

THE 8TH HOUSE:
A THESIS

By
JENNIFER KELECHI CHUKWU

B.A., University of Chicago, 2016

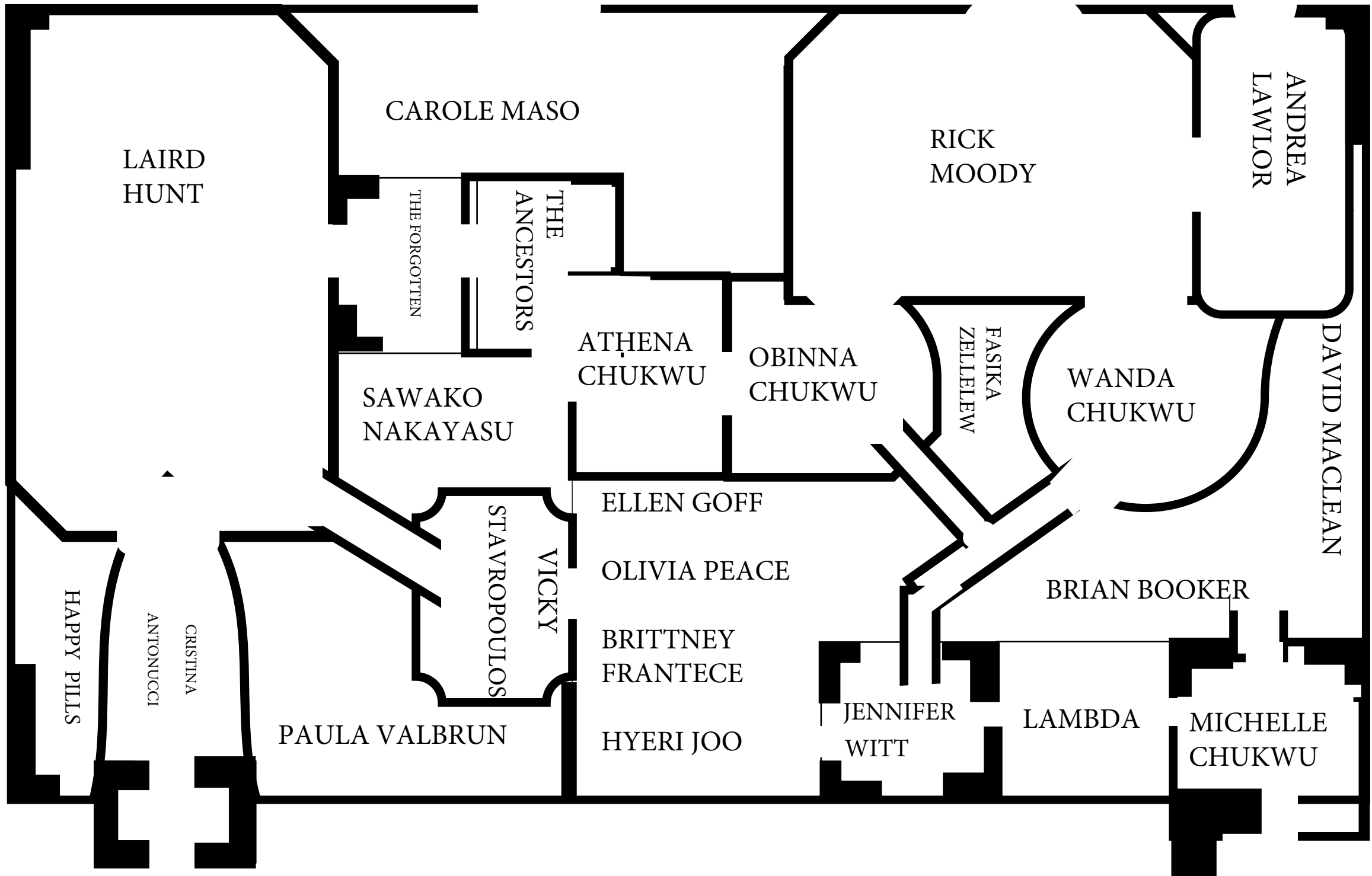
Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Literary Arts at Brown University

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

MAY 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



The 8th House: A Thesis

By: Sahara [REDACTED]

Advisor: [REDACTED]

Preceptor: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Department

University [REDACTED]

“Stumbling is not Falling.”

Malcolm X

Acknowledgments

Dear Committee,

It has come to my attention, that smoking kills, along with police, loner white boys, and looks. While embroiled in the process of trying to live, I have written this honors thesis.¹ It² is dedicated to the First Years who haven't yet died from alcohol poisoning, exhaustion, or overdosing. This work has been a labor of love and of hate. In it, you will find juxtaposition, verisimilitude, French, Freud, and anything else I've wasted 60K a year to learn.

I would like to thank my Advisors: Mr. White Supremacy, Mr. Capitalism, Ms. Racism, and of course my Life Partner for all the guidance they have provided during this process.

Yours Truly,

Sahara

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Sahara', with a stylized, sweeping flourish at the end.

¹ Ma lettre d'adieu

² When writing an honors thesis, you can get away with vague antecedents.

I. Aunt

My Aunt died in 1994, the year I was born. My earliest memories are Mother saying: “So much of my sister is inside of you.”

.-- - . .

Growing up, I tried looking for my Aunt. Kid me spent minutes looking into mirrors, staring down my throat, pulling open my mouth till the corners of it hurt, and rubbernecking up my nose as I tried to see pass the hairs and boogers. My Aunt wasn’t in my eyes or throat or even up my nose.

After every failed search and rescue attempt for her, I remember wishing things worked the way they did in *Cinderella* or *Anastasia*—lost things were always found in 90 minutes or less. If I were in a movie, I would’ve seen my Aunt in my eyes, and she would’ve looked back at me smiling. Toni Braxton would’ve screamed in her five octaves while my Aunt told me to *carry on my child and fight the good fight, so you can live for both of us*. And if not a good movie, then a good book would’ve also worked. Because, if I were in a good book, pages of beautiful description would’ve compared us to one another while using literary devices I still have memorized for no reason.

No movies, books, or metaphors could’ve helped me escape, and find my Aunt. Kid me was stuck in Novi³ searching for a family member who was allegedly inside of me. I would never enter an altered reality where I could pick my Aunt out of the lining of my cheeks. So, I guessed she was in my head, and in mother’s head, and father’s head, and my brothers’ heads,

³ One of the worst cities to raise a Black person. All Black people there look damned and desperate. If you’re wondering what double Ds look like in the Midwest—they are hands clenching on steering wheels while eyes are darting from left to right, trying to find a way to escape.

but not my bigot of an uncle's head.

But of course, I was wrong—the white people had her!

To be exact, my college library had her zine in the bookstacks. The zine was the last thing my Aunt did in her life⁴ and with the help of Mother, my Aunt published the zine, and even had a “book” signing before she died.

Fast-forward to a decade and a half later, a white graduate student decided to write a thesis about AIDS crisis art, post WWI German Art, and Freud. Somehow during his hunt for sources, he found my Aunt's work and used her as a citation.⁵

Because I am supposed to be grateful for this ivory tower that is the seventh best in the nation, this is the part where I say maybe all the bullshit, the crying spells, the nineteen extra pounds, and the all-nighters I experienced last year were worth it since I found family and part of my history at my University. Oh, and according to an email the President sent in August, **EVERYDAY** the University is making strides to become a much more inclusive, diverse, and comfortable learning environment while still not sacrificing its academic rigor. I only said that because I felt obligated. Hopefully, the previous two sentences will ensure I won't end up on the FBI's domestic terrorist watch list, hopefully in 20 years when some college student is writing a thesis about this thesis, I will seem a little well rounded, and not too much of an ANGRY BLACK GIRL. But I am an ABG. There are no excessive words or thinly veiled metaphors I can use.

⁴ Before being diagnosed with AIDS, my Aunt worked as a paraprofessional at Mary E. Mahoney Elementary; however, word got out that she was sick with that white gay disease, and she was forced to quit. Eventually, she was banned from her art classes at the church center because the other students and all the teachers didn't feel comfortable with her around.

⁵ He called her a misguided anarchist who needed to take drawing classes. Despite using it as a source, he didn't see the point of the zine and it's flat, ineffective language. I hope my Aunt's haunting him and putting typos in his dissertation whenever he's not looking.

From my anger, I have realized that I don't want to be here anymore. Years after pledging to a flag, after learning about pilgrims while making turkeys with my hands, after learning every moment in European history, after learning only of Egypt in the era of pharaohs for African history, after reading books where descriptors such as Nigger Black are used, I remember that my history goes unreported, and I am left compiling fragments of it. I have seen that my history is in Father's Igbo conversations I cannot understand. My history lives in Mother's murdered ancestors who worked the fields for men whose descendants have University buildings named after them.

Despite this hate, I'm going to classes inside these buildings. I'm living in a dorm where I'm too ashamed to wear my bonnet, and I'm graduating with classmates who want to wear cornrows and FUBU because they need that "ghetto" look for a 90s themed frat party.

So yes, I am an ABG that is accumulating tears, debt, and trauma just for the possibility that if I survive to graduation, I will get a piece of paper that is mostly in Latin.⁶

⁶ What am I Erasmus?



II. Elevator

Dear First Year, I highly recommend making up games to help you survive college. Last year, I thought too much, I cried too much, I ate too much. Today, the first day back to campus after summer break, I have decided that I'll make everything into a game. I'll play hide and seek with my professors. Then for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I'll play "eeny meeny minny moe" and pick one meal a day only to ensure I have enough carbs bottoming my stomach to drink. Ah yes, praise be to Rum Almighty, I'll play Russian roulette with shots of vodka, Everclear, and silver tequila so that for this year the fun will never die.

.. - .----. ... / - .. -- . / - --- / .-. .-. .-.-

My newest game to play is "Guess the Smoker." These days people always try to conceal the fact that they smoke. Example, when a smoker brings out a cigarette, they say some self-deprecating joke before shuffling outside with their shame that is hunching their backs. While outside, 7/10 people are complaining about secondhand smoke, 2/10's nostrils are being seduced by the familiar smell while scratching a nicotine patch on their forearms. Then that lonely 1/10 is asking for a light.

The only problem with "Guess the Smoker" is that it's completely dependent on location, but not all locations are created equal. Streets are too easy, elevators are OK, the best places are classrooms.

Please my fellow colleagues, don't listen to the plasma deprived adjunct who is sharpening their dagger between discussion sections as they prepare to kill the tenured professor who just celebrated his 105th birthday. Instead, play "Guess the Smoker."

Now, I'll be completely honest with you, I like "Guess the Smoker" because I'm always

the winner, but today is different. Someone else is coming for my crown. No worries. There's no need for you to call 911 and tell them there is a Mad Black Woman preparing to rampage because she lost a game.⁷

.-- --

Player Number One: A boy.⁸ He has Etch-a-sketch tattoos of misshapen koi fishes on his right arm, and his jeans, t-shirt, and sweater are ripped⁹ to high hell.

Player Number Two: Dorm janitor. I think Smokers United probably ex-communicated him for his health because if he has one more huff and puff, he'll blow his lungs out.

Player Number Three: A Little Girl. Kids these days are wild. Most are drinking and smoking by fourth grade. Why pay \$17.50 for a movie ticket when you can get high and make everything you see into a kaleidoscopic shot from *Paprika*?

.-- ---

1 or 2 or 3, which one will it be? Who cares, can't you see I'm having so much fun, fun, fun! If I thought I would be alive long enough to decide a major, I would major in games because they are what matter. They make everything into a joke because everything should be a joke. Why cry when you can laugh? Don't even try to answer that question. Just keep playing until you collapse.

My wisdom about games took me some time to attain. When I entered college, I was a serious student. I even bought the optional textbooks from the campus bookstore. But then

⁷ Reasons not to call the cops:

a. Bitch, I'm Black—I can't get away with tantrums, crying, or even breathing.

⁸ Of course, I check for someone hot. I'm 19, horny, and still take life advice from Wikihow articles. What I've learned is that if a boy points his toes toward you, then it means that either that boy is facing you or he likes you.

• I'm still trying to find the Wikihow articles on how to tell if a girl likes you, but I don't think they've been written yet.

⁹ Look this is college. Most of us are carrying caricatures of identities we wanted as kids.

toward the end of the first quarter, the other Black students started disappearing.¹⁰ To be exact, we lost four of the seven Black students who lived in my dorm. Two transferred, one dropped out, and then the other died. Whenever a student dies, the alive students receive an email titled *Unfortunate News*. There is a running joke on campus that the dead students join The Unfortunates. While the students laughed, I could only listen. Her death was the first of a series of wake-up calls that I stopped trying to snooze. I barely knew her, but after she died, I kept searching for traces of her. I reimagined the ways she sat in the dorm's study lounge. I walked the different paths she might have taken to reach the dining hall, and when I reached the dining hall, I scratched the laminate off the wooden table, the same way that I remembered her doing so.

Dear Committee, I want you to remember that she always put her dishes away after eating at the dining table, she held doors open for frazzled first years, and she was a political science major who didn't want to become a lawyer. She was/is a good person. She was/is another Black girl at this University and we stick together even after we fall one by one.

I want to keep her memory out of hopes that karma will make sure someone keeps my memory when I join The Unfortunates. Only to you, my readers, will I admit that during the pauses of my games, a growing part of me is preparing to leave like her. During the walks to lecture, I wonder if I leave, what will Mother say, and what will other Black students say knowing that another left?

As I wait to join The Unfortunates, I'm tired, and no longer want to perform. Most days I want to use my energy to take a power drill with a 1/4cm drill bit and drill a hole into my head so the thoughts I have

¹⁰ One night, I prayed the students' disappearances were abductions by aliens who were creating an Afrofuturist society filled with the best and brightest; however, in a dream Saint Butler came to me and said, "Oh my kindred, you already know the truth."

l

e

a

k

o

u

t.

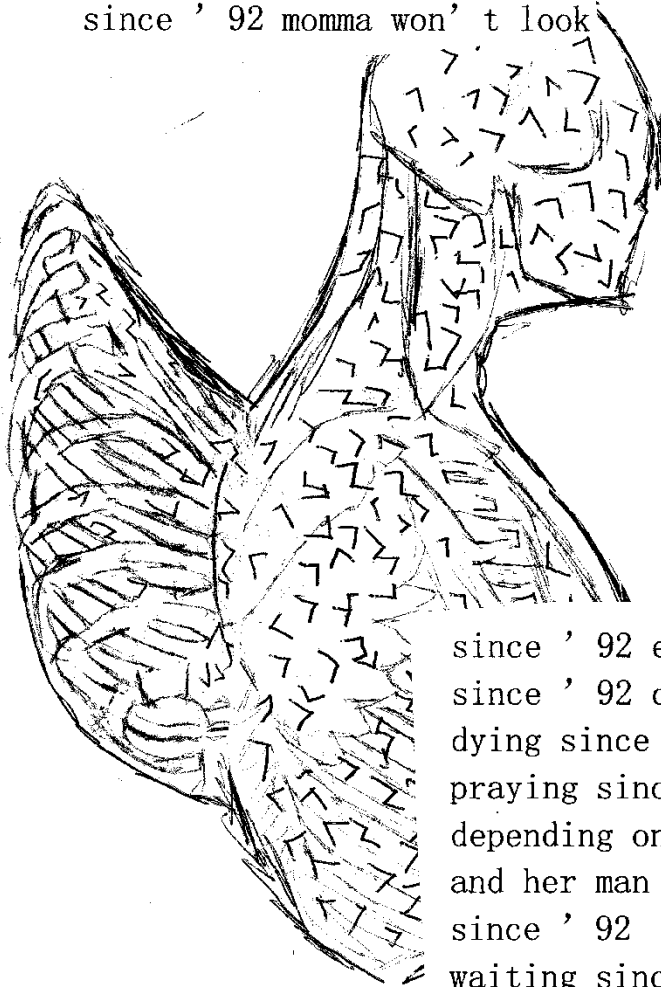
I can't say this out loud. I can't be the Black girl who is always angry, mad, silly, and depressed. That's too many diversity quotas checked. I need to find more games to keep moving and going around and around in circles, so these thoughts don't catch up to me. The moment my thoughts are trapped inside of me, I cannot move, and the pressure builds inside, causing time to stand still. To survive, I need time to move. I need for minutes to keep accumulating until they turn into hours, hours to days, that to weeks, then that to months, and finally a year is over.

I want to say goodbye but can't. Obviously, I can open my mouth, feel that echo in my throat as the letters **G O O D B Y E** come out and my lips move up and down. The letters don't become a word with a meaning. My language folds into itself and produces nothing that's satiable.

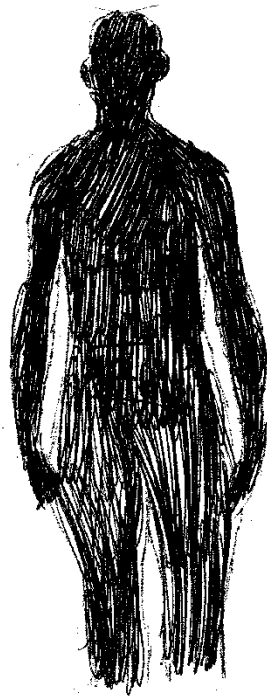
Yes, I'm stuck in the **GOODBYE**. All I want to do is escape and I will take the escape anywhere I find whether it is in a game or in the letters of

G O O D B Y E.

' 92.who knew when malice green died,
i was dying too
since ' 92 been sick with THIS
since ' 92 everyone known in the
neighborhood since '92
since ' 92 can' t work
since ' 92 momma won' t look



since ' 92 eating oatmeals and soups
since ' 92 crying since ' 92
dying since ' 92
praying since ' 92
depending on sister
and her man since ' 92
since ' 92
waiting since ' 92



196

②

III. Unpacking

After I leave the elevator, my feet drag along the faded blue carpet as they walk the green mile toward it. When I enter my room, most of me still feels like she's fractured, divided between living inside the elevator, living back home in Novi, and living in the voids of these three places.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Inside my room, the first thing I see is a note from Roommate asking for me to buy toilet paper. I crush the note, toss it into the trash can, and then close my eyes as I try to situate my body in this room. Though this room is in a different dorm¹¹ than last year, the room still feels exactly the same as the one from before. I stand between two twin XL beds, and perpendicular to me are two beige writing desks for studying. A little light can enter through a tiny prison window that faces an ivy-covered brick wall. In the spaces between these objects and sites, I close my eyes and feel the sadness from last year entering, swirling around me, tightening its grasps to trap my legs.

Honestly, I don't know what I'm trying to imagine with my eyes closed. This mind is filled with mostly school. I don't know if I have the capacity to imagine a new place that exists outside of books, dead white men, and coffee cups.

I just need to get back in it and accept being here.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Step 1: Make my bed.

I take last year's ratty linen. The sheets are covered with whitehead sized fuzzies, and the

¹¹ My previous dorm was an insane asylum, turned rehabilitation center, turned dorm. This new dorm is a gentleman's club, turned hotel, turned dorm.

blue dye stains my skin. Yes, these sheets are shitty, but I'll worry about them when the concerns about the carcinogens of blue dye start trending.

-.-- --- ..- / ..- / -.. .- -.--- .-. / --- ..- .-..

Step 2: Unpack clothes.

Top drawer is for bras and underwear. Second drawer is for trying-to-look-professional-shirts and one-wash-away-from-being-too-small t-shirts. Third drawer is for pants and leggings that haven't yet been destroyed by thigh rub. Fourth drawer is for the shit I couldn't figure out if it belonged in drawers 1-3. I have to be careful not to overpack any of them. There's an epidemic that's sweeping across campus, infecting the drawers' rails, and making them 1-3 forceful shoves away from collapsing. If the rails collapse, I'll have to call Dorm Maintenance Man, and listen to him complain how females are always the ones breaking drawers—#shitDMMsays.

... --- / .-. ..- --- .

My side of the room is made. The 1, 2 step is completed and there's no running away from this year. As I shove my empty suitcase into the small sliver of space that's left underneath my bed, I hear a knock on my door. Without even looking up, I know it's Mariah. When I have all my wits with me, my heart begins jumping even when she's a mile away. She welcomes me with a hug, and when she releases me, I watch as her smile lines are activated with every raspy word.

She asks, "Sahara are you coming to Shockley¹² for the BSC celebration?"

"Sure, but maybe a little later. I have to buy toilet paper for my room."

"Don't worry about that. Shockley has wrapped rolls in the bathroom, which are easy to steal."

