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sweet:2.3

May 2010

Letter from the Editor

Dear Sweet Readers:

A couple months ago my mother came for a visit. She lived in America for thirty-six years and had moved back Thailand, her home, in 2004. During her visit, the earthquake in Haiti happened. The TV in her guestroom was tuned in constantly to the news; my mother watched wordlessly as the stats about how many found, how many dead, how many are still unaccounted for echoed from the TV. Katie and I couldn't stand it. We retreated into our offices. We turned up the volume of our TV to drown out my mother's. We are people who do not watch the news. We are people who never read newspapers. We are the ones who have to change the channel immediately when commercials about abused and abandoned dogs come on TV.

We are not unfeeling people. Quite the opposite. Katie and I feel too much. We would find ourselves unable to work, to do anything, if we allowed ourselves to watch the evening news, which is always tragic. My mother, however, has always been in front of the television. Columbine. Desert Storm. The Challenger explosion. The Oklahoma City Bombing. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. She has been witness to a great number of tragedies.

During the trip, I finally asked her why she doesn't change the channel, why she insists on watching the news all day.

"I watch because I want to understand." Then she handed Katie some money to donate to the Red Cross and said, "I wish I could do more."

I thought about my mother's answer for weeks. To understand. To do more. And it was my mother and the continued heartbreaking details of Haiti that made me do something in the only way I could.

On Friday, February 12, 2010, the MFA Program in Creative Writing at University of South Florida, *Saw Palm*, YellowJacket Press, and *Sweet: A Literary Confection* came together and co-hosted Words to Help, Words to Heal: A Benefit Reading for Haiti at Dishtopia The Anytime Tea Bar in South Tampa. The venue was packed with about eighty plus readers, writers, and lovers of words, and along with the sweet scent of tea in the air, there was a true feeling of camaraderie. The combined efforts raised over $500.00, which all went to The American Red Cross.

Like my mother said, I wish I could do more. I wish our words could repair the world, replace what is lost.

—Ira Sukrungruang

Maggie Smith

If I Forget to Tell You

If I forget to tell you, daughter, keep your head
if your hands are severed: you can still eat pears

straight from the tree with your mouth.
If your hands are severed, wear silver

fists until your new ones bud in spring. Keep these
shining charms to remind you how fruit tastes

when you're bleeding. Daughter, don't believe
there is always a place for you—an empty cottage,

as if the person living there wandered off
and lost his way back. You might think

your skull is like a library, where each moment
is catalogued and waiting. Daughter, I believed it.

Then autumn was pulled down behind me
like a cheap picture studio backdrop

of fallen leaves, everything rusted. If I forget
to tell you, choose a word and let it live

alone in your mouth a while. *Pears, pears, pears*.
Sometimes there isn't room for more. Daughter,

where silence is permitted to grow, it grows.

Fundevogel

Never leave me, and I will never leave you.

If I lost you in the Schwarzwald,
I’m not sure I could bring you back.

These deep Germanic woods, stinking
of bear fur, half the footpaths grown over,

have their own rules. If I turn away for
one moment, a hawk could swoop down

and carry you high into a treetop. You’d be
long-lost. Babe in the wood, you must have

some bird in you already. I thought it first
finding the tiny nest inside the Christmas tree

after you were born. Then again watching
you crane to see leaves fluttering overhead.

You love the trees so. Even in the Black Forest,
slack orange tulips fallen from the poplars

are beautiful enough to eat—seemingly
sugared, as if off a cake. My little tow-headed,

rosy-cheeked girl, you’ve been fattened

on happiness, mother's milk, mother love.

You'd make some witch quite a treat.
So let me carry you. We'll sing to stay awake.

We'll keep one eye on the trees. As long
as we are touching, nothing can harm us.

