with this finger.” Kidd lifts his right index finger and shows it to Bro. Turner.

“Son, calm down.”

Kidd turns to face Thaddeus. “I am *not* your son! You don’t sleep with you son and then throw him away.”

“I don’t owe you anything.” Green lowers his voice and reaches out his hand to Kidd. “Let me pray for you. God can deliver you. A sweet, sweet love song.”

Kidd sees rivers and bloated bodies and it seems as if Green is floating. He pauses for a second and shakes his head to take the image out. “I hope God strikes you dead.” Kidd rushes towards Green and before he reaches the Pastor, four sets of strong, white gloved hands, grab him. As they are dragging him back up the aisle, Kidd and Patience eyes lock. He screams at her, “He ain’t a love song!”