¹² Named after William Shockley, winner of the 1956 Nobel Prize in Physics, and supporter of eugenics. If Shockley were alive, I think he would shockingly gasp at the site of so many Negroids inside.

Since, I have nothing else to do but steal toilet paper, and since I would never say no to Mariah, I agree to leave with her for the BSC¹³ celebration at Shockley. In this emerald rotunda, the frowns that hang above us are from the sixteen portraits of bald and bearded great white men who founded¹⁴ this University. Their eyes look down at us, inquiring, “Who let the Blackies in?” Though there are frowns above us, surrounding us are smiles. After nodding and mouthing *hi*¹⁵, I bumrush the food. Everything’s home cooked, and I’m guiltily excited that I’ll have one more meal that isn’t from the dining hall or a cheap, hemorrhoid causing diner. The combination of steam, savory seasonings, and hunger kick my nostrils, my eyes, and the rest of my body awake.

I examine the food, foil pan by foil pan, and try to decide which food item deserves the first spot on my plate. Trying to stay true to my .5 heritage, I decide that the Nigerian jollof rice is the most deserving of first place. After picking something from almost every pan, I look down at my Styrofoam platter of conquests.¹⁶ On my plate, the chicken grease creates a small pool of oil that I know will mix well with the jollof rice and collard greens that are meaty like my mama.¹⁷ Next to the meaty mama greens are candied yams with a light layer of marshmallows. The sweet stickiness from the marshmallows touches.... touches... Wait, it’s touching nothing?!? I’m missing the mac & cheese, my only vice behind drinking, smoking, binge TVing, porning, etc. I reach for the spoon to pile mac & cheese on my plate, but Mariah murmurs *don’t* under her breath.

I ask, “Why?”

¹³ Black Student Coalition

¹⁴ It’s easy to be a founder when the enslaved did all of the building, and you did all the murdering of the original inhabitants of the land.

¹⁵ I’ve spent most of my adolescence pretending to know people. Saturday nights in middle—high school were spent at Igbo parties celebrating a graduation, an anniversary, a wake, or confirmation of someone who I was supposed to know. These nights filled with saying hello to aunts and uncles taught me that pinches to your stomach’s sides are ways for aunts to see if the new weight you’re carrying is actually a secret baby.

¹⁶ Columbus would be so proud of me.

¹⁷ Don’t tell Mother I said that.

“It tastes like spaghetti.”

“Spaghetti?”

“Yes, and the game is Guess Who Mucked It Up.”

I pass the warning onto Hair Braider 1.¹⁸ She pushes her 26-inch indigo wig with green tips to her left shoulder so she can clearly hear the warning. After the message is received, she rolls her eyes and stops putting mac & cheese on her plate. While Mariah is warning more people at the BSC celebration about the mac and cheese, I’m trying to guess who messed up my fifth vice. I’m convinced it’s The Lone Caucasian,¹⁹ the only white board member of BSC. We laugh, and HB 1 says that sometimes allies can cook. I concede and then propose that it was a first year trying to follow grandma’s special recipe, but grandma didn’t want to be bothered so she told her grandbaby to figure something out. We laugh louder and agree that’s the likely scenario. As more people join our circle next to the food, we pass on the warning about the mac & cheese, ensuring everyone is spared from the treachery.

HB 1 while dabbing the grease away from the shined corners of her mouth mutters, “I wish everyday could be this celebration. I only see people when they need their hair done.”

The laughing stops. We all have a reason for not being around. Some better than others.

Thought in my mind: Survival.

Someone articulates my thought as I try to occupy my eyes with plate staring. I’m afraid to look up. I’m worried people will see the sadness that leaked from my head and changed the white of my eyes to a different gainsboro shade of mildewed pain. HB 1 ruminates on survival as she continues to talk.

¹⁸ HB 1 is the best hair braider on campus. Piss her off, and your edges will be gone by midterm season. Meanwhile, HB 2 is your last resort. She’ll have your parts as wide as the Red Sea.

¹⁹ Legend has it that LC has been on the board for eight years. He’s a PhD student and uses his connections to ensure that BSC secures funding for events. If his name isn’t part of the proposal, then BSC won’t get funding.

“That’s what Jen said all the time before she became an Unfortunate.”

My eyes are still stuck staring at the plate, and I respond, “I remember reading that email. She used to live in my old dorm.²⁰ She always opened the door for first years like me.”

We sit in silence and grow uncomfortable. Someone says, *Oh, this got sad*, but I’m not sure who. I don’t look up until I’m sure that the white of my eyes have returned to their normal shade. Once I’m confident that they have, I hope that with a sentence I can pull the laughter back into the room. I say, “Well, welcome to campus.”

The laughter is back, and more jokes are made with whatever material we have. We joke more about the mac & cheese, about how much toilet paper we can steal before we are arrested, about how to find a sugar momma or zaddy so we can drop out and travel. The jokes become more desperate as they try to make sure that there is no silence. With laughter, we can remain together.

One burst of our laughter rips through the music. LC, the Lone Caucasian, comes around and says that THIS is where the fun is. He grabs a spoonful of mac & cheese and tosses it onto his plate. He makes room for himself in the circle. The laughter ends.

LC declares, “Every year, I’m so happy to be part of THIS. BSC has so much culture and life, it’s a showcase of the University’s crème de la crème.”

He eats more mac & cheese and wipes what looks like a piece of something—maybe unmelted cheese, maybe egg, hell maybe an utter—off his mouth. This piece falls onto the floor, and as his body shifts, his foot mashes it into the burgundy carpet. His body continues shifting until he sets his plate down and then begins biting his nails like a cracked-out rabbit. He inserts the chewed bits of nail into his front jean pocket. Everyone is watching but is saying nothing.

²⁰ What I wanted to say: She used to live in the dorm two doors down from me. Her death prompted me to move.

“This University has so many opportunities for students like you. I want to make sure that I’m here every step of the way to guide you and give you access to whatever you need. Think of me as your personal keycard.” He adds more of the mac & cheese to his plate. “Has anyone else tried this? It’s pretty great. I made it myself in under 20 minutes.”

Mariah responds, “We will! But since we are the crème de la crème, we have to watch our heart health.”

LC laughs and dances away to the Motown music that plays in the background.

Crème de la Crème

With closed eyes, Me, a prototype Black, stands in a giant glass case. Her hair is in a perfect Afro and her skin is the right shade of brown. I.e., it is not too dark. She is naked, and a Chelsea smile is cut into her face. Next to her are four other prototype people of color who stand with closed eyes inside glass cases. They too are naked and have Chelsea smiles.

The Academy Leader enters the stage and is followed by other members of The Academy. They all wear vibrant Victorian suits and dresses. The Academy Leader's right hand is a giant white cane that has a golden tip. He is the proudest showman in all of academia.

Once The Academy Leader and members of the Academy enter the stage, the people of color inside glass cases open their eyes. Me's hands are sewn together so that they are stuck open in the begging position. Me repeats, "I'm just happy to be here. I promise I'm one of the good ones." Tears of "gratitude" walk down her cheeks.

The next person in the second case has a Warbonnet sewn onto his scalp. He cries throughout the play.

The third person in the third case is coated with glitter that has been applied with rubber cement. His hand rests on his hip as he repeats, "Yas, hunty. I'm hereeee. Your neighborhood queer."

The fourth person in the fourth case has two guns glued onto his hands. He screams out, "I've seen some shit. Shit you can't even believe." He continues to scream. His exhaustion causes his eyes to water.

The fifth person in the fifth case has two money bags glued into her hands. She is naked except for her shoes. One of her feet are kicked up to display her oxfords with red bottoms. She says in a 1920s posh accent, “You see, I’m different. I descend from the original members of the Niggerati. I read Langston Hughes’ grammar books in Mompsie’s air-conditioned womb.”

The Academy Leader: *(his voice is amplified by a microphone, drowning out the showcase’s screams, crying, and repeating)* Come one, come all! Come see the diversity showcase.

According to New News & You, we have the fourth best in the nation. Come close and see!

Look at this progress! Isn’t it grand?

Members of The Academy clap and scream huzzah. They knock on the glass cases, examining what’s inside.

The Academy Leader: They are the crème de la crème. The cherrypicked, the curated, the best of the best.

The Academy Member 1: Do you have ones from the hood?

The Academy Leader: Why, yes, of course, Madame! Just turn to your left and you’ll see one straight from the jungles of your scariest hood. *(Runs over to the fourth case. Leans toward The Academy Member 1 and whispers in her ear.)* Rumor has it that they were born and bred in Chiraq.

The Academy Member 1: Oh, my.

The Academy Member 2: Do have any Native Americans?

The Academy Leader: *(gallops over to the second case)* It took some time. They are a little hard to find, but we were destined to manifest one. Now look and see!

The Academy Member 3: Any gay ones?

The Academy Leader: Sir, we are the fourth best for diversity in the country. Of course, we have gay ones. *(somersaults toward the third case)* We've been told that straight is so passé. So, we kicked out some of the straight models and added in new gay ones. *(The Academy Leader feistily snaps.)* Aren't they so glittery?

The Academy Member 4: *(huffs as she pulls up her pants and wipes clean the spectacle that is infused in her right eye, and causing for puffed, infected skin to bevel over the lens)* This is great and all, but do you have traumatized ones?

The Academy Leader: *(looks disgusted)* Ma'am, we are still The Academy. We DO NOT admit them unless they have been traumatized.

All five faces in the cases fall into Elmer Fudd frowns. The Academy Leader bows. Members of The Academy wander around the glass cases. Member 4 taps on Me's case and it topples over. Both the glass and Me shatter into pieces.

The Academy Member 4: Oh no, I think I broke it.

The Academy Leader: It's okay! It happens all the time. *(He looks to the side of the stage.)*

We have a code blue, again.

Two new members of The Academy enter the stage. They are dressed in blue hazmat jumpsuits. They sweep up the pieces of the glass and Me, and then exit the stage. Seconds later, one of the jumpsuits wheels in another glass case. Inside is someone who looks just like Me—#twins.

The Academy Leader: You can't even tell the difference! Now, let me take you to the classroom to show what our curated crème de la crème learn while they are with us at The

Academy.

IV. Rarity

The event ended two hours ago²¹, and all the food but the mac & cheese is gone. Black trash bins are stuffed with crumpled napkins and contorted aluminum pans. Half the lights are off. Despite all these key signs that tell us it's time to go home, we're still here, trying to stretch out time.

HB 1 has a mini speaker and plays her "m.A.A.d City" playlist. Mariah tells her to add "Money Trees" to the queue. A circle of people next to us are planning where to have the after party. Another circle is trying to decide a name for our group chat. Eventually, the circles merge into one, causing for conversations to fly across the room.

-.-. -

"Call it, it's lit." "We have to figure out where we're going." "No, call it Black excellence." "Nah, that's too long." "Call it the Soul Circle" "No, the Soul train."

"We could swipe in the dining hall. It might still be open." "Call it Campus Jam."

"How about my place." "Do you have any furniture yet?" "No, but there's room for everyone." "But where are we going to sit?" "We could stand." "We've been standing all day." "Just make chat name emojis" "Nah, that's too "Call it the Resistance." hispter." "The what?" "The Resistance." "What if some white person sees it and thinks we're Black Panthers." "Watch a scandal happen, and we get kicked out." "What? That's dumb. We wouldn't get kicked out."

"I don't know. "How about that breakfast spot by the library?" This University is always trying get rid of us." "Hell no, that breakfast spot has rats in the back."

²¹ Oh, am I late?

“Remember what happened to Skid?” “To who?” “Skid, he was a freshman two years ago.” “Wasn’t he kicked out for selling weed.” “He wasn’t selling. His white roommate was selling,” “How about we chill on the green.” and he was the accountant.” “The green? Wasn’t it raining today?” “Well, he should’ve known better “I don’t think it was raining.” than to get in business with his white roommate.”

“I’m telling you the Resistance “Do you know if it was raining?” should be the name, and we won’t get kicked out.” “Do you want to “It rained. My hair is proof.” bet your scholarship on that?” “What about Dean [REDACTED]? If anything happens, he’ll have our back right?” “He doesn’t care about us, he’s more concerned about securing his check.”

“He’s an employee first, then he’s Black. You always see him smiling in patrol cars like he’s Axel Foley.” “You right.” “Call it Beyoncé.” “What no, “Is it going to rain tomorrow?” not everything is about Beyoncé.” “But it is tho.” “No, “I don’t think so.” it’s not.” “Hater.” “How? I’ve seen her in concert three times.” “Where are we “You’re still a hater.” going?”

~*~*~*~*~

When she has a chance, Mariah asks the group, “So, what are we going to do with this mac & cheese?”

HB 1 and I look at it. Besides LC’s scoops, the pan is still filled to the brim.

I respond, “We should throw it out.”

Mariah shares, “Legend has it that every year he brings mac & cheese, and every year someone in BSC has to throw it away. It’s a rite of passage. Sahara, this year it’s your honor. Next year,²² you’ll bequeath this honor to someone else.”

²² According to Mariah, every year someone suggests two things for LC. The first, he cooks something other than

I march into the bathroom and when inside, I remember my primary mission. I pack three giant rolls of toilet paper in my backpack, and then scrape out the mac & cheese. Huzzah, the pan is emptied. I think I've moved up the ranks in the BSC. Perhaps by graduation I'll be able to admit the following without risking my spot:

1. I hate most 90s R&B, most of it sounds like drunk text messages sung aloud.
2. Though Mother has R E S P E C T for them, I can't stand Mr. Songs' cockatoo hats.
3. I golfed for two years while in high school. I was over the par for every hole.

#alwaysaboveandbeyond.

--. --- - / - --- / -... . / -. . . - .-..

After I return with the empty pan of mac & cheese, the building manager at Shockley tells us it's time to leave so she can close up shop. Members of the BSC say their goodbyes, but there are still some of us who want to continue living in this moment. We finally decided on a place to have the after party.

Drum roll, please—\/\—a diner.

.-.. .-. --- --

The diner of our choosing is Voices of Reason because it's friendly for our perpetually empty wallets. Though we're poor, and the food is cheap, the sounds in this diner are rich. As your butt and back squeak against the booth's ripped pleather, your ears listen to famous speeches.²³ On Thursdays—Sundays, as the nights progress toward madness, iconic words collide with drunk confessions, exhausted sighs, and roars of laughter.

mac & cheese. The second, he steps down from his position. He laughs off both propositions. He believes the mac & cheese is a staple part of the welcome back celebration. LC also believes he can't leave BSC because he doesn't know anyone who is as qualified or as experienced to take over his position.

²³ Speeches are the only thing the owner will play. Well, sometimes she'll play Sun Ra if she's feeling like she's from another planet.

As Mariah, HB1 and a few others from BSC sit in the diner, I stare at the divided wall, the bottom half painted lateritious, and the top half melon. Both halves covered in a massive collection of crooked picture frames that display potted plants, costumers who died, and famous writers. My staring is stopped when menus are passed around. My eyes study the options, and as I gaze, I make sure to smile, and to join in on the conversation of what sounds tempting even though I'm too embarrassed to even order water after my glutinous display at the celebration. Mariah asks if I want to split a large order of fries. My mouth responds sure, but my mind tells this body that we aren't touching more than five fries, and if we dare touch six, I'm going to auction away my stomach and slices of my thighs to the highest bidder.

As everyone waits for their food, HB 1 laments on how the school year is about start, and though this moment is great, us gathering won't happen again till the end of the quarter. She repetitiously comments that she won't see anyone until they need to get their hair done. Mariah interrupts HB 1's lamenting with the proclamation, "This year we have the group chat. We will keep this community going." She points a fry toward everyone at the table. "Everyone here's going to graduate. We'll tear this University up and then make sure more students like us get in." She pops the fry into her mouth and leads us in saying cheers with our cups of water. The background speech changes. I don't know who it is, but the man's voice has a funny pitch, and he speaks with conviction and comedy.

~... ~... ~... ~... ~... ~...

One by one, everyone at the table makes the promise that we will graduate and if ever feel like dropping out we will message the group chat. When the check comes, I give Mariah my share for the fries, she says that's silly because I only touched two. Outside of the diner, we say our goodbyes to one another. Mariah and HB 1 are off to meet their partners, and the other

members of the BSC are hopping on the University shuttle or scattering toward their dorms. One student from BSC offers to walk me home. I decline. My dorm isn't too far, and I enjoy walking alone.

The student keeps insisting to walk me home. After minutes of back and forth, she accepts that I'm solo dolo, and urges that I be careful because Black girls are going missing, but no one is reporting it. Even though we've already hugged everyone goodbye thrice, we all hug one another again. A University patrol car with Dean [REDACTED] sitting shotgun stops next to us. Dean [REDACTED] rolls down his window, and waves at us. None of us wave back and instead start the fifth and final round of hugs.

As I walk home, the funny voice's speech echoes in my head. Though the pitch is strange, it is better than the normal voice that is living inside me. In my dorm, I place the toilet paper inside the bathroom, and go to bed sober and happy. This is an exquisite rarity.

Exquisite Rarity

Me, a trying to be happy, respectful Black, sits naked at a large dining table as she waits to be served. At the center of this table is a crystal decanter filled with the classic cocktail “Conceal Don’t Feel.” This cocktail is made of Carlo Rossi Red, vodka, Sprite, and tears. Yummy. Plating the table is ancestors’ best china that they stole when Master and Miss wasn’t looking. Me sits with her hands stitched into her lap and she looks to the other naked and happy, respectful Blacks who are drunk and smiling with Chelsea smiles that extend from ear to ear. Like Me, the respectful, trying to be happy Blacks are model members of the talented tenth. Their eyes are stuck open, and their falling tears fill the empty soup bowls that sit on top of their dinner plates. None of them can leave. They all are stuck, living as a display.

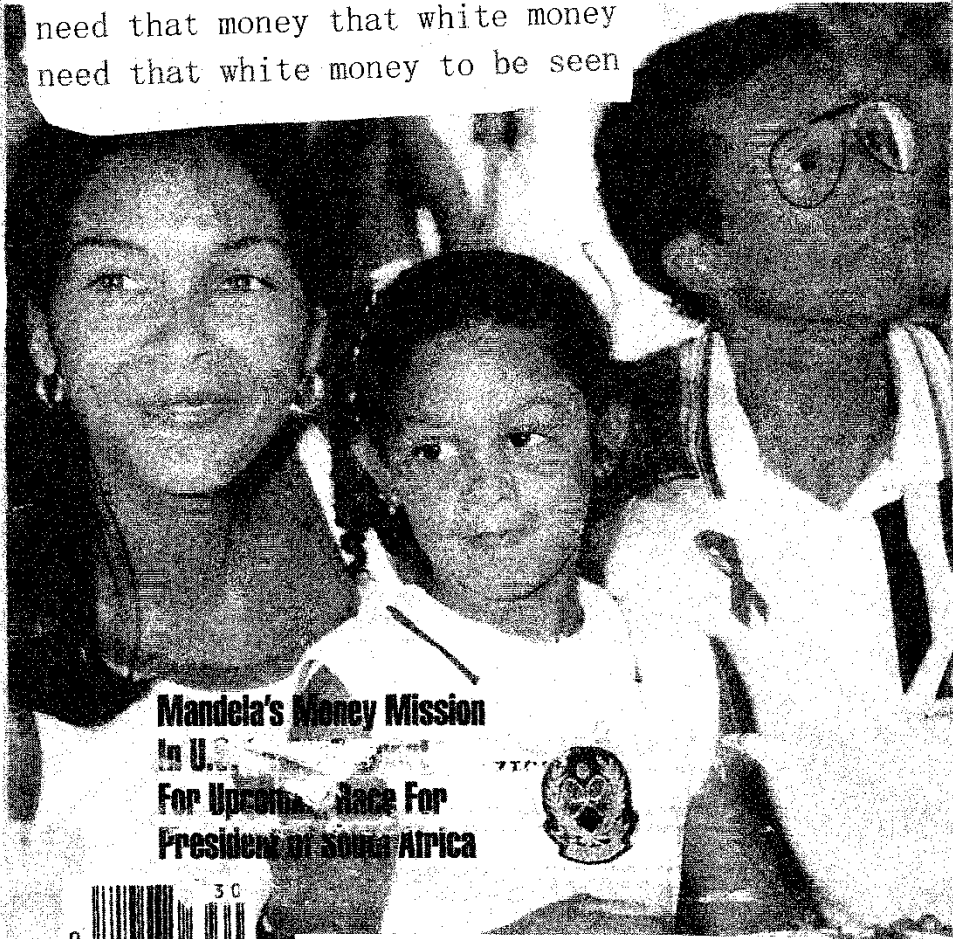
Black Dean, a member from The Academy, walks around the table. His left hand is behind his back and his right hand is a platter with a perfect set of white teeth sitting at the center. BD walks around and checks to see if anyone needs to be served. Me lurches forward, enduring the pain of her stitches ripping from her lap. BD sees Me in pain, comes over to help. With his left hand, BD rips off Me’s teeth and lips, takes the new teeth that sat on the platter, and then proceeds to add them to Me so that she too can be a happy, respectful Black.