Song of the Heirloom Apple Tree

—after Federico Garcia Lorca

Yes, there was always danger. Zeppelins dragged
their shade around the orchard like slow-moving clouds.
Still the sun pinned on us crisp, sweet cameos:
Star Ladies, Pink Pearls, Black Gilliflowers, Mothers.
I'm sure some were flawed, some bruised and soft,
but everything is perfected by distance. Nostalgia clouds
like bloom—that fine, gray dust children shine off
on their sleeves. A hundred years ago, I was promised
an inheritance: turn-of-the-century Golden Drops
glinting like vintage brooches. Instead I am bare.
Cut me down as you did the others. It hurts, but not
as you might expect. I imagine myself a freestone fruit:
The pit clings to the flesh but breaks free easily.

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MAGGIE SMITH is the author of three prizewinning collections of poems, Lamp of the Body, Nesting Dolls, and the hot-off-the-presses The List of Dangers. Her poems have appeared in The Paris Review, The Iowa Review, Gettysburg Review, Indiana Review, Prairie Schooner, and many other journals. She lives with her husband and young daughter in Bexley, Ohio—dangerously close to the best ice cream in town (the Salty Caramel at Jeni's Ice Cream) and not too far from the best dessert in town (the Bittersweet Feuillitine at Pistacia Vera).

Angela Brommel

From Highway 89

The land looks deceptively soft with pale grasses, but as far as you can see
there is nowhere to rest. Fallen, faded stalks of grasses have baked like unbaled hay.
Now you see each blade is a beautiful, brittle illusion of home.

Still it sways in the wind.

All around is sage, and what you want is wet black dirt, and the Kentucky Bluegrass
smell of lust that rises up from the backyard in June. There the Mississippi swells
underground until you can taste the water just beneath the soil.

Your hope swings like a divining rod.
The desert poppy has thorns.

ANGELA BROMMEL is a Nevada poet with Iowa roots. She teaches Women's Studies and Humanities at Nevada State College as an adjunct professor. Her work can also be found at Writers at Work. Angela's favorite chocolates include dark chocolate covered ginger, and Earl Grey truffles.

Donald Illich

Tracking the Moon

We tracked the full moon through the city,
each time coming up empty in our search.
A bad guy had stolen it, or a fool with a net,
who'd rather have it for his own than have
others enjoy it, too. What did we want with it?
A conversation about the nature of the night.
A difficult repartee about light and its effect
on the werewolves. The chance to play,
as if with a toy that we ran ragged as children.
The moon was smart enough not to be caught.
It pierced itself in the tallest tree and waited
for day to arrive, and for it to quickly disappear.
We wouldn't be able to climb there, even with
a ladder borrowed from the fire department.
God knows they'd like to have a word with it, too.
To wash away fires with tides, blow them out
with one puff from its man in the moon lungs.

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DONALD ILLICH has published poetry in The Iowa Review, LIT, Fourteen Hills, Cold Mountain Review, and many other journals. He won Honorable Mention in the Washington Prize book contest and was a ”Discovery”/Boston Review 2008 Poetry Contest semifinalist. Check out his blog for more info.

Luisa A. Igloria

Rock of Two Mouths

Each rock here has a face:
inscrutable, not even looking
at the water which threads
through the silence
in the only way
silence can possibly be
allowed to sing;
not even looking at the clear
light that flickers like each
day's votive candle—tinged blue
in the mornings, washed
grey or trembling gold
in the lengthening
afternoons. A hand
carved these hollows in stone.
They open their mouths
lined with moss and clover,
inconsequential weeds and wild-
flowers, that we might write of secrets:
of ways to woo a heart that has stood
too long, gaping first at one side
of the river, then at the other.

LUISA A. IGLORIA is the author of Juan Luna's Revolver, winner of the 2009 Ernest Sandeen Prize in Poetry from the University of Notre Dame Press, Trill & Mordent from WordTech Editions, and 8 other books. Originally from Baguio City, she is an associate professor, and currently Director of the MFA Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University. Luisa thinks ripe golden mangos are best paired with sweet rice cakes. Lately, she has been baking Dulce de Leche cakes, which she serves with whiskey sauce. For more information, check out her web site.

Andrea O'Brien

Rain Lore

We sift through photographs to remember what she looked like until the cold rain of memory storms down. We are collectors of myth, gathering stories and naming them as if they were insects pinned in a museum drawer. Our hands are like those of a child shaking a mason jar to wake its dead moth. Rain the size of sand falls outside. The shells we sift from sand will outlast the animals that made them. We wear our memories like yellow slickers in the rain, only to cast them off at the end of the day. We are flawed guardians, winging over her. As she fades like a photograph, we blot her image with pastels. Soon even the bitter rind we have sucked on disappears. She becomes a harvest moon, sifted from the ordinary ones. Rain the size of pearls falls. We thumb the beads of her necklaces like those of a rosary. Memory is brittle as the relics of saints. We call upon St. Kevin for that unseen seam between mud and muscle that suspended him in prayer until the blackbird’s brood broke through the shells in his open palm. Sometimes the music secure in our Victrola bodies escapes, and for that moment we no longer care how we came into being. Rain the size of pebbles falls. We rain our stories down upon the generation that follows. How will our existence bend to their language and memory? How can they preserve us from the warmest rain? All they collect will be sifted and shaped. We are creators of myth. Legend the size of rain falls.

Andrea O’Brien’s poetry has appeared in various publications, including The Hopkins Review, Connecticut Review, Nimrod International Journal, and The New York Quarterly. In 2007, the Kentucky Foundation for Women awarded her an Artist Enrichment grant to support the writing of her second collection of poems. Andrea lives in Denver with her husband and works as a writer and editor. She cannot recall a time she refused something sweet. For more info, check out her web site.

Melanie Graham

Between Women

Amid the pub din, black poodle
under the bar, and candle-jeweled ales, I confided
the rape to you, a tea and cake type, trilling R's
and vintage Hermes knotting your throat.

Speaking of violation, I laid out the loss,
the ragged hem of my virginity,
how, for years, I was split – one body
observing the other with cultivated detachment.

Later, at dinner, you shamed me,
so subtle, almost no one noticed,
and I thought of an expression I'd heard,
'Softly catching the monkey.'

I remembered how you held
glowing glass in your hands,
tilted head nodding, eyes stroking me
toward this moment.

I sat, mesmerized
by the silver platter of tomatoes between us,
their plumbed innards bare as seeded hearts,
sliced so thinly, arranged so carefully.

MELANIE GRAHAM is a second year PhD candidate at the University of Lancaster, UK and is working on a creative dissertation concerning violence and women. Her poems have appeared most recently in Harvard Summer Review, Homestead Review, The Southern Quarterly, and Saw Palm. Accolades include the Estelle J. Zbar Award for poetry and the Now and Then Magazine Poetry Prize. Her favorite candy is peanut butter roll, a rare southern confection native to Virginia that can only be made when the weather permits.

Meri Culp

Tangerines and Yams

When you are young,
all is skin and juice:

You carry your basket to bed,
brimming overflow of firmness,

rounded to golden delicious curves,
shining summer sheets, tangled in tangerine,

a plumpearpeach dive,
citrus skimming, thirsting

for lemon, for lime,
for the feel of skin.

I am ripe, you think,
all fruit sassy, fresh,

ready to jump, spring into
into the not-so-still-life

of Erica-Jonged verse,
penned in orange-mango-ed lines,

running off the unmade bed,
coursing down the hall.

But soon, the quick-turn of nectar,

seeps into the grooves,

of life, of garden,
to the place you find yourself,

when you are of a certain age,
sifting through soil,

no longer distracted,
by the dangle of fruit,

unearthing the dusky weight
of rich russet, ponderous yam,

this harvest of irregular shapes,
deep, yielding.

You carry your brown bag to bed,
rustic offerings, earth-echoed,

your hands lifelined to all things rooted,
muted tenderness, many-eyed, skinned,

vulnerable stew of strength,
this winter mix of finger shadowed

love, here on time’s bed,
here, still burning orange,

this yam-halved sunset,
this red - rooted sky.

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Meri Culp has been published in various literary journals including The Southeast Review, Apalachee Review, The Northeast Chronicle, Nomads, and Snug. She also has poems in the anthologies North of Wakulla and Think: Poems for Aretha Franklin's Inauguration Day Hat. She is currently working on a series of stalk vegetable poems—asparagus, rhubarb, sugar cane. Her favorite sweet? Rhubarb pie!