JULY 26, 1993/\$1.25 64060 A JOHNSON PUBLICATION

JET

ARTHUR ASHE'S
New Book, 'Days Of Grace,'
Tells Of His Three Burdens:
Race, AIDS And Davis Cup

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen



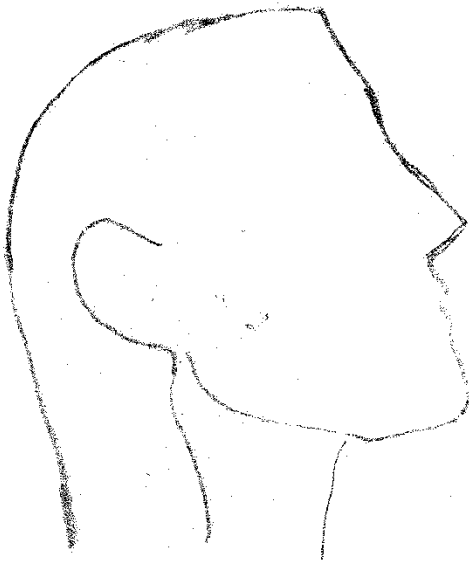
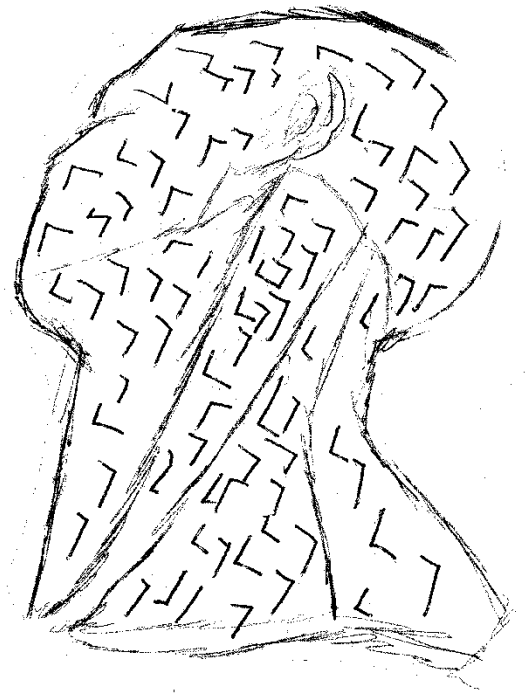
Mandela's Money Mission
In U.S.
For Upcoming Race For
President of South Africa



need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

sister asked what are we
gonna do about THIS
told her doctor
said there' s
nothing to do
sister said didn' t
ask about doctor
asked about us

can' t think about us
cause body isn' t
mine with THIS
all I asked sister



please keep loving me,
never leave me
please make me always here

V. Chit Chat

The group chat name the majority of us agreed on is Black Excel, and all day there have been nonstop notifications. The best post from today is from Mariah. She sent a photo of mac & cheese with a caption, *now this is how you mac*.

Everyone in the group chat reacted with laughter. A few suggested we forward the picture to LC and wait for his response. Hundred messages in, I've realized I'm one of the few who haven't sent any responses. To jump into the conversation, I comment Mariah's food looks so good that I need it for my soul. Most people in the group chat react to my message with a heart. Oui, oui! I seem so normal, so chic, so social when chit chatting.

Sure, there's the truth. For me, food isn't nourishing for the soul. Growing up, food deprived it, and plumped the body. Food made Father say, *you're getting too fat*. It made Mother repeat, *one ounce to the lips is a pound to the hips*. It made kid me believe that no matter what I did, pound upon pound would be added to a ballooning body.

Though in 10th grade, I did find a temporary solution to a permanent problem. I ate 1,000 calories a day. I picked up tricks like coffee with honey for breakfast, or if you wait till 3PM to eat, you can binge and not be hungry for the rest of the day, or if you're starving and feel like you might pass out, take a nap and when you wake up your body might have forgotten it was hungry, oh and of course, sparkling water and Altoids will make you feel full.

The diet came with benefits.

1. I got my first kiss.²⁴

²⁴ First kiss happened during a Band weekend field trip to the UP, and it was the scandal of the Geek Century. Me, a newly skinny flute player, and always skinny Drummer boy performed for the top high school band directors in the Midwest. After the performance, High School Best Friend said she could see sparks flying every time he hit the

2. I wore a bikini.²⁵

Diet came with costs:

1. I was sick often.²⁶
2. I didn't have energy to do anything besides study. Resulting in me having to quit my extracurriculars.

I couldn't keep up with the diet. One meal turned to two, two meals to three, and then three meals to three meals and some snacks. I plumped back up and threw away the bikini. My resentment for my body lives in every fold, every jiggle, and dimple. I wish I had enough of the cash monies to treat this body like Mrs. Potato Head, the Kardashian edition. Remove arms, legs, and stomach. Then perform operation inside my head. Get rid of the darkened spots and then with a scalpel extract all of my mental pain.

drums. The woodwinds couldn't believe I had caught the attention of a drummer. They thought I could've snagged a bass clarinet, at best. HSBF said that Drummer Boy was looking for a serious girlfriend and was falling head over heels for me. I didn't believe HSBF, and I ignored everything she said until a judge pulled me aside and told me it was the chemistry during the performance that won them over. Drummer Boy and I won first place for our performance and we wore our matching medals on the bus ride back to the camp.

That night after our win, there was a bonfire on the beach. Drunk off sugar, Drummer Boy and I snuck away from the chaperones. By the lake, we dipped our feet in the water, and plastic pop rings tickled our toes. It was the perfect moment. I was a pimple free that weekend and had the courage to talk to him face to face. He said, it looked like we were about to kiss so I kissed him. Lightheaded from my first kiss or missing my dinner of Altoids, I felt as if I could've floated away in the water.

Drummer Boy held my hand and we walked back to the bonfire with the rest of the students. When we returned, and two woodwinds saw me holding hands with Drummer Boy, they gasped, and shared the news to the rest of the woodwinds, brass players, and percussionists.

During that weekend, I was convinced Drummer Boy and I were going to date. We even held hands during the entire bus ride back, but when we got back to Novi, he told me he had a girlfriend; however, he was willing to dump her, if I could prove I was committed to him. I asked how I could prove my love, and he replied, "fuck me ;)." With HSBF, I got lingerie from TJ Maxx, but the next day after lingerie shopping, I got my period, and by the time it was over, Drummer Boy found a new girlfriend.

²⁵ It wasn't an insty bisty teenie weenie yellow polka-dot bikini. It was a hot pink bikini with silver clasps for easy access to my shrunken shriveling tits.

²⁶ One time I got too sick and never had the same lung capacity, which made playing the flute difficult. I went from 2nd chair to last. The next trimester after the demotion, I quit band.

There, that's the truth, but I can't say that in the group chat. This truth might escape into campus and cause a matrix of consequences.²⁷

--- / .-- . -.. -..

Phew, all this talk of past skinniness is making me hungry, but my Ride Or Die, ROD, is twenty minutes late to lunch. Don't worry, I'm not feeling so alone that I want to jump in front a University bus, effectively becoming roadkill. It's not time for that, yet. ROD's lateness gives me time to play the game of "Warm Bum."

You play the game by guessing, which chair in the coffee shop is warm from someone previously sitting on it. After you have your guess, you concoct a backstory centering on whoever was sitting in the chair. The rules of the game are simple:

1. Use your imagination.
2. Keep all guesses realistic.

My bet is on the chair next to the massive glass window. Inside the coffeeshop, it is always the first chair taken because of the view. My guess, the last person sitting in the chair was an Econ major who while sitting in his suit and producing small beads of butt sweat on the chair, stared at a dorm building, and imagined how one day that building would be named after him, and if not this building, then this café, and if not the building or the café, then the entire school, and if not the school, then the entire city, all inhabitants, including the rats. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph that chair must be blazing from that overzealous Econ bum.

²⁷ Second Disappeared Girl who used to live in my old dorm didn't disappear in the *X-Files* or *Girl, Interrupted* kind of way. She disappeared in a "Fuck This Shit" kind of way. Second Disappeared Girl's roommate told her friend who told her boyfriend who told the RA that they all thought SDG had an eating disorder. Reasoning? They didn't know of any Black girls who were that tiny. The RA along with Dean [REDACTED], the sole black dean, and SDG's roommate, roommate's friend, and roommate's friend's boyfriend sat SDG down and told her that it was in her best interest that she take a leave of absence. SDG didn't get a chance to tell them that she had malabsorption issues since she was a child, causing for her decreased appetite and slim frame. After a two-hour intervention, she decided to transfer schools. She hated it here anyway and was tired of people at our school diagnosing her after watching one episode of *Doctor Oz*.

Second guess, the chair across from me. There are a bunch of muffin crumbs on that side of the high-top wooden table and I figure an overworked grad student who was stalking a rich ex online sat there before leaving for their fifth job at The Dollar Colonel.

Satisfied with my answers, I start squeezing honey into my coffee. Normally, I can't taste the difference, but this morning I am feeling a little experimental, and want to see how much honey can make this burnt coffee taste like candy.

Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Clouds of honey sit at the bottom of my cup, and even after stirring, there's still no success. The coffee still tastes like shit. When I finish sipping, the grounds become wedged between my teeth and gums. I combine spit moving and tongue sliding to wedge the grounds out, and then swallow the coarse bits. Coffee Shop Barista comes and cleans the crumbs from the other side of my table. They ask if I need anything. I should say better coffee, but manners, right? Instead I say thank you for cleaning the crumbs. They leave and returns to the register.

My Ride or Die, ROD enters into the café. In her hands, she's carrying two giant cookies and two bags of chips. I smile. I've already forgiven her lateness. Like always, she's wearing her wire framed octagonal glasses that are smudged and scratched to high hell and her cropped black hair is tussled in the direction of North by Northwest. She sits down and slides over my cookie and chips.

"Sorry I'm late. I was helping my little sister²⁸ with her AP Lit paper. She's so hardheaded. She refused to change her thesis statement until 2AM."

While listening to her story of her battle against her sister's bad thesis, I munch on chips.

²⁸ Even though ROD is 2067 miles away from home, she is still an older sister to her core. After her father died, her duties as an older sister to her three sisters went into overdrive. Though there are days that is resentful for having to be caretaker for most of her teen years, she still always wants to help or protect. Sometimes I have to dodge her fingers when she tries to pick stray boogers out my nose. I couldn't ask for a better friend.

One of the things that makes ROD my ride or die is that she's one of the few people I'm able to eat in front of, and when I say eat, I mean I can down a burger, a milkshake, and chili cheese fries, half a panini, cookie, then buy a donut for later, and there's no judgment.

She scratches her hair, putting it in the direction of South by Southwest as she mumbles, "Younger siblings are just hardheaded." I sigh in agreement as we leave the table to stand in line for lunch at the café. There's a \$5 burger special. Though the bread is dried out, sometimes specked with mold, and the lettuce is wet and wilted, our bank accounts are filled with glee. As we are waiting for a food to be prepared, ROD asks me, "Have you meet your new roommate yet?"

"No, but she left a note asking for me to buy toilet paper."

"That's odd. It's not even week two and she's already leaving notes."

"Yea, I don't have a good feeling about this whole roommate situation."

"Well, you did submit your housing lottery form late. If you submitted it on time, we could've been roommates."

"Ugh, I know. I need to just get through this year with this new roommate. Maybe she won't be that bad." With our food in hand, we return to our seats. ROD shows me a picture of a soundwave. I ask her, "What is it?"

"It's the last voice recording of my father before he died. I'm thinking about getting it tattooed on my bicep. Will you come with me to the appointment?"

"Of course."

As we pick off the pieces of lettuce are too wilted and mushy to eat, ROD tells me of a 21st birthday party happening tonight. She doesn't know whose birthday it is, but she heard the birthday girl is a Donor Kid and spent \$400 bucks on booze for the party. ROD has the address

and is positive anyone with the address is invited.

.-- .-- .- .- / ..- .-- .--..- / -.. .- .- .- .-

Praise be to God almighty, tonight I will not drink from a \$15 vodka handle or sip from a solo cup filled with tante sweat flavored beer. I agree to go the party with ROD, and we plan to meet outside my dormroom before it starts.

I return to my room and go to the bathroom, and while inside, I realize that half of the toilet paper roll is gone. Roommate is on her bed listening to music.

I ask, “Did you use some of the toilet paper to clean up a spill?”

“No, why?”

“It’s almost gone.”

“I think that you must’ve gotten a small roll yesterday. Maybe next time you should get a jumbo one.”

Impossible, the rolls of toilet paper I stole were the size of Stonehenge boulders, but I don’t ask any other questions.²⁹ Roommate sees me going through my miscellaneous drawer and pulling out party wear. She invites herself to the party. She’s convinced the party is the perfect way for us to bond as new roommates. She runs over to me and hugs me, then begins picking out clothes to wear tonight too.

²⁹ Questions I have: Is Roommate embarrassed she had explosive diarrhea for the past few hours, and her bum is screaming, “Hear ye, hear ye, we shan’t go to the student health center.”

VI. Party

I started drinking at 16³⁰, and was used to swallowing whatever I found underneath the kitchen sink behind Kroger plastic bags. In the house, Father was the only one who drank. Drinking times were Saturday afternoon while paying bills or at parties with family. My favorite memories of Father are in his isiagu. Dancing with an uncle. A crumpled napkin in his hand to wipe off the sweat dripping from his forehead. Knees bent as him and an uncle quickly shimmy. While their bodies are bent, and their hands clap together, gold watches rattle on their wrists. Father's wide smile reveals his metal crowns that sit on three of his molars. When Father and the uncle are too hot from dancing, they roll up their sleeves, showcasing their BCG scars. Every part of them are drunk off of Cognac and the smell of fried puff-puffs, fried goat meat, jollof rice, and Prince Nico Mbarga.

Sweet mother, sweet mother.

During the parties, Mother never drank. She sat next to me, focusing on the whispers of some of the Naija women. Her ears trying to pre-emptively protect me from snickers concerning us, the Nigerian mutts. Mother has always hated parties, and the snickers from these women certainly didn't help. Growing up, parties were a gateway drug, and if you wanted to protect your soul, then they were to be avoided. Grandmother took Mother and my Aunt to church, in hopes of both protecting them and helping them escape from their house on Gratiot, a house of rotting ceilings and broken doors. Her tactic worked on Mother, but not on my Aunt. When Grandmother wasn't looking, my Aunt winked at the girls and a few of the boys, and during the summer, if they winked back, my Aunt and them snuck out of the church to kiss by the mulberry

³⁰ I don't know whether this age is young, old, or within the standard of deviation.

bushes.

In college, I have no house, and after sinning, I'm too tired to go to church. I accept that my home is a XL twin bed, a desk, and a cafeteria with rotating dining hall workers and rotating doors. Since I have no house or true home, I drink to remember the parts of home I need.

If I couldn't learn about Father's childhood or Igbo culture, then I would learn how to drink. At dinner while rolling fufu in my hands, my eyes tracked what Father decided to pour into his tall glass. Cognac and Vernors soon became one of my favorites, and then I learned to love the breadiness of stout.

.-. - - - - - . - . .

Before leaving for the party, I mix together my Cognac and Vernors. While Roommate is away in the bathroom,³¹ ROD texts me, informing me that she can't make it to the party. Her sister has decided to return to her original thesis and will need help making it work. Unamused, I sit on my bed flipping through the library's copy of my Aunt's zine, debating whether to rip off the barcode. The fine for a damaged library book is \$150. For now, the sticker stays, but the minute I get a sugar parent, I'm ripping it, and will make this zine completely mine. As my fingers trace my Aunt's drawings, I try to decide whether she would enjoy partying with me. From Mother's stories, I know my Aunt enjoyed dancing in a club called Heaven. I imagine us standing across from one another in her 90's bedroom. "I will always love you" by Whitney Houston plays in the background. I drunkenly sing along while she waves her arms and jumps on top of her bed blanketed with thrift store quilts. When Whitney hits that high note, we both fall on the ground like Sarah Jane collapsing on her mother's casket. The song ends, and below us

³¹ It's three days into living with each other and Roommate has already made a few comments that my smoking and my drinking are a lot. For now, it's best to be a little sneaky. Don't want her telling the RA that she needs to switch rooms because her roommate is a Ms. Hannigan who is collecting Heinekens.

we finally hear the scamming downstairs neighbor screaming, “shut y’all asses on up.” We try to keep quiet as we hold back giggles, but our laughter is too infectious. We cackle and hoot as we leave to go dancing in Heaven.

.. - / .- - - .. -.. -.. / - - - - . / -... . . - . / ..- . - - .

Roommate is out of the bathroom. She’s wearing her party outfit. A pink crop top and black and white mini shorts. As we enter the party, Roommate makes me promise that no matter what we stick together because she gets uncomfortable in social situations and plus, we need bonding time. Forty minutes in, Roommate finds a boy to flirt at, and I’m left alone. I hear a girl scream she wants to dance her tits off, and I wonder if tits got danced off would they:

A. Roll underneath a couch.

Or

B. Be taken to the fridge for safe keeping.

Although I don’t like people and think hairless cats should replace them, and though this party is terrible, and the students scream *nigga* whenever it’s on a rap track, the booze is still here. I don’t want to return home and read my Aunt’s zine or think about Fall quarter beginning on Monday. It’s still Saturday, and I’m still sober enough to know that I should probably stop drinking soon. After the next round of drinks, I notice a girl who keeps smiling at me, and though I don’t know if I’m sober enough to carve a smile into my face, I know that I can talk with her because drunk words have no weight underneath them. When you speak, that liquor stench makes words weightless. I could announce, *I want to murder myself and every person in the room*, and an evangelical soror would say, *omg saaame, girlfriend*.

The girl moves closer and towers over me. Good? A body standing next to me makes it seem

like I'm not alone. Her gray eyes glow against her skin. Her smile is closer than before, revealing her canine teeth.

... / ... :- .. --..--.. / / ... :- .. --..

“Hi”

“What’s your name?”

“Sahara.”

“Like the desert.”

“Sure.”

“Cool.”

“More hot than cool.”

“Funny. Have you even been there?”

“No.”

“How are you named after a place you’ve never been?”

“I don’t know ask my mother. What’s your name?”

“C1. I haven’t seen you around. Are you a new Donor Kid?”

“No, I normally don’t get invited to parties like these.”

“Who invited you to this one?”

“No one but I heard there would be free booze. “

“Funny.”

“Who invited you?”

“The host is my friend, but I haven’t seen her in over a year.”

“A year?”

“I spent my second year in Rome. I had to get out of this campus after my first year.”

“What happened?” I ask, wondering if C1 knew any of the Black students who became Unfortunates during her first year. What if we are the same and found different routes of escape. One route filled with glamour and gelato, the other filled with dead moths that rest on the carpet and windowsill.

“I had a falling out with people who weren’t my real friends and didn’t know how to have fun.” C1 hands me a cigarette. I smoke and watch her as she talks. I’m not exactly sure whether she’s here for open ears or my lips. I would be open for a kiss maybe even six. C1 is beautiful, the type of beauty that 1920s Blues warns you about. “My white friends talked behind my back. The people who I thought were my friends in the Black Student Coalition kept trying to tell me how to live my life. Then some bitch in the Coalition left my perm in for too long and ruined my hair. So, I left for bigger, better things, and went abroad. I hate this country. Everywhere I go people end up treating me terribly. I don’t know what’s wrong with Americans.”

“You’ve been there and back again.” I say in quick agreement. I’m beginning to worry that as I am trapped in this conversation all the booze, while in the heathen hands of the partiers, will run out.

“Yep! And here I am back in this Hogwarts hell. Desperate for real friends because my boyfriend is too busy opening his bar to spend time with me. You would think someone you’ve been with since you were fifteen would know how to give you attention.”

“It would be Mordor.”

“Excuse me?”

“There and back again, Bilbo Baggins.”

“What?”