Lea Banks

The Majesty

It was the end of the summer
and all the yellow pollen smell
of an afternoon. Withheld wings
of longing clutched in my torso.

The middle of the day is furious.
The bees soldier on in the sunburnt grass.
Their gossamer simmer—*like ladies
in saffron, all hoary and damp beneath
their breasts*—teems in this waste of heat.

I painted tomatoes, found them of Prussian
red cast, untrained on sodden fusty hay.
I wrote string beans, tangled up in their
green finery, strangled like the twine they
were tied upon. A thin thread of fiery
flourish; tiny stamens tongued my ankles.

The golden feathers were hidden behind
an old rock. Goldfinch? Grosbeak?
Small, flaxen, pithy; the most beautiful
thing we had surprised upon in our
thousand year reign. You said most
likely chicken feathers blown carelessly
across the field. Well, I threw in the word
“carelessly” and thought Warbler? How
verbose and inaccurate we both were. . .

The cartilage of birds and bees signals
summer’s end. They were alive just a few
short moments ago. Under my massive feet,
I crunch their skulls and wings everywhere.

Peering through the open door of my bird
house, my helmet, my bee bonnet burst.
The swarm split open. Witness the royal
jelly strewn on my path. . . wildly, wildly.

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Lea Banks is the founder of the Collected Poets Series in Shelburne Falls, MA and the editor of the imminent journal Oscillation: Poetry in Motion. Booksmyth Press published her first collection of poetry, All of Me, in 2008. Two of her poems were nominated for the 2009 Pushcart Prize and she has been published in several journals including Poetry Northwest, Slipstream, Diner, The Recorder and American Poetry Journal. She attended New England College's MFA program and facilitated stroke survivors' writing workshops. Sweets are really all she lives for: from Nutella and Dulce de Leche to Moon Pies and pineapple upside down cake. She secretly is addicted to Twizzlers.

Thinking Back on the Bolivian Altiplano in a Well-lit Suburban House in San Antonio, Texas

Hal Amen

When you have no electricity, you spend your days out in the fields with the livestock, the llamas and alpacas. Maybe sheep, maybe cows. You get home at dusk and cook dinner in the fading light. The cooking fire gives off light, but also smoke, and when the wind blows right the smoke backs up in the ventilation hole and fills the room. You cough. You burn candles or oil lamps, and they make you cough, too. Sometimes they fall and burn you back. It's hard and expensive and risky to make light, so usually you don't. You sit in the dark. You sleep. You'd rather be using the time to dye yarn and weave textiles to sell to the tourists, to make jewelry, to weld or solder, to help your children with their homework, to find some way of supplementing the subsistence income of the *ganadero* lifestyle. But there's no electricity. You can't see, so you don't do anything.

When you have no electricity, you have no power.

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HAL AMEN is a freelance writer and traveler based in Austin, Texas. His personal blog is called WayWorded, and he's editor of Matador Trips. His all-time favorite dessert is Korean hotteok.

Fool

Nicole Louise Reid

So I decided, because he was on to me—on to me perhaps even before I'd been on to my own scheming—to touch myself in our bedroom that night instead of spend his money. Our money, of course and the cliché of it burned me just about as much as the truth, but I knew the way he thought of it since I owed on a car and school loans and a few less understandable personal debts that amounted to full closets I hated anymore to open.

And I decided to touch myself instead of eating, too, for though he never *tsk-tsked* the way a helping always lapped over my plate's green spiral rim, he didn't know the half of what my desk drawers held—just the janitor who tipped out the sacks and wrappers, the restroom's wadded paper towels become napkins. No, he didn't know the half of how many bites a day could hold, how many sugared swallows.

But that would be behind me now, too. Compulsions traded away for something I would never tell him but always know: the night when he yelled about overdrafts, when he said *normal people don't buy $500 ottomans, they buy $500 couches*, while he dealt out Omaha downstairs to friends, I slipped one hand between my legs, worked my lips apart and once I was wet enough to want to move faster, I ran through the names and the bodies clicking chip stacks on the dining table downstairs but nothing, no one, stuck.

Wet as I was becoming, I thought of a boy I taught that semester: legal to drink but all mutter and curls. I did not say his name aloud but shut my eyes, pressed my tongue into the shape of it, and that's when I came.

It was like a divorce that night. Like winter in between the toes and sickness that eats the flesh. I could not take it back, any of it—the fingers were mine after all. And I did not want to.

But there was our baby sleeping down the hall. Through the monitor on the kitchen counter for the poker game to hear, came his shifting sighs slow and heavy as crows' wings.

I pulled my hand free, took up my magazine again, an article about sleep and dreaming, no mention of dignity. It was so easy to be afraid of shutting one's eyes, but nowhere near as easy to fear keeping them open.

No matter. None at all. I flipped pages until I fell in and out of the words and sleeping, finally turned off the lamp on my side of the bed. He would be here soon and touch my face, move some hair away

from my eyes to behind my ear—maybe that's what he would do, because he's seen it in the movies. If he noticed the scent in the room, he'd never suspect the hollow of my mouth held anyone but him.

He tried not to wake me, pulled the bathroom door to damper the sound of his belt sliding free of its pants loops, the quick piss, and tap of his toothbrush. He didn't touch me, just slid through the dark to his pillow.

I sent one hand out to him, an invitation, a bridge. He sighed and moved closer, to where he usually slept, where he wanted to be: my shoulder against his chest, the curtain's gleaming edge out of sight. My forehead found his. Our noses briefly touched. And he kissed me, his tongue inside my mouth, warm and breathy where the other boy waited.

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Nicole Louise Reid is putty for Boston Cream Pie. She is the author of the novel In the Breeze of Passing Things and fiction chapbook Girls. Her stories have appeared in The Southern Review, Quarterly West, Meridian, Black Warrior Review, Confrontation, turnrow, Crab Orchard Review, and Grain Magazine. She is recipient of the Willamette Award in Fiction, and has placed in Santa Fe Writers Project Literary Awards, Press 53 Open Awards, Pirate's Alley William Faulkner Short Story Competition, the F. Scott Fitzgerald Literary Society, and Glimmer Train. She teaches creative writing at the University of Southern Indiana, where she is fiction editor of Southern Indiana Review and directs the RopeWalk Visiting Writers Reading Series.

Blasphemies

BJ Hollars

How many times have I tried to tell this story?

Once upon a time, many years back, I dated a girl who insisted I become baptized. It wasn't explicit. I was sixteen, and she was a girl, and my salvation seemed a small price to pay. And so, one July day, we drove to her pastor's swimming pool and he dunked me underwater.

That was everything.

I wore my t-shirt because the pastor wore his. It was my first baptism, so I screwed up the cover-your-nose part and came up cleansed but sputtering, hacking into my towel. Moments later, I made small talk with the rest of the flock before slipping inside the pastor's house to peck at the cheese tray.

"You're freezing," the girl said, tracing my goosebumps.

Or I could tell it differently:

Once upon a time, not so many years back, a girl insisted I become baptized. I was sixteen, and she was a girl, and I was happy to do it. Sometime in late July, we drove to her pastor's house and I dunked in the pool. Afterwards, the girl and I ate watermelon in a hammock. I was happy to do it. And until we broke up three months later, I kept insisting I was happy. That it was no problem—hardly an inconvenience—that the water had been fine.

Or, like this:

Once, on the day I was baptized, I called my best friend and my parents and informed them of this an hour before the ceremony. We caravanned to the pastor's house, waving in the rearview mirrors, and somehow, they applauded my decision. They told me they were proud, though they couldn't have been. That afternoon, post-baptism but pre-watermelon, that best friend and I played tennis on the school courts. I convinced myself that the accuracy of my second serve was a gift from God for my allegiance.