“The Hobbit.”

“Are you some fantasy whatever?”

“No. There and back again is the only phrase I remember from that book.”

“Oh, funny.” This time after saying funny, C1 smiles. “So, if you don’t like fantasy, what do you like?”

“Drinking.”

“Funny. Do you want to grab a drink?”

“Sure.”

We move from the apartment’s balcony toward the party’s nucleus—the kitchen. Most students crowd around the countertops that are covered in half filled bottles of vodka and quarter filled liters of pop. As C1 makes her way toward the fridge, I remain near the backdoor that exits toward the balcony. While I wait, I lean against the wall, praying for the alcohol to slime all my thoughts.

My problem is that I think too much, and the only solution to this problem is drinking. I need to feel these thoughts disappear into a place rooted inside of me. A place where my Life Partner, LP, stays rent free. Dear First Year, you should know that LP is Depression and she’s a controlling bitch who sees my life in 20/20. She doesn’t live in a garret. The two of us have been besties since third grade, and as a result, she can’t live in any ole place. LP, my Life Partner, lives in a luxurious mansion built with everything I see, feel, think, or remember. The inside of her mansion is curated with whatever she wants. Tonight, the want is alcohol. Beer, vodka, tequila, MD 20, she needs it all, and so far, the tally for the night is four shots of vodka, a beer’s whose name looked German when I first started drinking but looked French after I finished, and a cocktail that tasted like Amoxicillin.

LP's happy. My thoughts are slimed.

... --- -- / ... - - -

C1 returns with a beer and a boy. He has khaki colored skin and an ass chin. His sunken eyes are the color of whiskey. Above these whiskey eyes are his bushy eyebrows filled with a wildlife of dead skin. The front of his neon orange shirt reads in black letters, *Caution: Student Liver*.

He asks, "What do you have planned for the rest of tonight?"

"Nothing," C1 replies.

"We should hang after then."

C1 responds, "Sahara, come with us? This party is dead."

"I'll think about it," I reply, and they keep talking with one another. I finish my beer and the drunkenness is washing all my discomfort off me. I tell them, "I should go," so I can savor this moment in peace.

C1 responds, "Don't leave, we just met." She pulls out a bottle from her pocket.

I ask, "What is it?"

"It's a popper for relaxation."

She sniffs the bottle, first. Then it's Student Liver. I sniff last. Heat rushes to my head and it tilts back. All thoughts are at rest, and for a moment, the intensity of the alcohol and popper freeze my involvement with time. I stay out on the balcony and listen to C1 and Student Liver flirt, but as they talk, I of course, think.³² I wonder what would happen if I jumped off the

³² This thinking won't ever end. Even when my brain shuts off to sleep, I dream my thoughts, spiraling down into that day's word worlds. One remedy for heavy dreams that I picked up last year is two pink Benadryls and two beers. Pop two bennies, down those beers, and bam, you're a sleeping beauty who won't remember the dream you had of the seven barbies hog tying you while the head Barbie, whose hair you cut without her permission, is carrying a butcher's knife and debating how to carve you up.

balcony. The fall wouldn't kill me, it would break, at most, a femur, and the sounds of a bone breaking would shock Student Liver. The next day in class he would say: "Dude I was talking to her before she jumped." Or "Fuck man, I can't believe she jumped off the balcony." Or "I wish I could've hit it before she jumped. Crazy bitches are great in bed."

A question from C1 retrieves me from my imagination. I ask her to repeat herself because I can't understand. After her words are restated, I still don't understand. Her words are becoming too slimed by the time they enter into my mind.

Student Liver says slowly, "Come back to my apartment."

A quick, "No," is my answer.

"Why not? It's right downstairs. I'll smoke you out and then we can go clubbing."

"Come on Sahara, he'll smoke us out," she says while frowning.

Thought in head: 30% of this campus, all of California, and cancer patients can smoke us out. Does that mean I have to go to all their apartments? If the answer is yes, then my account is fucked because it can't afford that many metro passes.

Thought said out loud: "I should find my roommate. It was cool meeting you both."

... .

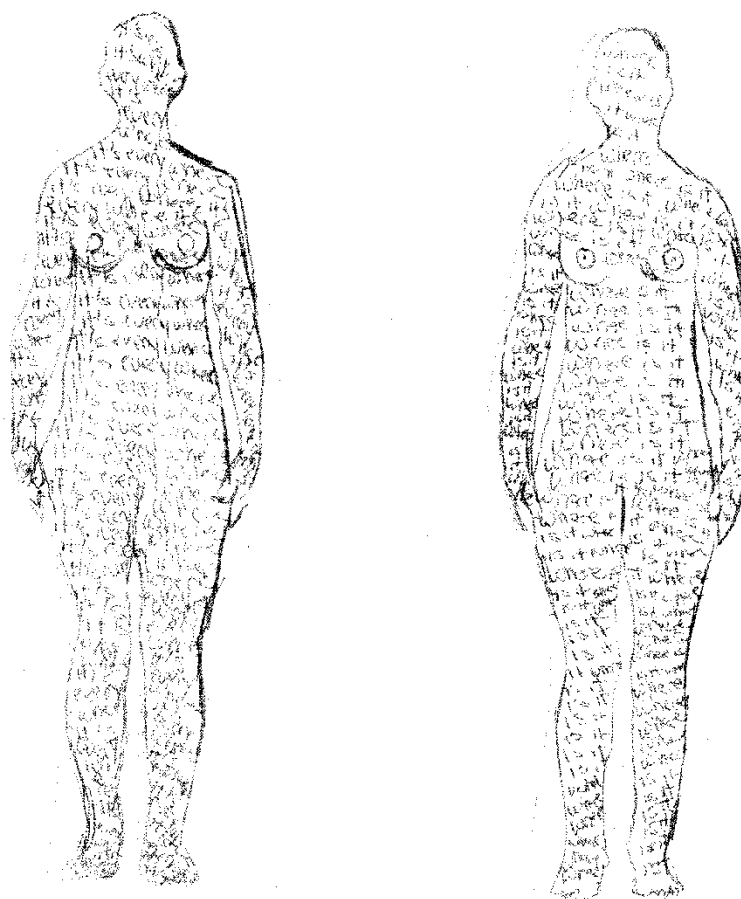
I leave the party and walk home alone.

Number of catcalls received: 3

Favorite one³³: Free Pussy?

³³ A runner up: look at them chocolate thighs. This is a runner up because it might have been a magical incantation. If I felt safe enough to confront the speaker, my legs and then the rest of my body would've started to melt and splatter into pieces of chocolate.

who' s gonna find me
who' s gonna bury me
nobody touching



the neighborhood
girls who got THIS





VII. Afterthought Party

I wake up at 7AM. One of the many things wrong with this body is that it's never able to sleep after a night out. It wakes up early, trying to piece together whether it had fun with the rest of me the night before. My body turns to the side, and I see Roommate isn't there. I'm not worried enough to text her and make sure she's still alive. In my head, I say she's probably fine, even though it's 2013, and from the news, more and more of me is learning to always expect the worst.

I pray my headache and nausea go away. My prayers go unanswered,³⁴ and the only response from universe is the DADS. I drag myself out of bed and as I sit on the toilet, I watch an itchy-bitsy spider crawl along the bathtub. It's about to go down the waterspout; however, before itchy-bitsy spider falls, it must prepare to survive and then become the king of spiders and sit on top of the carcasses of those who didn't make it.

... .. /

I get up, wipe, and then weigh this body. 225.8. I stare at myself in the mirror. Cellulite pulls my thighs. The only interruption is the cutting scars that started around 2006. The dried blood from my last cut sits at the center of my left thigh. After washing my hands, I drench a wad of toilet paper and dab, dab away the blood till it's saturated with water. Then, I try to peel off the scabbed patches of skin. The scars, a combination of dashes and dots from cutting, are my evidence of me searching for ways to unzip this body and see where the wrongness rests. Is it in my thighs, stomach, or just in my mind? If I keep cutting, there's a chance I might find out.

³⁴ God must be waiting to answer my prayers for when:

- a. I need salvation from alcohol poisoning.
- b. I need an extension for a midterm.

.... --- .- / .. - / ... - .- .- .- .- .-

I discovered the magic of a razor while babysitting Brother 1 and 2. They sat downstairs while I sat on the floor of my parent's bathroom. I stared at Father's BIC razor, and after my hand became calibrated to its weight, I began moving my hand up and down, treating the razor as my bow and my thigh as my violin. I became obsessed with the sting of every cut. At the time, I still hadn't yet been kissed. But I imagined that sting was what a kiss would feel like. I opened my eyes and saw my hands covered in blood. I cleaned myself up, hid the razor underneath my pillow, and then went downstairs like nothing happened. Because it was nothing, really. The cuts were the next step in sadness.

Step 1: Knowing it.

Step 2: Accepting it.

Step 3: Doing something about it.

This sadness has existed in me since third grade,³⁵ and I know it'll be passed onto my children, which in all honesty, I can't even imagine having. I'm already pushing into a size 18. Rumor has it that with every kid, you get fatter and sadder. Rumor³⁶ has it, children always see their mothers naked. Their innocent eyes fall from breasts, stomach, and then thighs. How do I explain my scars when they ask what happened to Mommy?

-. --- / -.- .. -.. ...

I stare at my hair in the mirror. Edges napped, and box braids smell like cigarettes. In 8 weeks, I'll sit in front of a computer. Find a television season or movies to watch. Start unraveling hair with help of toothpicks. Toss extra hair into plastic bag on the floor. This ritual

³⁵ In third grade, Mother, Father, and brothers were away in the basement. I remember leaning against the creamsicle kitchen island, pressing a butter knife against my wrist and feeling so disappointed that nothing red appeared. When I realized nothing would appear, I went downstairs to join the rest of the family.

³⁶ I don't know who says these rumors. I just know they are true.

will happen in 8 weeks because I know Roommate will be gone around that time. She's the type to be away on vaca in Bermuda for a pre finals distress. With Roommate gone, I'll avoid the repeating of her questions such as, "Is that a weave?" or "Where does that hair come from?" or "Do you even keep *that* clean?"

This body won't have kids. It won't give them a sadness and it won't send them to a college with the future racist intellectuals of America who toss around questions about hair.

.---.-.- / -... ..-.-.-

Dear Committee, I need to stop complaining. I should respect all that you've done for me, and simply be grateful to have this work in your presence. I need to honor Mother and Father's hard work to get me here and remember that Parents didn't send me here to imagine having kids or to sniff out the racist students. Be grateful. Parents' experience was worst.³⁷ So far in college, I have not been called a nigger, booty scratcher, or told that someone hates my face. I need to be stronger. Stop drowning in thoughts. Just graduate.

³⁷In medical school, one of father's professors was convinced that Father didn't know proper English. The professor always cold called Father and corrected his English in front of the class. Another African, an Ethiopian, in the class supported Father and is the only reason Father survived school. He brought Heineken to study sessions and knew how to calm Father down on days his rage was so strong it produced tears. Throughout school, the white boys and girls called Father and his friend African booty scratchers. They ignored them, studied, and vowed to show them what they knew. Father and his friend graduated first and second of their 1986 class.

As Father struggled in medical school, Mother struggled with her paralegal certificate. Like me, Mother had extreme anxiety when she was in school. She always stuttered and said the wrong thing. The students laughed. She overheard a male classmate say that he was tired of seeing the faces of niggers who don't belong here. After overhearing this, Mother remembers crying in my Aunt's arms, telling my Aunt that she was just so tired. My Aunt told Mother to stop all that crying and get her certificate. Mother did what my Aunt said and graduated. Years later, Mother conducted a job interview for that classmate. They sat across from one another. Face to Face. He wasn't hired.

.. - / / -. --- - / -- - / . .- ... -.--

12:30 PM on Saturdays, Jackson Dining Hall is crowded with the hungovers, the sleepers, and regular lunch eaters. I put on my plate what I can stomach—dry cellentani, marinara sauce that’s half oil, and crumbling garlic bread. I sit at a table that is the length of the Silk Road. As I scarf down the food, two boys beside me are flaunting their intellectual value. Bragging about suffering for classes that haven’t even started yet.



give me life or me death
 life with THIS living death

JET'S Top 20 Albums



Janet Jackson



Luther Vandross

Title

Artist and Label

- 1 JANET Janet Jackson (Virgin)
- 2 NEVER LET ME GO Luther Vandross (Epic/LV)
- 3 MENACE II SOCIETY (SOUNDTRACK) Various (Jive)
- 4 FEVER FOR DA FLAVOR H-Town (Luke)
- 5 IT'S ABOUT TIME SWV (RCA)
- 6 LeVert (Atlantic)
- 7 can' t dance in heaven Bobby Brown (MCA)
- 8 living in bed lektra
- 9 stuck with sister' s man' s books rcury
- 10 stuck with these sketches /MCA
- 11 stuck with THIS mbia
- 12 regina bene (Columbia)
- 13 Walter & Scotty (Capitol)
- 14 PRECIOUS Chante Moore (Silas)
- 15 TILL DEATH DO US PART Geto Boys (Rap-A-Lot)
- 16 PROVOCATIVE Johnny Gill (Motown)
- 17 THE AFTERMATH Da Youngsta's (Eastwest)
- 18 SONS OF SOUL Tony! Toni! Tone! (Mercury)
- 19 THE BODYGUARD (SOUNDTRACK) Whitney Houston (Arista)
- 20 THE CHRONIC Dr. Dre (Def Jam)

not living not dying

VIII. Sunday

It's the last Sunday before classes begin. ROD and I sit in Voices of Reason Diner. She apologizes for bailing on the party because of older sister duties. She asks how the party went, and I can't remember. LP, my life partner, has edited my memories.

.. / .- -- / .- . . - - / .- -- . . - - ... - / - .

Our food is approaching, and we stare at the waiter with glee. I know the scrambled eggs will have the mushy taste of uncooked yolk. I know the pancakes will have that aftertaste of baking soda and the hash browns will be chunky potatoes that are drenched in oil. The taste and site of the food don't matter, we just need something to quench the munchies that march in our stomachs.

As ROD slurps her eggs, she asks, "Are you going to the Afro & Astrofest this year. I heard it's in Waukegan, we could catch the train there together."

"Probably not. It seems like a lot of effort for the cards to tell you it's another terrible year."

"But you love Astrology. What changed?"

A shrug is my first answer because my mouth is filled with pancakes and my lips are sticky from syrup. I wash the pancakes down with water, and backwash foxtrots toward the bottom of my cup until tiny sand colored sediments sleep at the bottom.

After my mouth unsticks, I respond, "One too many bad horoscopes that led to one too many make out sessions with too much tongue."

"Fair. Over the summer, I swear this girl I was hooking up with only wanted to taste my face."

"Did you stop hooking up with her?"

“No, she was super cute, and her apartment cat was fun to play with.”

“Are you gonna see her again?”

“If she still has her cat, then yes.”

We stare at each other, and then move into our laughter. We laugh until we're transformed out of our bodies and feel that our laughter has deconstructed this café and campus. Our laughter uses the campus and diner's debris to create an alloy cocoon where inside, we are safe from school, and its slow motioning or fast-forwarding of time.

With ROD, I tell myself that I am not sad. I can make jokes, eat, smoke, and repeat if necessary, until the sadness that LP survives on is a fossil buried underneath the repeated steps.

So, I swear to all parts of myself, I am not sad, I am not sad, I am not sad.

I can survive off our laughter. I can live in this loop.

IX. Class

Gather around lil' churen.

Hurry, and pick a seat.

Are you comfy?

Are you ready?

Yes. Yes. Yes. No.

Well, it don't matter.

You're the only spook here.

Now my lil' churen,

Mr. Professorman ain't here,

so let's kill time with a lil' game of mine

What do you spy with those pretty blue eyes?

... .. / - / -... ..

First class of the quarter is HSR, High School Revisited. In this intro to writing class, we revisit the great novels we were supposed to read in high school. So far, we're already off to a vigorous start. Mr. Professorman has ordained due dates for our class assignments. People who have last names A-H paper have papers due the Sunday before second week. I-N have papers due the Sunday before third week, and O-Z papers are due the Sunday before fifth week, and then this cycle repeats again until our quarter is over. So, this weekend I guess I'm writing a paper on the *Awakening*.

... .. / -- .

High school me loved writing. There was the hunt for an idea. Back then, the teachers loved the crazy, the zany, the strange peculiarities that lived in a book's jacket flaps. In college, the crazy, the zany, the strange peculiarities don't matter unless you write and think the way the dead people before you did.

Dear First Year, if you take nothing from this thesis, remember to copy, but don't plagiarize. If you don't copy with a twist, then you will never see a paper grade above a B-. For that GPA, you better regurgitate. You better drink that simulacrum. And yum. The texture is curdled milk and it has a flavor as bland as colonial America, but if you're lucky, you might get a speck of Beatnik spice.

While in my discussion section, I drink in everyone's word but never talk. I don't want their eyes to dissect and then place mind and organs on a surgical table to study what I'm about. I once confessed this worry to ROD, and she told me to remember the facts, and not let other students and professors convince me I don't belong here.

Ten Facts I Hate about Me

1. This University is one of the best in the world.
2. I have scholarships based on merit and a scholarship based on need.
3. I was in the top ten percent of my high school.
4. My first year of college I got straight C's.
5. My stomach turns before the start of every class.
6. Most times before class starts, I cut, and if I do it on a day that I'm wearing tights, I'm terrified people will see the hardening blotch on my stockings.
7. I imagine being in a trophy case of "Blackies That Made it."
8. I want to leave but am too ashamed to tell Father.³⁸
9. I don't belong here.
10. I don't think I belong anywhere.

-.. - - - . / -... - - - - - - - / -... . / -.. / ... - - ..

For the first day of class, we discuss Edna's suicide³⁹, and everyone in class agrees that it was justified. A classmate says that if she was forced to be a breeder, she would off herself too.

She asks the class, "Why wouldn't you want to die when the only other option is breeding?"

My mind is distended from consuming everyone else's words. I need to talk so as to expel their language out of me. Mother's words and her language of love raise from deep within me. *True family is all that you need.* With ROD, some days I believe in Mother's words, but I add a little spice. This truth with a little spice results in a promise between ROD and me. It

³⁸ In the first week of Naija Girl Orientation, we learn to never tell your fathers who survived starvation and warfare that you don't want to go to class because you have a case of the sads.

³⁹ Sorry for the spoiler, but don't worry here is a list of depressing books and stories to read instead: *The Old Testament*, *No Longer Human*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, *The Blacker the Berry*, *Death in Midsummer*, *Passing*, *Giovanni's Room*, and "Sunday Following Mother's Day."

being, that if either of us hit the lotto, we're adopting children, then moving to Detroit to start our grammar school. ROD and I would run a great school. Every school day would begin with the students screaming for at least ten minutes before we would begin the lessons for that day. Once the students were old enough, I would make my Aunt's zine required reading. Last night, I thumbed through all twenty-four pages, and in them, all my Aunt wanted was family. As she died, she watched me grow in Mother's womb, and now, every time I read her work or trace her drawings with my eyes, I'm watching her die. All my Aunt wanted was family. All my Aunt needed was unconditional love and the chance to be seen in her way. I will do right by her.

Always, I carry her zine in my backpack. I put it in the back compartment to ensure that none of the pages are crumpled or stained from stray uncapped pens or the mush from forgotten bananas I stole from the dining hall. But now, as I sit in this, this class and these words, I know that my silence is betraying both my little truths I still hold onto and the promise that I'm trying to keep of making my Aunt always alive and here. Guilt swishes in me until its movement causes a reservoir of words to build within my entire being. With my truth in hand, I speak up saying, "For some marginalized communities like Black communities, a chance to have family is a chance to reclaim the home space."

She interjects, "Well for feminists like me, family is oppression. And what? You're the voice for all African-Americans now?"

"No, but there's other history to be—"

"There's only one history and it's that women have always been forced to take care of their children and their homes. We never had a chance to pursue our professional or political interests until the first-wave."

"That isn't inclu—"

She interjects again, “Do you only want to be some breeder?”

Classmates nod to show their agreement with her or to keep themselves from falling asleep. Professorman turns to me, waiting for my rebuttal, but I’m panicked into silence. He responds *great point* to the Interjector, and the class discussion continues. The class talks about the sea, the imagery of water, and what is and is not natural.