Months later, that best friend and that girlfriend would form a relationship themselves, but whenever I pictured them together, I always just pictured them at the edge of that pastor's pool. How they'd looked from my view beneath the waterline, so wobbly and uncertain.

Or:

There was this one time I got baptized for a girl, but it wasn't the worst thing. I was supposed to be Jewish, but then I dunked in the pool and was not. The cheese tray was mostly cheddar, and I think I drank a Sprite that afternoon. Then, off to tennis on the school courts before eating the watermelon in the hammock, spitting seeds in the grass I would mow the following day.

But then there's also this:

The following December, after the girl and I broke up, the pastor's house burned down. It was a few days before Christmas, and I woke early for swim practice, turned on the television in the pre-dawn hours, watching his house smolder while leaning over a yogurt cup. That morning, I skipped practice and drove to his house, instead. And while I did not see what I expected (there was no robed family huddled alongside the manger scene) I watched the firefighters pick at things with their axes. It was still dark, so I crept through a few pines and stared in at the empty pool in the backyard.

Removing a church bulletin I'd stuffed beneath my car seat months prior, I wrote the pastor a message and placed it in his mailbox. Don't ask me what it said. I don't know if he ever received it, or if I even signed my name.

I only saw him once more after that, years later at the public library. I hid from him behind the stacks of books.

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B.J. Hollars is an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama. His work has been published or forthcoming in Barrelhouse, Mid-American Review, Fugue, Faultline, The Southeast Review, DIAGRAM, Hayden's Ferry Review, Puerto del Sol, and Hobart, among others. Visit YouMustBeThisTallToRide.net and bjhollars.com for more info.

Catch and Kiss

Akhim Yuseff Cabey

I

When I pulled over at a *BP* in Gahanna, Ohio so that the first black girl I would attempt to care for in five years could buy a pack of cigarettes, a six pack of beer, and a Swisher Sweet cigar, a black boy was working over a white girl in a car a few parking slots to the left of mine. Kayla, who I'd been romancing for a week, had already gone inside to make her purchases just before the whole thing went down. At first the boy and girl (they looked in their early twenties, like me) had just been sitting there: him in the passenger's seat, her behind the wheel. Though I considered myself a racially progressive brother who had dated and loved a handful of white girls and succeeded in judging them not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, I still stared at this interracial pair.

Not in the way some gawk at such couples as if they were vagrants begging for change with upturned palms; not, too, in the manner some peer frighteningly at these kinds of lovers as though they were witnessing a bloody fist fight. I gazed at them perhaps like one does a raging blaze, and embraced the sudden, psychic joy that results from recognizing a common intimacy with strangers: that of lying naked in the light with a lover whose skin shade is opposite yours, gaping at the marvelous conflagration of two such bodies sown together in ecstasy.

The black boy had his back to me when it all began. I couldn't see the white girl's face as he struck her. Just the back of his head, his slender shoulders, and his elbow slapping the passenger's window behind him before each time his arm snapped forward. The girl had long, finely crimped blonde hair that whipped about wildly as the boy attacked; after three quick blows, he stopped, and the strands floated back to her shoulders. The song I'd been listening to—DMX's *Crime Story*, a funky, lyrically driven rap song with a kind of 70s bass and drum beat that harkens to *Shaft*—only distilled the boom of the boy's voice as he turned away from the girl and slammed the dashboard with his fists.

Had I turned the music either down or off, I was certain the boy would sense me surveying his rage and turn it on me. So I just faced forward, caught what I could from my periphery, and listened to the dim roar of his voice, the octaves of which I was more intimate with than the naked dichotomy of their bodies huddled together in bed.

I recognized the force of his mania as the same I'd grown up with in the Bronx, the same that

existed throughout the city as a whole, and the same that I'd first been introduced to in my own apartment. For most of my childhood, my parents battled like righteous, wild animals. They prided themselves as much on being articulate as they did having filthy mouths. At the height of a fight, my stepfather made fun of my mother being skinny and having a flat ass for a black woman. He mentioned these things as though he were telling a joke. My mother often laughed with him before slamming on the brakes and striking back with, *better than being a no good-ass charcoal nigger!* Usually a beat of silence passed before he'd cross the room and pin her against the wall by the throat, until either her eyes watered or her body went limp in his grip.