While in my silence, I remember Mother and her stories. As a child, she prayed for children, a home, and a husband. In her neighborhood, homes were burned and abandoned, fathers dead or disappeared, mothers were lost, children were mourned. Mother thought that through prayer she could break the cycle. Every night in her bed, she rubbed her stomach and prayed. When My Aunt interrupted Mother’s prayers, she prayed with Mother to avoid judgment. My Aunt prayed for nieces and nephews—ones that she could hold and kiss. After every prayer, she promised Mother and then God that the moment the nieces and nephews turned 18, she would take them to the casino.

.-- - - / - --. ---. . - . . .

I’m 19 and still haven’t seen the inside of a casino. I believe whatever trickster was listening played a cosmic joke on my family. Yes, I’ll give you a husband that you’ll grow to dislove. Sure, I’ll give you a family, but you’ll lose your sister, and will almost die during every pregnancy. And of course, you’ll have a first born, but she’ll be broken, and should be returned to sender.⁴⁰ My child, you’ll have family, but there will be so many external factors that will try and destroy them and you. Maybe, The Interjector was right. Family is a prison constructed by obligation. But what do I know? Most days, I’m too nervous to speak.

⁴⁰ Shipping and handling not included.

..-.

Can we please stop.

No

..- -

Where are we going?

.-. -.-

It doesn't matter.

But I don't think we're going anywhere.

. .-..

./ .--

Can we please stop.

No.

We need to go, go, go.

--- -

X. Post Class Discussion

While still in HSR⁴¹, I ponder questions to research for my thesis. Thus far the central question: What is the most literary and academic way to kill myself? Should I sneak into the dining hall and put my head in an oven? Should I get hit by a laundry van? Or do I remain here and be respectable, soak in all the comments of this place, let it clog my ears, brain, and arteries so I can die from aneurysm, stroke, or heart attack.

..... / /

With other people, I'm good at being polite. I know how to hold my tongue in order to accommodate their comfort. Growing up, Mother taught me to carry myself as if I were a special edition American Girl doll. From Mother, I learned to smile, to carry with me only appropriate and polite stories, to keep my legs crossed even when wearing pants, but most importantly, to store my tears in a reserve deep inside of me. This reserve was only to be emptied when locked inside my room while my face screamed into a flattened pillow. Any other location ran the risk of exposing myself as acting "out of character."

Early on in my childhood, I learned that everyone in my Nigerian community had a role. At parties there was a priest who shouted prayers. There was the nun who in public thanked the priest for his shouts, and in private carried on an affair with the priest's brother. There was the MC who told us when it was time to pray, eat, and then dance, dance, dance, and this MC was responsible for swiping the unguarded cash boxes at parties. There was the pedophile who organized all the church functions and was protected by the men who didn't have daughters. There was the ostracized American aunt that aunties mocked for wanting to jail the organizer of the church functions—half of the aunties agreed that the American aunt should've watched her

⁴¹ High School Revisited

daughter better at the church functions. Then there was Mother and I, trying to stay in character.

Some days were performed with perfection and no one could tell American in us. One summer before starting 11th grade, Mother and I joined the league of Nigerian aunties. The night in question, a “cousin’s” graduation celebration. Since we knew this “cousin,” we were expected to help serve the food, effectively meaning that all eyes would be on us. The days leading up to this celebration were magical and anxiety filled. By myself, I practiced the pronunciation of my aunties’ names to ensure that my slippery tongue wouldn’t trip over a vowel or a constant. With the other aunties, Mother and I planned our outfits and accessories. When the big day finally arrived, all of us wore matching bright orange and purple headties. They shined with a metallic brilliance that matched our costume jewelry bought from the nearest Lee’s Beauty Supply. We all stood behind the line of food tables. Before the horde of hungry men, women, and children arrived, the aunties shared tips for serving. They told me to say no to the men who asked for extra scoops. They assured me that it was fine to serve the smallest piece of goat meat to whoever I couldn’t stand. They marveled over my blossoming beauty. My hand clamped down on the plastic serving spoon. I was and still am in disbelief of the night that I became a Naija woman. Corrections for every time I mis-pronounced my middle name, the laughs for not knowing of IMO state didn’t matter. For that night, I was finally a Naija woman. However, this night didn’t last. It lasted for one night. At the party the next weekend, UB⁴² came, and interrogated Mother, again, on why my name wasn’t Christian or Igbo. After his interrogation, Mother and I stopped attending the parties.

-... -.-.-.-.- / - - - - /- - -.-.- .

⁴² Uncle Bigot

Dear thesis committee,⁴³ at this place, the character that I am playing is becoming hard to stay in. These days, when I hold my tongue, I wonder if it would be less painful for me to chew it off. I'm craving moments like that sacred day with the Naija women.

⁴³ Did you forget that this is my thesis? Shame on you.

XI. Valve

Days later, I sit with Mariah at the dining hall. She pops a pill into her mouth, guzzles down water, and then stares at her computer screen. She's also in the process of writing her thesis, but her project is much more exciting, and you should give it a read. She's writing about JSW, an older poet from Chicago who writes in Morse code. Mariah takes a break from writing and rubs her chest. She removes her scarf that is printed with white lilies, and a beveled line of cauterized flesh runs down the middle of her chest. Obsessed, my eyes run up and down her scar. Mariah catches my staring and uncomfortably looks at me. She rewraps her scarf around her neck.

"I guess you haven't seen my surgery scar yet."

I respond, "What happened?"

"I have a hypoplastic left heart and needed three heart surgeries as a kid."

"Is your heart better now?"

"Yes, as long as I take my coumadin, regularly."

I don't know what to say next. I can't make a joke about having a broken heart—it seems in poor taste. Before I can try to begin another conversation, Mariah picks a red fuzzy off her shaved head, and prepares to write elsewhere.

"Sorry for staring."

"It's fine. I'm used to it."

She leaves the dining table. Alone, I watch the mechanics of the dining hall.

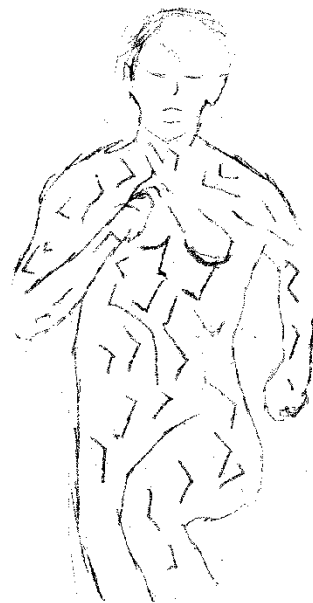
- / ... -.- ... - . -

The Black workers stand behind the grills, salad, and pasta stations. They serve students who never say thanks. The students return to the table and talk about which workers are their

favorite and remind them of a mama they always wanted. The Black workers remain standing behind the stations, waiting for the next ungrateful student.

I want to break the mechanics. I want to press condescending students' faces into the grill. I want to drown them in vinaigrette. I want to gag them with croutons and then stab their eyes with sharpened shards of carrot. I want to dunk their fingers into pans of frying oil. I want to inject melted butter in their veins and watch the lardification. I want visible violence, and destruction. I want the workers to join me. I want them to drop their spoons, tongs, and spatulas. I want them to walk out. I want us to pick up steak knives so we can stab anyone who tries anything. But we're too busy trying to find our different ways of surviving.

why you dreaming?
you got nowhere to go



Track List for Survival

Side A:

1. "Lost in the World" by Kanye West, Bon Iver
2. "1-800 Suicide" by Gravediggaz
3. "Fragile" by Tech N9Ne, featuring Kendrick Lamar
4. "Mind Playing Tricks on Me" by Get Boys
5. "Suicidal Thoughts" by Biggie
6. "Answer" by Tyler, The Creator

Side B:

1. "Prayers for Rain" by The Cure
2. "We Might Be Dead by Tomorrow" by Soko
3. "You Know I'm No Good" by Amy Winehouse
4. "Paint it, Black" by The Rolling Stones
5. "Funnel of Love" by Wanda Jackson
6. "Odd Look" by The Weeknd, Kavinsky

Side C:

1. "Tears of a Clown" by Smokey Robinson & The Miracles
2. "Tear You Apart" by She Wants Revenge
3. "Do I Wanna Know" by Arctic Monkeys
4. "Super Rich Kids" by Frank Ocean
5. "Black Balloon" by The Kills
6. "New Slaves" by Kanye West

XII. C1

Next class, Genre Benders. I take my seat at the back of the lecture hall. I've learned from course reviews that it's wise to sit as far away from the professor as possible. This Professorman only teaches from the rare editions of 20th century novels. Those who sit at the front row of the class can see the book lice running across his yellow pages. Though there are a number of free seats around me, someone decides to sit right next to me. When I look up, I see that it's C1 from the party.

"You made a mistake not smoking with us. You missed out on free weed and a fun time," she says while Professorman draws arrows on the chalkboard that point to nowhere. He raises his voice to shouting levels when he's convinced that none of us understand where he's going.

I respond to C1 with a smile and nod, which I think translates into *good to see you too* or *sorry for bailing*. I'm not entirely sure. This is a 10AM lecture so everything inside of me is still waking up, and prone to misfiring. The only thing I can do is doodle. So, I fill every inch of my notebook with words and scribbles, creating a palimpsest of my boredom. Mr. Professorman leaves. Class is over. As I walk out, C1 tells me we need to hang soon. My words say *sure*.

As she walks away, I debate whether to tell her that when she hangs out with me, I'm the type who brings along their partner. When I stopped escaping from LP, I stopped mocking people who never left their partners' side. Now, I get it. A partner, a girlfriend, a boyfriend, an FWB, all personified comfort. A breathing blanket. A laughing heating pad. A kissing body pillow. Why question it, and separate yourself from comfort when it's there and always waiting for you?

While waiting for the bus, LP and I imagine lovely scenes, but before I embed myself in

these scenes, C1 texts me, asking if I want to hang out for Thirsty Thursday. My words say *sure*, again, and this time the text message serves as record of my agreement even though I'm already regretting saying yes.

Imagined Scene #1:

Me sits at the back of the University bus while listening to music. Unbeknownst to University students, a city bus has just plowed through a stop sign and is headed right in their direction.

Boom, bam, bang.

The city bus crashes into them. Me is one of the 13 casualties. Please send your thoughts and prayers Me's way.

Imagined Scene #2:

LP invites Me to her mansion, and Me is obliged to attend. The mansion is prime real estate in Brain Valley, and when LP calls for attention, Me always answers. Upon entering, LP offers Me a platter of delights. Delights are vodka that you drink on days you play hookie, double stuffed cookies, creams for phantom aches, pills for those days you want a head drill, and pot for when you just need to be baked. Me gulps down all the delights then waits for the pleasure to hit.

XIII. Museum

While sitting on the toilet before a class begins, I get a text from ROD asking if I want to skip—God, yes. Before leaving the bathroom stall, I take deep breaths and practice smiling, hoping that with practicing I can pull some happiness out of me. It’s Friday and the last full conversation I had with someone was on Monday. Between now and then, I’ve only talked with LP, and it feels as if she has expanded her real estate to all my mind’s matters. During her campaign for Westward expansion, she twists everything into evidence for why I shouldn’t be alive. When she’s up and active in this fretful head, I’m not safe. I think about unlocking car doors and rolling into traffic, of taking a box cutter, gliding it against the veins living underneath my wrists. Gliding it until the glide turns into a puncture strong enough to nick the right artery and make the box cutter too slippery to hold in my hand.

- / ... -- - .. - . - . / .. - - - - - . - - - - - .. - - - - -

I meet ROD outside of the dining hall, and we take the 28 to head downtown. There’s temporally relief in escaping from campus. On the bus, we try to escape the bubble, and talk about the lives we have outside of school. ROD tells me about the excitement she has for the new Gameboy Advance cartridges that will be arriving in the mail. Specifically, she’s expecting *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* and *That’s So Raven*. I give her the look that I always do when I’m about to call her out on her hipster nonsense.

Knowing my looks, she responds, “Don’t you dare.”

“Fine, but you know what I was going to say.”

“I know, but you’re just jealous.” ROD takes out her scratched and faded red Gameboy Advance SP. “Look at it. This, this—,” Before she can finish her statement, we cackle, and upon hearing our cackles an older woman in front of us turns around and smiles. We have this back

and forth about her Gameboy at least once a quarter. During my first quarter last year, I thought it was lame. Like ROD's mother and her sisters, I didn't understand why ROD still played with it until I asked her. She told me it was one of her Christmas favorite gifts from her father. After that I never asked her again. Last Christmas, I stole an old Gameboy charger from Brother 1, then gave it to her as a gift along with a *WarrioLand 4* game. ROD and I still have the back and forth and the shady eye glances that end with a grin. My time with ROD is always packed with contagious laughter. Generally, her cackle and our antics can soothe the parts of my mind LP has infected, but today the go to tricks aren't working.

After our laughter ends, our conversation dulls because I'm too fogged to enter inside of it. I stare out the window, and half listen to ROD. She taps me on my shoulder when we've reached our stop.

As we're walking to the museum, she asks, "Are you okay? You seem out of it."

"Yea, I'm fine. I didn't get enough sleep."

"Sahara, we can be serious, you know that, right?"

"Of course, I'm just tired."

"Promise, you'll let me know if something's up. This year doesn't have to be like last year."⁴⁴

"I promise. Today, I'm just tired."⁴⁵

.. .. / -.. -.. / .- .. -.. -.. / .. -.. -.. / .. -.. -..

Outside the museum, children try and climb on the colossal bronze tigers, but the security guards and parents scream them off, and direct the children back inside. While the children are

⁴⁴ Crying spells with ROD by my side filled my freshman year. Peak crying moment happened after a trip on 25I, once the walls stopped moving like symphony notes, I sprawled myself onto ROD's floor, and cried as I repeated, "I'm tired of surviving nights."

⁴⁵ Girl, you're always tired.

upset to venture inside, both ROD and I are grateful to flee from our dorm room heat. The museum's free air conditioning cools the sweat saturating our bodies and t-shirts. We wander through sections of the art museum, until we find a bench to sit on. We stare at the Pollock in front of us, pretending that it's more than masturbatory nonsense.

A little girl runs through the exhibit. The guard stops checking her phone and scans the room for the girl's mother. Her mother stops taking a picture of a giant canvas named "American Diet", which is painted with puke. She tries to shoot her child a look to stop the girl from running. This look does nothing. I'm rooting for this kid. As a child, I hated being held, and tried to escape out of Mother's arms whenever I had a chance. I was perfect at escaping because I was solid weight. I could lock my body and sink myself below Mother's grasp. When she tried to resituate herself to get a better grip on me, I seized this moment as my escape window and started sprinting. Mother then had to chase after my afro puffs as they ran through whatever place I turned into a maze.

The little girl brushes against an art piece, and I wonder if the piece breaks how much her mother would have to pay.⁴⁶ The little girl trips, crashing onto the ground, and hollers. The Art Lookers stop holding their chins as they gaze at artwork, and fold their arms, as they frown at the mother. She picks up her child and scurries away to another wing. The Art Lookers return to holding their chins. ROD and I giggle, but a whipster⁴⁷ staring at a Pollock spits, *shhhh* at us. We take the stairs to exit the museum, laughing all the way down.

⁴⁶ It's contemporary art, most of the art lookers won't be able to tell if half of it was missing.

⁴⁷ White hipster

XIV. Discussion

Dear First Year, when picking classes, advisors will tell you that Naughty Cells⁴⁸ is for students who don't want to buy a text book⁴⁹ and need an easy "A". In this course, you learn why and how cells turn against the body. Though we are weeks into this class, no one has any idea what is going on. Our stupidity doesn't slow down Naughty Cells Professor's lecturing. In fact, I'm convinced our stupidity makes NCP lecture faster. She's given up hope on us and now is determined to lecture for fifty minutes about her research. Though I'm still here looking for that "A", once students realized NCP stopped covering the material, they stopped attending lecture. I heard through the grapevine that next Sunday some of the absent students are hosting a manhunt for "A". Some places that they are checking are quizzes, tests, and discussion posts.

⁴⁸ Though many professors have taught Naughty Cells, the constant is the fiddle-leaf fig tree that sits in the corner of the classroom. This tree only grows when the average test score is more than 70, and there hasn't been any new growth since 1996.

⁴⁹ This class' lack of textbook make it a hot commodity. Rumor has it that one student, who never planned on taking the class, sold his seat for \$200. Buyer stated that \$200 was worth an easy A and was still cheaper than a textbook for other registered classes.

MISSING

A

A

DOB.....Na/Na/1792

Date Missing.....9/4/2012

POB.....Farish, William

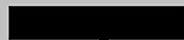
If you find A or have any information concerning its whereabouts, do not contact the authorities. They are not to be trusted.

Please can toll-free:

xxSA-xxH- ARA

GPA HELP INC.

P.O. BOX: 1618



... --- .-... .. -...- -.-... ..-...

Sitting at the back of lecture, I scribble notes while two clickers are at my side. One for me, the second for Second Black Girl in my class. I saw SBG on the first day of class, and by the second week, we developed a system for NCP's weekly quizzes. Our system is simple but ingenious. SBG drops off her clicker at the library's front desk and asks for the librarian to hold it there for me. I go to the library to get her clicker, and then will click in answers for that week. The next week, I don't attend lecture. I drop off my clicker at the library, SBG gets it, and then clicks in answers for me that week. SBG and I don't text unless there is a problem concerning NC. All I know about SBG is that she's black, dark skinned, from the Bay, and a pre-med major with a world of classes on her plate. I haven't seen her since we agreed on our system, and I won't worry about seeing her unless I get an email with the subject line *Unfortunate News*. Although I hate this class and can't remember the details of SBG's face or her height, I'm grateful for her and our system—it makes sure that I attend at least half of my lectures for this course.

NCP puts today's questions on the board, and today they are surprisingly easy.

Questions 1: Infective endocarditis can effect which part(s) of the heart?

- A. The endocardium
- B. The heart valves
- C. Both A and B
- D. None of the above

Question 2: What are some ways that bacteremia (bacteria in the blood) can occur?

- A. Toothbrushing and flossing
- B. Chewing food
- C. Use of wooden toothpick
- D. All of the above

Question 3: What imaging should initially be performed on a patient with suspected infective endocarditis?

- A. TTE
- B. TEE
- C. Both
- D. No imaging is recommended

..... /

After answering the questions, I watch a student below me. Next to them are six clickers. Throughout the entire lecture, they search through notes, the internet, and text a group chat to make sure that they pick the right answer⁵⁰.

By the end of lecture, NCP sees that boredom is creating more bags underneath our eyes. She stops lecturing and after reminding us of our midterm next week, she announces that there's a surprise for this week's discussion section. A few students sitting at the front of the class perk up.

Lecture ends, but the 12 Angry Students who have discussion right after lecture migrate to another room. This room is tinier room and also houses centipedes that dart across the pale orange, coffee stained carpet. Before discussion begins, I rush to the bathroom. My stomach is in knots. I hate this class because if I don't speak, I won't get any participation points for the day, and I need all the help I can get to make sure I pass. I sit on the toilet for five minutes and realize that my anxiety shits won't detonate in time, and if I stay on the toilet, I'll be late for class. I don't want everyone staring at me as I squeeze past students to get to an open chair⁵¹. Today,

⁵⁰ . The gag is that our answers don't matter. Wrong and right answers are the same. After seeing our responses for the first quiz, NCP said our class needs all the help that we can get and changed all the quizzes so they were graded for participation.

⁵¹ I don't understand why empty seats are always located in the worst positions. During my first year, I was late to Pop It: A survey of Modern Art, and the only available seat was a chair that was suspended from the ceiling. The professor and other students had to hoist me up. The class went 30 minutes over and everyone, including the professor rushed out the room. I was left sitting in the ceiling seat, waiting for our next class session.

they'll hear stumbling words, my griping stomach, they shouldn't also have to witness my grotesque body squeezing through the small space between wall and seat.

Once everyone is settled in class, NCP announces instead of discussing naughty cells we will discuss naughty scientists. She still sees our boredom and tries to excite us by sharing that there will be a follow up surprise for discussion.

Someone asks, "Is it Halloween candy?"

NCP responds, "No, I don't hand out Type 2 diabetes as a surprise."

The class is silent. NCP and the student stare at one another. The student isn't sure yet whether to be embarrassed, but after more silence, they turn from peach to tomato. The professor breaks out into a chuckle, and then she passes out Greek candy that she brought over from back home.

As she opens her PowerPoint, she states, "Next week we will be learning about sugar and cancer."

A few students slow down their candy chewing as NCP begins her lecture. The opening slide of her PowerPoint features two pictures. The first is of Henrietta Lacks and the second are of the scientists who conducted the Tuskegee Experiment. The professor gives us the background information about Lacks and the Tuskegee Experiment. She finishes setting the scene and establishing the stakes for the experiments. She drops hot words like consent, ethics, racism to keep us liberals from falling asleep.

She finishes her PowerPoint and posits, "Was what the scientist did worth it?"

For the first twenty minutes of class, Philosophy Majors 1, 2, and 3 dominate the discussion and debate the definition of ethics.

Another student enters the conversation and declares, "We need risk-taking scientists for

the advancement in medical research.”

Philosophy Major 2 and 3 agree with this new input. After that nonsense, a student wearing a *Cackling Goose Jacket*⁵² responds, “Given the socio-economic standing of the patients, it doesn’t matter. They would have died from disease anyway.”

Two sorority girls next to The Jacket nod their heads in agreement. One of them chimes in, “Also Lacks wasn’t using her cells for anything important, and probably would not have understood what the scientists wanted to do with them.”

Ain’t this a bitch. Papa⁵³ can you hear me? If yes, please get me of this class. I don’t want talk. I want to remain in my silence, but I know I must say something if I want points for today.

My laptop is open, and I am documenting classmates’ responses in the Black Excel group chat. None of us are surprised by the classism and racism masquerading as a progressive and intellectually stimulating conversation. NCP’s face is flat, none of us know what answer she’s waiting for.

People in the Black Excel group chat are encouraging me to speak up against what I’m hearing. I wish I was evolved enough to grow another mouth, and inside this new mouth would be new courageous words. Hell, I wish I could restructure my atoms to create new ears to cover my current ones. New ears that plugged my old ones could protect me from what I’m hearing from the Future Academics of America. In the group chat, Mariah asks if there is anyone who is disagreeing with what has been said. I respond, *no*. Her response is a triple text. First text is a sigh. The second says, she’s sending me a hug and all her love. The third, if I’m feeling up to it then I need to say something. Five minutes later, my body doesn’t feel anything. Maybe the hug

⁵² It’s 45 degrees out. It’s not that damn cold for a jacket that cost \$1,000.

⁵³ Not praying to the Bio father. I’m praying to the Heavenly. Perhaps Father in the sky might understand my exhaustion against racism. After all He did create the humans that created it.

and all the love's GPS system is acting up, and they don't know which room I am in⁵⁴.

A new student sitting next to me joins the conversation. On her laptop is a pride and pronoun sticker. I'm hopeful. Last week, she ranted about objectification when discussing breast cancer and a woman's body. Perhaps, she is my white queer ally in hiding.

She comments, "This was terrible, but it allowed things like the National Research Act to make sure that all patients in trials are protected. Now all patients are listened to and protected by doctors. This doesn't happen anymore. At times, the ends do justify the means."

More people nod in agreement. Though there are others in class who haven't spoken, several classmates turn to me, the class' Negro in Residence, and wait for my input. With their eyes staring at me, I straighten up. I feel like a fist has been shoved up my ass and scrambled my intestines.

All I can think of is my Aunt and Mother. I think of my Aunt hunched over drawing paper as she suffered from bouts of blindness, side effects for a drug that was never going to save her. I think of Mother's chronic hypertension during her pregnancies, which her doctors never took seriously until Father while wearing his scrubs or a white coat was in the room with the other doctors. I take deep breaths and start speaking, but the sentence is broken with stutters. I'm already terrified of the forthcoming rebuttals, interruptions, and interrogations.

NCP asks me to repeat what I just said⁵⁵. I repeat, "These patients were targeted because they were Black and poor. How can we have this discussion without discussing race?"

The student next to me rolls her eyes. I want to perform enucleation and instead of placing her eyes on a sterile surgical platter, I will toss them into a time capsule so that as they roll around in the never-ending aluminum box, the eyes can see the history of violence and

⁵⁴ At times this building and its Gothic architecture does feel like the Murder Castle.

⁵⁵ Of course, when trying to speak zero, I end up speaking twice.

trauma against Black bodies. No one in the class has anything to say. My stomach is in a lattice that is perfect enough to top an apple pie. The silence I longed for at the beginning of the discussion is here, but it is filled with as much fear as when words saturated this scholarly air.

The silence is sliced when NCP responds, “Yes, I agree. This is an important part of the discussion. These patients were targeted because of their race and their class.”

Since the professor has approved of what I said, the previous defendants of the scientists change their tune. Now philosophy majors and the false ally talk about racism with such sorrow that you would think Lacks was their grandmother. After finishing their performances, the students in the class look to me for their approval⁵⁶.

... .. / - - - - - / - - - - - / / /

Class finally ends, and NCP announces the surprise. Over the weekend, we have 2,000-2,500-word discussion post to write as a response to class discussion. Requirements are that we have to cite three sources. The bright side is that we can work with a partner.

As I close my laptop, the student next to me who rolled her eyes at my comment offers to work with me.

Her pitch, “It would be a guaranteed A if we showed both sides of the argument. My part of the post would stick to the scientific facts and talk about the benefits to the scientific community. Then your part of the post would talk about the whole race *thing*.”

My response, “No, I would rather work on it alone.”

⁵⁶ The bestseller, *The Blacks vs You: How to Survive* by F. Sandford, was published a year after the “Brown vs. Board Education” decision. This seminal book helped white families adjust to the cultural shift happening in their America. In 2013, this book has been reprinted because of its invaluable key facts such as, if one Black person agrees with you, then you’re not racist and will be invited to every cookout.

Works Cited

Sandford, Ferguson. *The Blacks vs You: How to Survive*. Karen's Kind Kings, 1955.

Thing: A Play without a Word

On stage is a large chalkboard and taped on it is “THING” in giant letters that are made of rope and silver twine. Next to the chalkboard is Academic who studies it. Kneeling in front of the board are Black Person 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

As BP 1-5 stare out at the audience, Man enters the stage. While Academic studies the chalkboard, Man begins pulling off pieces of ropetwine. Academic pays no attention to Man and continues studying. Man walks around BP 1-5, and as they walk around, they whistle the alphabet song while twirling the ropetwine in their hands. Man stops by BP 1.

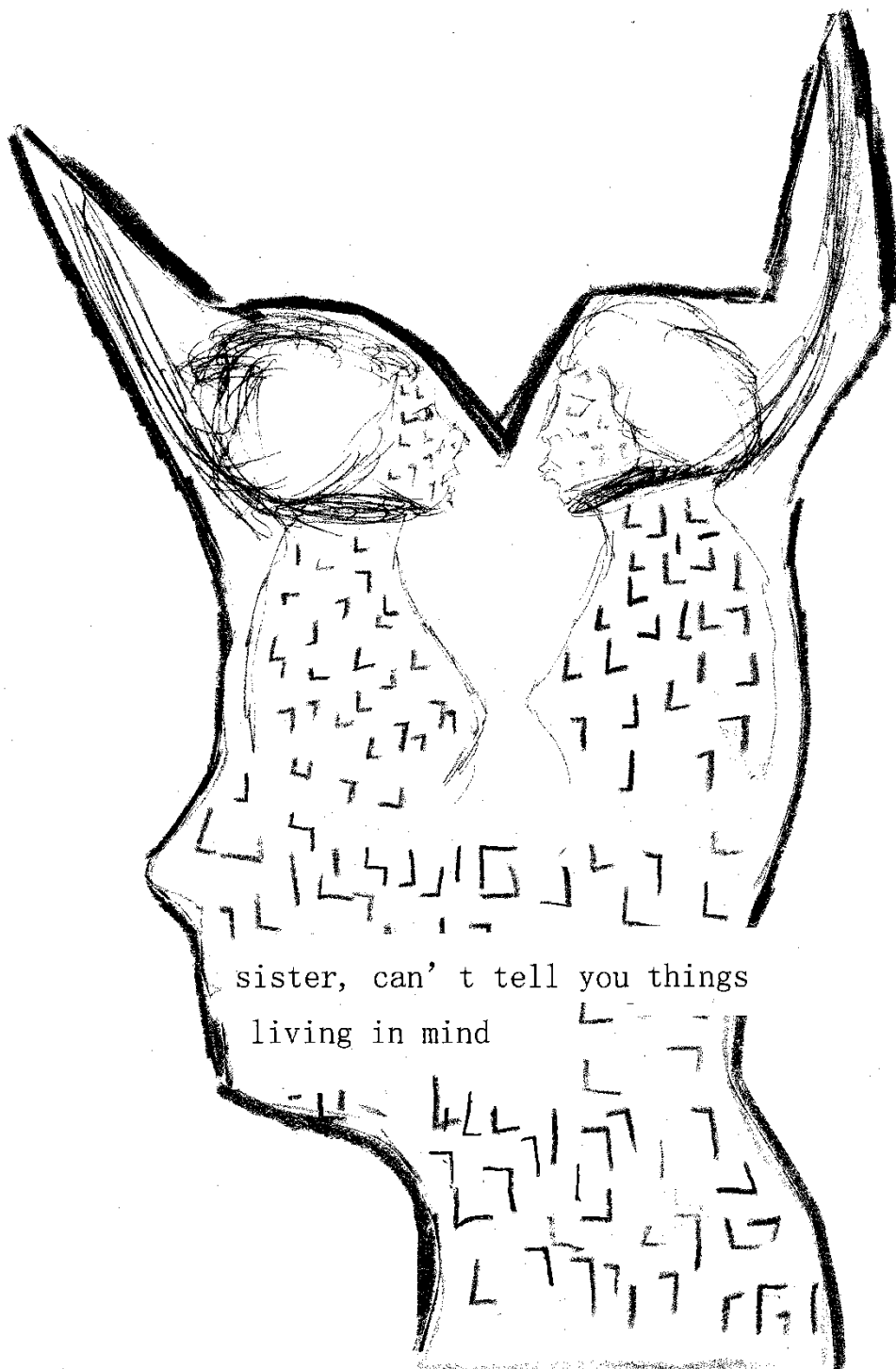
Man takes one piece of ropetwine and ties the hands and feet of BP 1.

Man takes one piece of ropetwine ties the hands and feet and then whips the back of BP 2.

Man takes one piece of ropetwine ties the hands and feet, whips the back, and then places a noose around BP 3's neck.

Man takes one piece of ropetwine ties the hands and feet, whips the back, places a noose, and then gags BP 4.

Man takes one piece of ropetwine ties the hands and feet, whips the back, places a noose, gags, and uses the remaining ropetwine as a makeshift gun to shoot BP 5 in the back until they collapse on the ground. Man stops whistling the alphabet and then exits the stage. Academic stops studying the blank chalkboard to study the Black bodies on stage.



sister, can' t tell you things
living in mind

doctor' s a two legged dog.
keep saying pain is expected,
not even trying to do
something bout it



172

should replace him with my lil' ken colie.
cat' s got more brains than him

TV Book

momma, if you gonna make me
sit in the front of the church
just look at me when
they talk about THIS

**'THERE
ARE
CHILDREN
HERE'**

THIS not a curse for
all the women and men
i loved
THIS is what it is

*Oprah Winfrey
Norman Golden II
Mark Lane*

November 28-December 4, 1993

XV. Sunrise

I meet Mariah for a study session at Sunrise Café. She sits alone at a booth with a navy of papers spread across the blue tiled ceramic table. This café is quiet, except for the TV, and the coffee pots that hiss behind the register. It's empty inside here because no one is ever sure when the café will be open. The owner's hours are based off his mood. When the café is open, you can never be sure if there will be coffee. Normally, he runs out by 2:30pm, and after the coffee is all gone, he'll sit down for the day, clipping his fingernails while watching reruns of *ER*. I know what you're thinking, and yes, this café is definitely a front business.

I sit down at the table and bring out my collection of notes that are stuffed inside my 4½ Stare Notebook⁵⁷. Across from me, Mariah frequently sighs, and her frequent sighs are strong enough to tussle her papers. On the exhale, the papers float back down onto the table, and her scent is blown toward me. Her air that drips with honey, mangoes, and shea butter first sends me to an unfamiliar place in my mind, a place that keeps my heart, and after stopping there, the scent travels to my stomach, real heart, groin, and thighs, causing a radiating clusters of butterflies. I'm excited and afraid.

.. - .----. ... / .- . . - .-.. / .-.. --- ...-

This year, I don't see much of Mariah. She's playing the game of catch up. While most students in her thesis seminar are preoccupied with getting honors on their projects, Mariah is trying to stack her GPA. During her first two years of college, she rarely saw

⁵⁷ Dear First Year, always buy the knockoff school supplies.

above a 3.3. At the end of her second year, her advisor told her that if someone of her demographic wanted to attend graduate school, they needed at least 3.7. Her advisor recommended that Mariah choose a different, more realistic career, one that didn't require anything beyond her postsecondary education. After hearing this advice, Mariah cried for what she thought was at least a quarter.⁵⁸ When she finished crying, she recalibrated herself. Now, when you watch her eyes scan pages she's reading, they move like a ticking clock. She's determined that every scanned page is movement toward her future as a professor. Her petty dream is to send an email to this advisor that includes her professional signature as a professor.

-.-- --- ..- / .-- --- ..- .-. -.. / - ...- . / -... .-. / .-- .--.. ..-.-.

I stare at the computer screen, trying to figure out what I will write, and in the midst of my stares, I talk with LP. Together, we agree the words I write won't matter. They'll fail because they are connected to me, a calcification of failure. We laugh at the sappy Tumblr truth of our thought, and I begin typing.

-.-- ..- --- -.-- .-.

Dear First Year, if you don't know how to write an essay, have no fear, Sahara is here. Below you will find the steps to successfully write a coherent paper.⁵⁹

Step 1. Open syllabus. Scroll down to the readings. Eliminate the readings you haven't done. Out of the 20-30 readings, this should leave you with 1-3 readings that you can use.

⁵⁸ Legend has it that Mariah's tears were so many, and her wails were so loud that they spilled out of her dorm room. People thought the echoes of her academic exhaustion was a broken pipe in the bathroom, and almost everyone on her floor called dorm maintenance.

⁵⁹ You're welcome. Now, you don't have buy *The Elements of Style* or *Doing Honest Work in College*

Step 2: Craft the paper's argument around the readings you've done. If you haven't done any readings, go to Wikipedia. If Wikipedia has no entries on the readings, go to Google Scholar. If Wiki and Google Scholar don't have your back, go to Reddit. If Wiki, Google Scholar, and Reddit all have nothing you can use, ask a classmate. If Wiki, Google Scholar, Reddit, and a classmate have nothing, you need to read the first and last chapter of the book, and then skim the middle pages for thirty minutes.

Step 3: Get coffee, and make sure it's the worst coffee you can find.

Step 4: Look at the word count or page count and ignore both. We know damn well that for the word count you will be either over or under the range. If your professor still does page count, you'll end up changing your font to 11 or 12.5, and then tinkering with the margins.

Step 5: Turn on writing music. For example:

“Shame” by Evelyn “Champagne King”

“On Melancholy Hill” by The Gorillaz

“Under Pressure” by Queen, David Bowie

Step 6. Stop writing. If you are alone, breakdown. If you're around others, breakdown. Cry, scream, and contemplate throwing your computer against the wall.

Step 7: Listen to your Life Partner that is living in your head. Listen to them as they remind you that since you're shit, the paper you're writing will be shit. Listen to your LP

as it tells you that the professor and students will laugh at you, and they will send your writing to all their closest friends to mockingly show to others. By the end of the week, professor, students, and all of their friends will meet in someone's industrial loft and will conspire over chips and guac about how to make a drinking game centering on how awful this thing is that you're writing.

Step 8: Debate whether to delete everything. Debate whether it'll be more embarrassing to turn in this essay or turn in nothing.

Step 9: Think of the most terrible things your professor could say to you. Examples:

Do you even know how to write?
Reading your writing was a waste of my degree.
You don't deserve to be at this University.

Step 10: Pause your breakdown. Even if you're alone, people are watching you. Go back to writing. If it's hard for you to start back up, remember, one letter, next letter, another letter, more letters, and then a word is made.

Step 11: Realize that these paragraphs are basic, but they've transliterated your thoughts to a computer screen well enough.

Step 12: Re-Read the last paragraph. Realize it needs an explanation. Just one sentence, no wait two, maybe a third and fourth. You're at ten sentences. That is a big paragraph. Try and divide the paragraph into two, but two mini paragraphs look unholy.

Step 13: Check word count. Shit, 1000 words over. Read over essay again. Delete extra
thats, delete six repetitive sentences, and delete a few more sentences that were angry
rambles. Check word count again. 643 over. Oh well.

.-- .- --- -.- -.-

I stop typing and look up to Mariah. My eyes catch her mid hair scratch as her
short nails move in a frenzied zig zag formation. She sees me staring, and I forget to
break eye contact. We're caught in this stare, and it only breaks when she speaks.

"Sahara, why are you always staring at me?"

"Sorry, I sometimes don't know where my eyes go when I'm thinking."

"No need to apologize. It's a little funny."

"What is?"

"Me catching you watching me."

"I guess it is a little funny to look up and see a pair of eyes on you."

I widen my eyes as far as they will go, and this causes Mariah to laugh. I laugh
with her. Every part of her is infectious. Her laugh, her fragrance, and of course, her
smile.

I return to writing and thinking, but stop when Mariah mentions, "You're
starethinking again."

"Sorry."

"What are you thinking about anyway?"

"Dumb stuff. School. Life."

"What do you think about when thinking of school?"

"How nervous I am."

“I used to be nervous too, but then I learned how to better handle my nerves.”

“How?”

“I talked with a therapist and then I found my partner who is pretty great at helping me calm my anxiety. Have you thought of talking to someone?”

“No⁶⁰.”

“If you ever think about going, let me know, and I can tell you who I went to. Wait, actually.” Mariah trails off and begins texting on her phone. My screen lights up with a message from her. “Here is the contact information for the therapist that I went to. She’s cheap, easy to talk to, understands what it means to be at schools like this, and to top it all off, she’s black.”

I respond thanks and we return to studying. Once my wrists begin to hurt from too much key pounding and my eyes are glazed over from too much rereading, I decide that it’s finally time to stop working. I text ROD, asking if she’s free to hang, but she can’t because she has her tattoo consultation. I search in my phone for C1’s message and ask if her offer to hang out is expired.

I tell Mariah, “I’m heading out.”

“Okay, I’m going to stay to finish up some more work. Hopefully, I’ll see you soon.”

I hug Mariah goodbye. Our cheeks kiss. If I could stay at the café and stare at Mariah as she worked, I would remain here; however, being a stalker is frowned upon, especially when it’s midterm season.

⁶⁰ Yes, but I’m afraid of what else I’ll discover about myself.

XVI. Gray

Dear First Year if you're ever looking for a sanctuary in college, try bathrooms. They're a portal to your dream world. Inside my dorm bathroom, I study my body, and touch every inch that I believe to be extra. Inside, I can cut, I can grab parts of me, and imagine having enough strength to pull them off so I can store them inside the toilet tank. There, the flesh would sit in the water undisturbed, except for the gradual rot to purple and blue, as I forget it was ever part of me.

-.-.- .- .- .-.- / -.-.- .- .- .-.-

It's funny that bathrooms have morphed into an oasis because as a kid, I always tried to never go in them. Growing up, I hated taking showers. Sundays before Mass if I didn't have an excuse⁶¹ to skip church, I ran the water and sat on the toilet seat. After a few minutes of staring at white tiles packed with grime or flaking paint from the ceiling, I got undressed and wrapped a towel around my body. Some Sundays, I figured I sat in the church pew smelling like Pepé le Pew, resulting in Mother having her suspicions. After church she always asked a series of questions:

Mother: Did you shower today?

Me: Yes

Mother: What soap did you use?

Me: Ivory.

Mother: Use a different one. I can smell you. Go shower again.