I ran away to college saddled with a honed enmity and self-devotion to be nothing like my folks. I promised myself to love properly and powerfully despite the dense, jagged rock beyond the flesh of chest that seemed to grow larger with every breath I took. As a sophomore at that upperclass institution, my girlfriend—who was white—purposely cheated on me with a redshirt freshman basketball player after she'd found out I'd cheated on her. When she deliberately came to my room to purposely confess, the mighty hand of Perpetuating Cycles squeezed me in its palm and I slapped her. The blow was firm, decisive, righteous, reckless, evil—possessed and packed with all the black masculine sickness (or masculine sickness that *happened* to be black) that, at first, I'd been born into, but which now I ran to and relied on because I'd been so long addicted to its flavor; a taste from which I believed I could extract sanity and control, but failed.

I came to forgive myself and my girl and the place I'd been raised and that upperclass school: An institution where so many of my brown friends and myself engaged in a near existential contemplation of the meaning of our brown skins in comparison to a block of the white majority that were addicted to the notion of themselves as *only* human beings.

I fell for the shunned, misfit white girls, ones who, among other evils, had been brainwashed to loathe their bulky bodies and, in turn, themselves. I fell for *these* white girls and not the platinum blonde, emaciated sea nymphs the culture glorified, for I too had been a misfit back in the Bronx. There, the "black boy god" had a beautiful head of hair: either curly and, thus more manageable than naps, or he kept it every day in a tight, clean fade like his daddy owned a barber shop; he wore designer jeans and polo shirts, double-lined windbreakers, and a rugged pair of Timberlands. He was quick with his tongue and deft with his fists.

Me: I liked Star Trek and Guns N' Roses, two things which disqualified me from falling under the adoring gaze of pretty black girls.

The white girls I lunged toward in college, and who moved toward me with the same ferocity, could more readily imagine themselves drinking piss than either expecting or demanding sincere affection from those white-boy kings. Boys who'd been brainwashed themselves to prefer a girl who was both thin and willing and who kept her mouth shut until he was ready for her to open wide. Whatever sense I made out of who I was as a black kid and who I was as just a kid, there was a clear connection between the content of one's skin—a palpable mixture of beauty and evil—and the potent color of one's character.

Though profound, such an awareness was dead that night in the *BP* parking lot as the boy bounded from the car and slammed the door with both hands as though to drive it through the frame onto her

body. One final, decisive, righteous, reckless and evil blow. Then he was gone.

The girl sat with her face in her hands, the edge of her forehead resting on the steering wheel. I stared at her for a minute, talking to her with my mind, hoping she'd look up and see me watching her, and then gesture me over. I would've climbed into her car and kissed her face, smoothed her hair back and reassured her that *all* black boys were not like him, and that I'd prove it to her if she could summon enough strength to give us another shot. When she lifted her head up, her face was full of freckles and tears. She wore thin-framed glasses. She dabbed fingers to her cheeks and lips like she was testing for swelling and blood. There was neither trickling red nor bruises from what I could tell. When our eyes met, I was relieved that she didn't remind me of any of the misfit girls I had loved at that small, rich school. Instead of motioning me to come to her, she moved her arms and shoulders and made a face like, *the fuck you looking at?*

Even as she put the car in reverse, flipped me off, and pulled out into traffic, I continued to stare.

II

For those five years in college I'd spent suckling the progressive part of my humanity that allowed me to simultaneously appreciate and negate the importance of racial difference—in whatever sloppy, humble, blistering or glorious forms it presented itself—I couldn't dodge a bewildering question: Where had all the black girls gone in my life? I couldn't reconcile the fear that I had supplanted the power of brown flesh against brown flesh with that of brown against pale, just to prove to the stunted, dictatorial black people from back home that I was going to be the black person *I* wanted to be. It sounded like poisonous bullshit when folks remarked that one can take the boy from the city, but not the city from the boy, for in the five years I'd been away from New York, I'd done a damn good job scraping that cancer out of me with my bare hands and leaving it to rot to death on the curbs of that rich college. But still where, where had all the black girls gone?