I followed Mother's order and went back to the bathroom. Again, I sat on the

⁶¹ Best ways to get out of Mass: nosebleeds. Remember they don't want your blood only Jesus'.

$$x_1 \dots x_n / x_1 \dots x_m - x_{m+1} \dots x_n / x_1 \dots x_m / x_{m+1} \dots x_n$$

Do I tell her she needs to buy the toilet paper? I won't. She'll ask me what's the big deal and I'll say it's not a big deal, while thinking, what the hell is causing her to run through this much toilet paper.⁶³ Good God, even the Pampers' Bears don't use this much.

$$\frac{(\dots) \dots (\dots)}{\dots} = \frac{\dots}{\dots} / \frac{\dots}{\dots} \dots \frac{\dots}{\dots} / \frac{\dots}{\dots} \dots$$

⁶² Sure, there's the argument that she's rarely here and that my ass is wide, but I'm suspecting that she's taking toilet paper when she leaves. Sometimes when I leave for class, there is a ½ a roll of toilet paper left, but when I come back there's a ¼ of a roll. What is she doing with all that toilet paper? And no, she's not wrapping her pads in wads of it. Is she stuffing her bra, suffering from Epistaxis, or Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

⁶⁴ Dining hall napkins aren't good for the bum. When the roughness causes you to scrunch your face in

button my shirt all the way to the top, or should I leave two buttons unbuttoned?⁶⁵ Two buttons, no buttons, napkins, no napkins, two buttons, no buttons. Does it matter? My fupa is so loud and proud that everyone will stare and won't even care how my shirt is buttoned. And oh, it's gonna be bad, Momma. They're all gonna laugh at me. Hold me, Momma. Please, hold me.

I spend almost twenty minutes debating my buttons, and now am running late to meet with C1. I make an executive decision and button my shirt all the way to the top and then decide that the possibility of shit hands because the dining hall napkins fell apart mid wipe isn't worth the risk. So, I'll buy the toilet paper.

--- ..- / -.- --- ..- ..- ... / --- -.. / --- ..- ---

C1 lives in the New Money High Rise. The high rise has twenty-seven floors and rent for a studio starts at \$1,975. In order to even receive an application for a unit, all potential tenants must have a referral from a current resident. For college students who don't live here, New Money High Rise is the closest that we'll ever get to Narnia. The key to this wardrobe is a mini white electronic device. The doors into this wonderland are made of glass and have gold hexagon knobs. These days, everyone who is anyone knows that carpet can be oh so kitschy, and as a result, this high rise has purple tiles, which have been a part of the hotel since it was originally built in 1924. For treats, there's complimentary lemon and lime infused sparkling water or coffee and tea that is served at the perfect drinking temperature of 136°F. The magic of this place even extends to the numerous mythical creatures inside. The creatures are comprised of donor kids who

discomfort as you wipe, recite this chorus — "You gotta do what you gotta do, especially when it's a number two."

⁶⁵ On the third day of queer camp, a true queer said to me, "have all buttons buttoned if you want to be like me."

never go to class, but still graduate with honors cords, the International Elite who wear MC² bookbags the size of tampon applicators, and of course, the tenured professors who use grad students' labor as their personal solar panels.

Inside, I tell the front desk woman C1's first name and apartment number, and Front Desk Woman asks for a last name. I tell her that I don't know it. She looks at me, and her eyes shift from my dinged white shirt and jeans that are ripped at the knees and the insides of my thighs. I'm pretty sure that the sparkling water here costs more than my entire outfit.⁶⁶ Front Desk Woman tells me that for security reasons, I can't go upstairs. Her eyes direct me toward the nearest seat, a plain leather lounge chair, which is surprisingly uncomfortable despite the lavishness of the building. I shift back and forth, trying to find the right spot. She hears my shifting, and her eyes glare at me over her floral bifocals. I stop mid-shift and stare at her long, rectangular face. The top half has paperclip thin eyebrows while the bottom half is a frown and a field of chin hair. Her cracked lips are small, caved into her teeth, and misaligned with pink lipstick.

I try to take two peppermints that are sitting in a jar, but Front Desk Woman catches me reaching for two. She informs me, "Only one." While my hand is inside the jar, I release the extra mint. Front Desk Woman keeps talking. "How is she your friend and you don't know her last name?"

"I never asked for it."

She remarks, "You don't know her name and she doesn't look like she is a friend of yours. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

I try to respond, but the phone rings. She raises her forefinger, blocking me from

⁶⁶ Yes, the cost includes my shoes.

speaking. On the phone her voice is softer, she apologizes to someone for the inconvenience. She looks at me and then puts her finger down.

“You can head upstairs. And your friends last name is [REDACTED]. That’s something you should know.”

I’m Nigerian enough to recognize that part of C1’s name is Nigerian. I knock on the door and then twist the gold knob to discover that it’s unlocked. C1 is sitting on the couch staring at her blank tv. Her eyes are red and white like the two peppermints I tried to steal. The apartment is cookie cutter and decorated with a mint green sectional and a pastel, zigzag patterned rug. C1 waves me toward the couch. She lights another joint and taps the ashes onto the rug. Next to her while I watch the ashes fall, all I can think about is the Naughty Cells midterm that I’m too doomed to study for. C1 interrupts the silence and my anxiety.

“If you’re hungry, you can get anything out the fridge.”

I thank her, then walk to the fridge, but the only things inside are limes, a case of Guinness, rotting fruit, and half of a dried-out onion. I grab two beers and return to the couch. C1’s done smoking and takes out two pills and places them inside her grinder. She grinds away, and as the pills turn into crumbs, I try to think of some type of small talk.

“So, are you half Nigerian?”

She replies, “Yep.”

“What’s the other half.”

“My mom’s Italian.”

“Cool. I’m half Nigerian too.”

“Which side?”

“My father.”

“Did your father teach you anything about being Nigerian?”

“No.”

She turns to me and waits to speak until she’s positive she has my full attention.

“I didn’t start being somewhat Nigerian or Black until three years ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“My parents never talked about race and we were rich before everything else.”

She pauses and turns to the wall as she asks, “Am I Black enough for you?”

I look to her confused, unable to decide whether this is some joke. She keeps waiting for my answer as if this moment is some sort of test. I don’t know what the correct answer is for her approval. I respond, “Of course you—”

“Forget it. What could you know that I don’t already?”

She opens her pill grinder. Silence returns, fragmenting the space we share. I attempt to merge us back together by asking, “What are the pills?”

“Does it matter?”

I don’t respond. She wipes dust off her coffee table then cuts three lines with her student id. She asks if I want some, even though I don’t know what it is or how to consume it, I say sure. She must see the confusion in my face, and she rolls a ten-dollar bill. After she snorts, she talks. Her words become progressively more frenzied.

“You know in the 20s people used to smoke cigars with ten-dollar bills.”

“Yea, that’s the one fact from APUSH I remember.”

I lean in, and before I start, she warns not to sneeze or blow the lines away. I inhale and follow C1’s recommendation of wiping the leftover line on my gums. She

snorts the last little.

I repeat my question, “What is it?”

She wipes her nose and tells me, “Adderall.”

“Ah, college gold.”

“Funny.”

C1 turns on her music. Daft Punk blares as she is dancing, jumping side to side, and snapping her fingers. She dances toward the table and grabs her beer. She dances back toward me because she’s forgotten her joint.

She shouts, “Let’s go to a bar. Are you 21?” Before I respond, she continues, “Doesn’t matter. I know a place that doesn’t card, and it’s always a good time.”

She starts jumping higher. Her beer spills on to the carpet and when she’s finally out of breath, she turns down the music. I step over the puddles of beer as C1 leads me into her bedroom because we must change. She searches for clothes, first in her cookie cutter dresser, then in her walk-in closet, and finally on her white canopy bed.

For an excuse, I say, “I need to go back to my dorm because I left my wallet there. I’ll change there and then meet you at the bar.”

She responds, “That’ll take too long. Tonight’s my treat.”

C1 drags me to the foot of her bed, then hunts for potential outfits. I know that whatever she chooses, no matter how stretchy, will end up making me look like a Bob Evans sausage roll that’s being squeezed out its casing.

She’s found two possible outfits.⁶⁷ She takes off her clothes and tells me to hurry up and take mine off too. I move away from the bed and closer to the closet. I take my

⁶⁷ Fuck

shirt off and my hands are wrapped around my stomach. My fingers try to disappear into my flesh. She comes closer to me, shoving a piece of clothing my way as she says, “This might fit you.”

In my hands is a stretchy romper. My grip tightens on myself. I stare at her body and cannot stop studying it, part by part. She has long light brown legs and every part of her seems hairless. There’s a constellation of moles on her collarbone. While in her underwear—of course it’s a matching lace set that’s free of holes—she’s twirling her hips in circles to the music. She’s a reincarnation of Josephine Baker, except even tinier. She stops dancing and orders me to try on the outfit. I pull down my pants, and I try on the romper. The stretchy fabric clings to my body, detailing every part of my grotesque form. C1 studies me, part by part, and sees the fresh cuts on my thighs.

“Wow, I guess you’re fucked up too.”

After she speaks, my breathing stops and tears well in my eyes. I try holding them back, but I’ve never anticipated this moment of someone seeing this part of me. In consequence to this surprise, I mis-operate. The tears fall. I redress in my original outfit. As I’m getting dressed, she asks, “Have you talked to somebody?”

“No.”

“Good. Talking to someone will make you even more depressed. What I’m about to tell you will save you some money.” She opens her dresser and pulls out a pill bottle and puts it in my hand. “Right now, you’re bored, and looking for attention. If you find yourself sad some days, take one of these, and sleep off whatever feelings you have. But I swear to God if you use one of these to off yourself, I’ll regret ever meeting you. Don’t do anything stupid because you’re bored. Remember, bored, not sad. If you stick with

me, you will never be sad again.”

In my mind, I keep repeating C1’s incantation of *bored, not sad*, and it guides me throughout the night. With her words, I watch C1. Dancing when she dances. Drinking when she drinks. I can be fun like her. C1’s final outfit decision is a black leopard blazer paired with the black romper that I tried on and vinyl heels. While in the taxi to the bar, we drink vodka out of a metallic bottle, and C1 tells the driver to keep changing the radio station until she knows a song that she can sing along to. Finally, he lands on the right station, and she hollers the lyrics to “Bitch, Don’t Kill My Vibe.”

.

The bar we end up at is called Dorian. It has three levels, and C1 leads us toward the basement. Down there, we sit down on a long red couch, which lacks a backing, and order the first round of drinks. After the first round, C1 leaves to say hello to her other friends. Alone, I take in the art deco bar. The lightbulbs in the basement are blacklights. There’s wallpaper patterned with bronze clouds, and spray painted on the wallpaper are words in Spanish and French. I’m definitely underdressed for this bar. Everyone here is wearing a dress, suit jacket, or a Grace Jones-esque combination of the two.

C1 returns after making the rounds of hello. She orders us two manhattans and Bar Owner comes over with the drinks. She kisses his craggy face, which is marked with a giant scar that runs across his forehead.⁶⁸ He sits down next to C1. They flirt with one another, and I sit to the left of them, remaining silent. When they finish their round of drinks, BO, the Bar Owner, tells the Bartender to bring a bottle of scotch. Still on the previous round, I chug the Manhattan, trying to get as much of this alcohol that I’m

⁶⁸ Later, I would learn his investor who was also his second wife gave him that scar when she hit him in the head with a wine bottle.

hoping is free into my body. As I am chugging, he whispers into C1's ears, which causes for her to giggle in a pitch so high that I didn't even know it was humanly possible.

TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE!
 TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE!
TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE!
 TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE!
TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE!
 TEHEHE! TEHEHE! TEHEHE!

Post-chug, my cup is empty, and I try to listen to BO, but his words are elided because of his drunkenness. I think he says to C1, "I love you. Just let me show you."

Bartender returns with a bottle of scotch and three glasses. BO orders Bartender to get herself a glass while he strokes C1's thighs and then his Salt-N-Pepa beard.⁶⁹ Bartender leaves and returns with a glass. As scotch is poured, C1 declares her love for this bar because it has the best scotch in the city.

We say cheers and the glass feels too heavy in my hands. I quickly drink and then set it on the table. Bartender refills my glass, and I gulp everything down, again. Bartender reaches for the bottle to refill it and I cover it with my hand, but BO swipes my hand away. He tells me I have to drink because we are celebrating love. He kisses my cheek and pours me more scotch. C1 and BO are laughing with one another. I am too drunk to know what is driving the TEHEHE's. I try to lean against the couch but fall into the wall.

⁶⁹ Ooo baby, baby.

BO laughs, mentioning to C1, “My love, I think your friend has had too much to drink. I thought people like her were always up for a good time.”

“Of course, she’s up for a good time. This night is just starting.”

“This is why I love you. You’re always so fun.”

I open my eyes and look to C1. She’s sitting on BO’s lap as she’s drinking, smiling, and telling a story. I try to focus on her words, hoping that they will help sober me up. She tells us a story of her time abroad. Late one night while walking in Shoreditch toward the 24hr bagel shop, she watched two teenagers fuck on the top level of a double decker bus, and when the teenagers realized she was watching, they waved at her. BO laughs, and C1 vibrates on his thigh like a Tickle Me Elmo that is operated by giggles.

He kisses C1’s neck and proclaims, “One day, we will go to London to be horny teenagers together.”

He begins thrusting his pelvis underneath her. I don’t want to stomach them anymore, and I’m tired of watching their fun. I leave for a smoke. Bartender follows me and I let her bum a cigarette. She’s striking. Rosebud lips, an afro puff of hair so tall it reaches the clouds, a sculpted face, and eyes as dark as a total eclipse, all culminate to her personal beauty. While she talks, I fade in and out of her words.

“Can’t stand him. Such a creep. Free drinks to pretty.”

“You free drinks?”

“What?”

“Cause you’re pretty.”

“You’re drunk.”

“And.”

“You curious or pissed at daddy?”

I roll my eyes and answer, “Fuck you.”

Her response, “Kiss me.”

“I can’t because that ciga—”

She stomps out her cigarette then kisses me. I kiss her back, and more heat rushes to my face. As we kiss, I am filled with hope. The first hope is that my tongue becomes tied to her so that we are connected in this moment forever. The second, each kiss partitions off part of my face, and this body and everything that’s contained inside of it becomes faceless. The third, with Bartender, I can be as fun as C1. While Bartender kisses me, she unbuttons half of my shirt and pushes my bra down. She licks my nipple, and then sucks it. She moves up to my neck, biting it while asking me how far I want to go.

She says, “If you let me, we can have fun all night.”

“You, that fun?”

“Don’t believe me? Let me show you a night out, and maybe if I’m lucky the night will turn into a day with us together.”

I press into her and kiss her harder, embracing the back of her hair. Her curls are a pillow for my fingers. As we are inhaling each other, I hope for her to take in everything inside of me so that there is nothing left. I bite her lip. She bites mine then returns to kissing my neck. I beg her to bite me, and after each bite, I ask for it to be harder than the one before. We pause, and it gives me time to breathe. She holds my head, cups my ears, and then kisses me again. I have a feeling that none of my hopes will come true. I, no

matter what, will never be like C1. All that's inside of me will remain there. Bartender and I's tongues untie, and I tuck my tits back into my bra then rebutton my shirt.

"I can't."

"What's wrong?"

Between our lips, I whisper, "I don't know."

"It's okay. We can go back inside."

In the basement, BO has a bottle of tequila waiting for us. I take two shots and before he can pour the third. I stumble to the bathroom. My body swings back and forth as I try to walk to the stall. Finally, I make it. Head over toilet, I stay until I vomit. I am too drunk to get up so I stay on the floor. Enough time passes for people to wonder where I am. I hear one person giggling as another helps me to my feet.

TEHEHE!

Detroit Free Press/Nov. 28-Dec. 4

Sunday/28

Morning

5:00

13 Firefighters 22400
 14 Movie **XX** "Pancho Villa" (1972) Telly Savalas, Clint Walker. The Mexican rebel and his right-hand man lead an attack on a U.S. fort. (V) 749826
 20 Three's Company 893428

5:05

1100 Movie "Full Eclipse" (1983) Mario Van Peebles. (V) 87956225

5:30

2 Newhart 57315
 3 Kidbits 42603
 4 Singalong! 62251
 10 It's Your Business 951405
 1100 Moneyweek (R) (V) 316584
 1100 Movie **X** "The Hollywood Knights" (1980) Tony Danza. (R) 480190

6:00

2 Mass for Shut-ins 27374
 3 Open Doors 45770
 4 America's Black Forum 73048
 10 Catch the Spirit 75634
 20 Charles Stanley 264867
 20 Best of National Geographic "Voyage of the Brigantine Yankee" 856003

6:30

2 MotorWeek Chevy 5-10' 61
 3 Due Process 44400
 4 Weekend Travel Update 981
 10 Keys Kids 43645
 1100 Insight 356003
 1100 Movie **XXX** "The Purr Rose of Cairo" (1985) Mia Farrow (PG) (V) 6750683

7:00

sister tells me about
 movies with people dying with THIS
 what do movies know about dying?
 what do they know about dying here?
 don' t look like me
 don' t talk like me
 never been to
 this side of town like me

sister says what

about magic and arthur



they don' t count
 they got that white money
 they' ll live forever

went to the psychic downstairs
asked her when am i gonna die?
asked for my palm to find my life line
looked at it and said couldn' t find it,



then said, gimme 10
and i' ll try and find it again
didn' t have that money
went back upstairs to bed with ken

4

Death in the Afternoon

While inside a posh DMV, Me waits in line. The lights are bright, the counters clean, the carpet fresh. On the walls are plasma televisions playing the same ad on loop. In Me's hand, she is holding a card with her fingerprint on it. In front and behind her are college students who are all either staring down at their cards or watching the ad. Some of the college students are missing arms, parts of their heads, or legs.

Ad: What's your soul worth? Together, we can find out. With a down payment of your soul, we can put you on track to graduate loan free. Please ask your clerk for more details.

Me's number is called. She walks toward the counter.

Clerk: Welcome to Purgatory, please give me your card for processing. *(Me hands over her card. Clerk places it underneath a scanner for processing.)* The process should take about five hours. Thank you for your patience.

Me: Excuse me, I would like more information regarding the loan forgiveness program.

Clerk: *(slides over a handbook that is larger than In Search of Lost Time. The cover of the handbook reads, "How to be Debt Free")* Let me know if you have any questions.

The clerk turns on her portable television that is next to the scanner. She watches Dynasty, but

during the commercial break, she switches the channel to Dallas. While Clerk sits on the edge of her seat when she's about to find out who shot J.R., Me watches the Loan Forgiveness ad that plays on the plasma.

Ad: Have you heard about our loan forgiveness program? With the one-time down payment of your soul, you will graduate any higher education program debt free. Why wait till after graduation to lose your soul working at a dead-end job, when you can use it for freedom? Still not convinced? Then hear from some of our satisfied customers.

A girl appears on screen. She's in a hospital gown and missing her right arm and left eye.

Girl in Ad: Before deciding to enroll in Hell's loan forgiveness program, I was worried about what I would do after graduation. There were jobs, but the salary wouldn't make a dent in my loans. Then one night after a toxic shock scare, I ended up in this DMV and heard about this program. After learning more about it, I immediately knew that this program was right for me. I made the down payment of my soul, and only have five more payments left. Don't worry, the other payments are so easy. I gave my right arm and left eye, and it was completely painless. I'm so close to being loan free and can start living the life I want. This is the best decision I've ever made!

The girl leaves the screen, Me tries to lift "How to be Debt Free" from the counter but it is too heavy. A soft ding is heard in the background and the clerk sighs. She ignores the ding until after the big J.R. reveal. As the episode's credits roll, Clerk removes Me's card out the scanner. The

clerk reads off Me's decision.

Clerk: Well lucky you. You're going back to your body. See you next Thirsty Thursday.

Me: Wait, before I leave, I would like to enroll in the Loan Forgiveness program.

Clerk: *(reads the screen)* Well according to my data, your soul is too empty to give.



4/28/1993

XVII. Prayer

Eyes open. My teeth chattering. Wrap myself tighter. Was on stomach, someone turned me to side. Try and not move. Moving causes head spinning. Moving causes guilt. Living exactly like last year. Drunk in a squeaking bed. Can't stop shaking. Teeth chattering even when jaw is clenched. I am 85% sure with 15% yield of uncertainty I am dying.

Try and piece together a prayer,

Dear Lord, please make sure my parents don't have to pay back my loans.

Dear Lord, please let my brothers forgive me for leaving them like this.

Dear Lord, please have someone discover my body soon so it doesn't rot like Jen's.

Amen.



hot head cold bed
THIS life not a life

THIS living death

62

XVIII. Hanging

I wake up. My head pounds. There's dried vomit on my braids, and my mouth tastes like puke and Frost Gatorade. This body feels too heavy to lift and I stay in bed until I hear a moan from below. I look down and see that it's ROD. She's using Roommate's fuchsia robe as a blanket. I lean forward to shake her awake. I keep tapping her shoulder until another wave of nausea hits me. I stop shaking and fall back into my bed. My stomach flips. I'm not sure whether I have to puke or shit, so I curl into a ball until I figure out whether I have to number 2, 3⁷⁰, or 0⁷¹. When I think my body has made my decision, I rush to the bathroom and accidentally step on ROD. While puking in the toilet, I see my phone next to the scrub brush. There are 36 missed messages.