Inside the *BP*, Kayla waited in line. Looking exasperated at the customers ahead of her, she clutched her cash and shook her head. I ogled her: It was her impatience, her sometimes unprovoked insolence and alpha-girl hypersensitivity which had initially attracted me to her. Besides being nineteen and from the suburbs, she had a body like a Barbie doll. As she made her way out of the store, carrying her purchases in a plastic bag, I admired how she simultaneously reminded me of those black beauty queens from the Bronx—ones who had never given my rock-and-roll black ass the time of day—and was nothing like them at all. I was digging how she flickered back and forth from being a black girl and a human female who *happened* to be black.

Man, I hate slow ass people, she said when she slipped into the car and placed the bag on the floor near her feet.

I said, *I feel you.*

On the highway, Kayla pulled a tiny knife from her purse and slit the Swisher Sweet cigar down its center and emptied the tobacco innards into the plastic bag between her calves. She tore off the curved mouth end of the blunt before inserting the weed; she looked like she was doing origami as she carefully worked the shell into the shape of a cigarette. Her meticulousness turned me on. We

were heading back to my place and the closer we got there the more it seemed possible that after we smoked and had a few beers, we might lie in bed together and I would rediscover the traditional, pleasurable image of our multi-shaded brown skins pressed together. Maybe then I would mention to her the horror of what I'd seen back at the *BP*.

As it was, I mentioned that I'd seen a black boy beating on a white girl in the parking lot just as Kayla lit the blunt, puffed on it a few times and filled the space between us with a thick gust of smoke. Instead of responding, she reached for the CD player and began *Crime Story* over again. At first, I thought she hadn't heard me, but after I hit the blunt, I was sure it was because she thought I was one of those brothers who only cared about race, who didn't have it in him to realize that the only real thing that mattered was being human. The further we drove the more bothered I became that Kayla wasn't appalled that two people who had understood the beauty of their difference could let their relationship reach such destruction. She just bopped her head and motioned with her gun-shaped fingers in sync with the thump of the bass beat.

Kayla, in the end, turned out to be uncomplicated. She liked her weed, her beer, and complaining about her shit job at Kroger supermarket. She wouldn't fuck me that night because, she said, she didn't know me that well. Though she'd dated a few white boys—but didn't add they were boys who *happened* to be white—the only conversation we had about interracial dating ended with her saying that she didn't see color, just the person. That didn't stop her from using phrases like *white trash* or *sketchy ass niggas* in the short time we'd known one another, when either a white or black person, respectively, had crossed her.

The longer she refused to respond to the scene back at the *BP*, the more I knew it had nothing to do with her being a black girl. She had arrived at some place in herself as a person that was comfortable with the paradox of her racial philosophy. The more I saw this, the angrier I became at myself, at her, at the mesmerizing and undeniably black aggressiveness of DMX's song—an aggressiveness that had been implanted within the deep, tangled forest of whatever human boy I'd been the moment I slipped from my mother's womb into the world. I needed Kayla to be nothing but a black girl that night in the car. I needed her face to be a beacon beckoning me back to the mainland of my youth and origins, back to a time and place when there was no need to observe and then brood over the filthy, complicated equation that made up the color of one's character in relation to the content of their skin. When there was only brown…

But it was too late, and had been for a long time. I'd been, for too many years, saddled with the intricate truth of who we are as people. For there was nothing I could've done to help that white *and* human girl that night in the parking lot of the Gahanna, Ohio *BP*. There was no sermon fiery enough I could've delivered to convince that black *and* human boy to reconsider his fists within the greater context of his obliterated heart. I didn't know *this* white girl; I wasn't *that* black boy. This was not my interracial love story. It was theirs.

As we took the stairs to my apartment, Kayla's voice sounded at my back.

I see that kind of crazy, racist shit all the time.

And for a few long moments—the kind that stretch the vast terrain of a violent life—I had no idea what in God's name this particular human girl was talking about.

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