1st—Bartender apologizing for not realizing how drunk I was⁷².

2nd—C1 asking if I am alive, and if I am, if I want to go to another bar with her and some Donor Kids.

3rd—Mother asking if I'm going to church for Thanksgiving.

4th—Mother asking why I'm not coming home for Thanksgiving.

5th—Mother asking how, where, and what I will cook for myself for Thanksgiving.

6th—Mother asking when my Christmas break is.

7–36—a flurry of messages from the Black Excel chat.

Too tired to respond, I mark all messages as read, and then place my phone on the sink. I return to resting on the toilet seat and my eyes stare at the gunk and grime next to me and pray it

⁷⁰ Diarrhea

⁷¹ Puking and spitting up. One of the first things you did as a baby.

⁷² How did she get my number?

is dried vomit, and not displaced shit, Roommate's period blood, or a new colony of bacteria that is eager to make me patient zero.

ROD stands by the bathroom door. Her hair is the messiest I've ever seen it. Her glasses are off, and without them she can't see. She cautiously enters the bathroom, knocking over my caddy and all its contents inside. I'm too hungover to fully worry whether or not my razor is in there.

I ask her in a voice that is rattled with exhaustion, "Where are your glasses?"

"They fell off last night, and I'm not sure where they landed." She scratches her hair and comes further into the bathroom. She pulls back the shower curtain and sits at the edge of the bathtub.

"Sahara, where did you go last night?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"To a bar."

"With who?"

"A friend. Can you stop asking questions? Not feeling the best right now."

"What type of friend drops you off in front of the dorm like trash?"

"We had fun last night. She wanted to have more fun, but I couldn't keep up."

"You're lucky I saw you after going out for a smoke. Mariah and I had to carry you upstairs. We almost called an ambulance."

"Good thing you didn't. Ambulance rides are at least two grand."

"Sahara, can you be serious?"

"I'm sorry you had to take care of me, but I had—"

“Fun? You were puking everywhere last night. I was terrified.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll make it up to you.”

“I don’t want anything. I’m worried. You’ve been off this quarter. I don’t see you and when I do, you’re quiet most of the time.”

“It’s been busy, and I’ve been tired since the school year started.”

“It’s more than that. Just be honest with me.”

I get up from the toilet and wipe my mouth. In the tub, I see my clothes from last night covered in vomit. I lean next to ROD and pick through the wad of wet jeans, shirt, and bra. Underneath them, I see ROD’s glasses. I hand them to her and before I can try to explain away last night, I hear a knock at the door.⁷³ It’s Mariah. She enters my room, sets a bottle of Fruit Punch⁷⁴ Gatorade on my desk along with a pack of saltines. Mariah unbuttons her gray peacoat and sets her jacket on my desk. She’s wearing her backup study outfit⁷⁵—a raspberry beret, Blondie t-shirt, and black leggings. I look down and see I’m wearing oversized green workout shorts, and an old high school class t-shirt that has a giant blue whale on it. Embarrassed, I pull sweatpants over my shorts, and then a hoodie over the t-shirt.⁷⁶ Mariah walks closer to me. I back away from her.

“I don’t want you smelling my vomit breath.”

Mariah responds, “Sahara, your breath is fine. I wanted to make sure you were okay. I was worried.” Her concerned words divide me. Part of me is happy that she thought of me, while another part is embarrassed that she had to help carry my vomit covered body up the stairs. She

⁷³ Dear Lord, don’t let it be Roommate asking for me to buy toilet paper.

⁷⁴ A much better flavor than Frost.

⁷⁵ Her normal go to is black sweatpants, an oversized black hoodie, and her lucky green and blue that she’s had since seventh grade.

⁷⁶ How the hell did ROD find the worst options in my wardrobe to dress me in?

smiles and unwraps the cream scarf around her neck. I make sure not to stare at her scar. “I couldn’t stop worrying last night. You even had my partner worried too.”

The mention of her partner seals me back into one. All of me is ashamed that Mariah had to help carry me, and that she stands in my room right now, staring at my vomit speckled braids and a body, which is doubled over because of an aggressive hangover. Both her and ROD are standing in my room, and I’m afraid of what questions they might ask. If I begin explaining why I drink the way I do and why I’m okay with being tossed like trash, their exhaustion and annoyance will fill my room. Exhaustion from explaining myself. Their annoyance from how weak and careless I am with myself. I lean against my bed, silent and tired.

Everyone in the room waits for me to say something. I mumble, “Thank you, and I’m sorry for causing so much worry,” then I raise my lips upwards, effectively carving a smile into my face. “I owe you both lunch or something. I would treat you now, but I should probably study for my midterm.”

“Of course. Let me know if you need anything.” Mariah says as she wraps her scarf tightly around her neck. Before leaving, she invites both of us to a Friendsgiving at her partner’s place. Despite the wet smell of vomit permeating the room, her and ROD discuss food. To occupy myself from the conversation and the next wave of nausea, I pack my backpack. After Mariah leaves, I put on my coat. ROD stands by the door.

“Sahara—”

“Yes?”

“I saw them.”

“Saw what.” Her eyes shift toward my thigh. I reach for the doorknob, but she grabs it first.

“You haven’t even changed or brushed your teeth yet.”

“Perfect, I’ll fit in with the engineers at the library.”

“Sahara—”

I leave ROD in my room and head downstairs. I notice people in the hall are either staring or smirking. My eyes focus on my footsteps to ensure they’re steady. If I can walk straight, then I’m no longer a mess.⁷⁷

When I look up, I catch Front Desk Lady’s eye. She smiles at me and waves me over to her desk. She says, “It’s good to see you upright. Last night, you had me worried. You couldn’t even walk upstairs and you vomited all over the entrance.”

“I’m sorry for causing such a mess.”

“No worries, I’m not the one who had to clean it.”

“Who did?”

“Your RA, but don’t worry it’s about time that she did some work. Promise me you’ll be careful and don’t end up like those kids that think they’re white. Last night, I caught a group of them, trying to pee in the library’s fake tree over there. I swear that half of them won’t have livers come graduation.”

“I promise.”

I say goodbye, and as I leave, I raise my lips upwards, to carve another smile into my face.

⁷⁷ Dear Thesis committee, I promise that I’m a container of fun. Normally, no visible cracks are allowed for anything to spill out. Last night was a slip up. I promise I can hang.

XIX. Test

In the library, the words on the computer screen seem to melt into one another, and if they're not melting, they're vibrating. I lean in closer to my laptop, hoping that the closer I am, the easier it'll be for me to understand whatever naughty cells do inside our bodies.

I take a break from studying because the words are blending like colors on an artist's palette. I take out my Aunt's zine from my backpack and count the typos and sentences that don't end with periods. I don't know whether these mistakes are meant to be here. The graduate student who wrote about my Aunt's zine spent three paragraphs on why this work was offensive to poetry. He couldn't believe my Aunt was able to get away with creating something like this. Why couldn't he just let the work be and understand that it wasn't for him? I return to my laptop and type his name into a search engine. Within .4344 seconds, I discover his current apartment address and his office number. I place my hands behind my head and fantasize about vengeance. I would creep into his office, go on his computer, delete all his papers and all his backup files, take all the ink out of his pens, type up and send a letter of resignation for his fellowship appointment, sign him up for weekly poop deliveries, then shake up half of his cans of lime sparkling water, and then poke holes in the rest. I smile as I imagine every step. I keep rehearsing the lie that I would say to the department office coordinator, "I am a visiting scholar." Then I get a whiff of my armpit. Oh Lord, it's a kick to the nose.

-. . - - - . / -- . . . - . - . / - - - - - . - / - . - . . - - -

Inside the bathroom, I rinse my mouth with coffee and then water. After this, I take a clump of wet paper towels and give myself a hoe bath. Once I'm as clean as I can get, I put my layers of clothing back on, then I return to my seat at the library. I watch a student pace in the

book aisle in front of me. Their movements cause for the motion center lights to stay on. I don't know whether this student is deranged and drunk, and it doesn't matter. Growing up, the choice was whether it was rabbit season or duck season. These days, the choice is never yours, the seasons are either midterm or finals, and during both we're always rabid.

I return to the hopeless endeavor of studying. If I stay long enough, then I will either pass this midterm or become a ghost that haunts this library's floor. I figure that after a few years as a ghost, I'll throw books at the hopeless studiers. The ones who die from brain herniation will become ghosts with me, and eventually as one big happy ghost family⁷⁸ we'll spill out into the other library floors.

. /

Dear First Year, if you weren't afraid of tests in high school, then you will be afraid of tests in college. No matter how hard you try, it'll never be enough. Professors in college care too much⁷⁹. The lecture hall is their throne room.

Meanwhile high school teachers stopped caring about grading after so many strikes, pay cuts, and bruises from breaking up riots. Instead, they started caring about how many side hustles they needed to keep their bills paid on time. The lack of caring changes in college. Professors still don't care about their students. They're too busy trying to birth their dissertation or maybe a page length sentence for a book their Momma wouldn't even read.

Though these professors don't care, they still have the power to instill in you the fear of failure. Before exams in college, I get the shits and the sweats, and while wiping my forehead or my bum, I pray to anyone that's listening and keep my eye out for any goats to sacrifice. No

⁷⁸ This campus won't mind having a few more ghosts. There are already all the slave ghosts living in the resident, lecture, and dining halls. You know, the ones who died while building these buildings.

⁷⁹ Where else can you get paid to fail students and steal their papers, which you later on publish under your name?

matter how hard I pray, the outcome is always the same. As I read the questions, they make no sense, resulting in me panicking, and my breath becomes shortened, and my face becomes hotter, and the questions begin blurring on the page, and I know that everyone in class is watching me fail. In these moments while taking the test, all I want to do is run out of the lecture hall, and away from the test that is only there to test the idiocy in me.

-... .. / - - - / / .- / .-. - - .. -.. / .- - - .- -. -.-

NCP hands out the test and then scantrons. She hears the class' snickering at the archaic form. She comments, "I get a good laugh too when I see your grades."

I color in bubble after bubble. I reread question after question. When did reading become this hard? Students in front of, next to, and behind me are already finished. There's a handful of us left, and I don't want to be the last one. I rushfill the last of the bubbles, turn in the test without looking NCP in her eyes. I beeline out of the lecture hall and into the bathroom. Pull down my pants, razor in hand, cut until I snap myself out my mind.

PART 1

SUBJECTIVE SCORE INSTRUCTOR USE ONLY				
100	90	80	70	60
50	40	30	20	10
9	8	7	6	5
4	3	2	1	0

	(T)	(F)	KEY	
	%	2	3	5
1	A	B	C	D
2	A	B	C	D
3	A	B	C	D
4	A	B	C	D
5	A	B	C	D
6	A	B	C	D
7	A	B	C	D
8	A	B	C	D
9	A	B	C	D
10	A	B	C	D
11	A	B	C	D
12	A	B	C	D
13	A	B	C	D
14	A	B	C	D
15	A	B	C	D
16	A	B	C	D
17	A	B	C	D
18	A	B	C	D
19	A	B	C	D
20	A	B	C	D
21	A	B	C	D
22	A	B	C	D
23	A	B	C	D
24	A	B	C	D
25	A	B	C	D
26	A	B	C	D
27	A	B	C	D
28	A	B	C	D
29	A	B	C	D
30	A	B	C	D
31	A	B	C	D
32	A	B	C	D
33	A	B	C	D
34	A	B	C	D
35	A	B	C	D
36	A	B	C	D
37	A	B	C	D
38	A	B	C	D
39	A	B	C	D
40	A	B	C	D
41	A	B	C	D
42	A	B	C	D
43	A	B	C	D
44	A	B	C	D
45	A	B	C	D
46	A	B	C	D
47	A	B	C	D
48	A	B	C	D
49	A	B	C	D
50	A	B	C	D

© 2010 Scantlon Corporation
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED (U.S. PAT. NO. 7,298,901 B2)

Customer Service
800-722-6876

FEED THIS DIRECTION

SCANTRON EM-882-E-9A0-4-22

IMPORTANT

USE NO. 2 PENCIL ONLY

TO USE SUBJECTIVE
SCORE FEATURE:

- MAKE DARK MARKS
- ERASE COMPLETELY TO CHANGE
- Mark total possible subjective points
- Only one mark per line on key
- 163 points maximum

EXAMPLE: A: 5, B: 3, C: 2, D: 1, E: 0

EXAMPLE OF STUDENT SCORE:

100	90	80	70	60
50	40	30	20	10
9	8	7	6	5
4	3	2	1	0

NAME

SUBJECT

DATE

TEST NO.

PERIOD

FOR USE ON
TEST SCORING
MACHINE ONLY

REORDER ONLINE
www.ScantlonStore.com

TEST RECORD

PART 1

PART 2

TOTAL

START LOSING WEIGHT NOW!



SALE ENDS SAT.!
Lose Up To
55 Lbs.

\$99⁰⁰*

Offer expires Dec. 4, 1993

PROGRAM INCLUDES:

- Weight Loss Weeks
- One-On-One Counselling
- Blood Pressure Monitoring
- Mild Exercise Program
- Owned & Administered by
- Board Certified Mich. Doctors

INCLUDES ALL LAB WORK AND MEDICAL SET UP!

OPEN TODAY TO SERVE YOU!



WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAM

CLINICS FOR TEENAGERS

CALL TODAY FOR FREE CONSULTATION
 Mon.-Fri. 9-7; Sat. 9-1
 We Accept All Major Credit Cards

CANTON — 981-6700	LIVONIA — 473-8430	PONTIAC — 683-9600
CLINTON TWP. — 228-2008	LIVONIA — 473-8430	ROSEVILLE — 778-2288
DEARBORN HTS. — 274-7744	MADISON HTS. — 546-6940	SOUTHFIELD — 559-9444
DOWNRIVER — 928-0084	MT. CLEMENS — 228-2008	TROY — 524-3040
EASTPOINTE — 778-0600	NORTHLAND — 557-0370	UTICA/SHELBY — 731-3100
FARM. HILLS — 932-3370	NOVI — 347-3450	WARREN — 546-6940
FLINT — 230-8888	PLYMOUTH — 981-6700	WATERFORD — 683-9600
LANSING — (517) 887-8883		ROCHESTER HILLS — 852-8333

XX. White Oprah

After the test, I return to my dorm, and stare at the spider webs dangling from the ceiling. Roommate enters, huffing and puffing, then ranting that none of the elliptical machines at the gym were open. She stands in the center and begins her calisthenics and squats. She makes room for me to join.

“I had a rough day and would rather smoke.”

“Ugh, smoking. It’s an ugly habit that makes you ugly.”

“It helps me destress.”

“What has you stressed?”

“School.”

“What about it? This school is so great, has so many opportunities, and cute boys. Like today, I was in line waiting to pay for my tea, I started talking to this dude in front of me about my plans for the summer, and he offered me an internship.”

“Must be nice.”

“It was so nice. Sahara, if you want to start feeling better you need to be more positive, put yourself out there, and workout. Exercise is the only guaranteed way of feeling better.”

Too exhausted to disagree, I nod my head. I sit on my bed, anxiously waiting for something to do. I see the pack of cigarettes peeking out from underneath my pillow. I leave for the park that is next to my dorm. Darkness casts its shadow over the green and blue slides, swings, and trapeze rings. While sitting on the swing set, from the distance, I see a cliff of rocks and the water. I take out a cigarette. During this adult recess, my exercise for the day is moving

my hand back and forth from my lips. As I'm in this moment of smoking and staring, I wish something would happen. This moment keeps ticking and tocking, nothing is happening, leading to my conclusion that I have to be that something. I stub out my cigarette on the swing set's steel chain. I wrap my hands around my neck, tighten my grip, and count the seconds, imagining every second brings me closer to joining The Unfortunates.

I release myself and light another cigarette. When the cigarette's menthol numbs my cheek and tongue, I return to my room. It smells of sweat. Roommate finishes up her exercises and wipes the sweat from her upper lip. She shows me a photo of her boyfriend.

"Isn't he cute?"

I respond sure as I search for the recent rolls of toilet paper I bought. I can't find any. Roommate talks over my frustrated sighs and slamming of the drawers. "You know he has a friend that looks exactly like him, and his friend might be into Black girls. I could introduce you to him. If the two of you got together, you would have such cute babies."

"Yep, our kids would be the perfect multi-culti smoothie."

She laughs. Good, laughs are good.

TEHEHE.

"Sahara that's so funny, but if I were you, I wouldn't say things like that in front of my boyfriend's friend."

"Why?"

"Jokes like that scare men away. My advice is you only bring out the crazy after you've hooked them."

Out of curiosity, I ask, "What does crazy look like for you?"

“Sometimes I have a weird craving for sweet stuff, carbs, and cheese. I can’t say no to BBQ sauce on my Mac & Cheese.”

“BBQ sauce on Mac & Cheese.”

“It’s so good. What’s weird for you?”

“I guess my weird jokes.”

“Your jokes are fun, but you can’t say them in front of a guy you want. You have to be a mild version of yourself.”

“Not too spicy.”

“Exactly, not too spicy. Instead of hot sauce, be barbeque.”

Roommate sits back down on the floor and kicks her legs up in the air, pointing her toes as she rotates her ankles. I stare at her weak chin and unruly eyebrows that are as messy as a deconstructed bird’s nest. She wears yellow socks that are decorated with mini purple lollipops. She flexes her ankle up and down, side to side, and tells me how this boyfriend is a keeper and way better than her boyfriend from the beginning of the quarter. This boyfriend eats vegetables and showers every day. This boyfriend is in a frat but has never roofied a partygoer and sometimes calls out his bros if they’re being rapey. This boyfriend volunteers because it looks good for his future med school applications but also because he enjoys helping others. Last summer, this boyfriend went on a mission trip to Africa. She showed me his profile picture. It’s him with a bunch of smiling African toddlers who didn’t look hungry. I asked her, which country he visited. She couldn’t remember, and it doesn’t matter. The point is that **THIS** boyfriend is a keeper. Just from listening to Roommate I already know the **BOY**friend’s class schedule, his dick size, his eating habits, his siblings’ names, and his study schedule.

What else is there to know? Roommate finds more to tell such as his upcoming teeth

cleaning for his sexy pearly whites. And yes, teeth when straightened right can be so sexy. As she discloses BOYfriend's fear of dentists, I wonder whether Roommate has hidden her crazy the same place she's hidden the damn toilet paper. If the toilet paper and crazy are being stored in the same place, do you think there will be enough room for my crazy too?

How to Bring out the Crazy

Man and Me sit at a diner and split a milkshake. Though Me knows damn well she wants a double bacon cheeseburger, her own milkshake, and chill cheese fries, her and Man aren't official, so she is still in the stage of splitting food and pretending she's not hungry. Me wears a sweater with only the top button unbuttoned, a poodle skirt, and ballerina flats. Her hair is straightened and slicked to the side. Whenever she stops speaking her face jumps back into that warm Chelsea smile.

Man: Hey, so I was wondering do you want to be my girl?

Me smiles even wider. Her eyes become even brighter.

Me: Are you sure?

Man: Yes, you're so low maintenance and you're always there for me. I would be a fool not to lock you down.

Me grabs Man's hand. The rest of the diner dims. A spotlight appears on them.

Me: I'm so happy. I can finally show it to you.

Man: Show me what?

Me leaves and goes backstage. She returns and is dragging a giant yellow drum that has the letters "LP" etched into the center. The sounds of the drum scraping against the floor echo throughout the stage. Me's outfit has changed. She's wearing stained sweats. As she is dragging the drum, her wig falls off, revealing her wig cap. Man looks confused.

Me: Look inside.

Man peers into the drum and inside of it, he hears cackles.

Man: Is that all you?

Black slime erupts from the drum and splatters him in the face. The slime burns craters into his skin. He covers his face while he screams in agony.

Me: No baby, she's part of us.

Laugh track plays "aww" in the background. Panicking, Man looks around and then darts off stage. He's so afraid that he's tripping over his feet. Laugh track changes to the same cackles that were heard inside the drum. Me puts her wig back on goes off stage to redress in her sweater and poodle skirt.

TEHEHE.

XXII. White Oprah Cont.

A few days later NCP emails me, informing me that I've failed my exam and she wants to meet with me during office hours. Our meeting time is set. I want to text ROD, but I'm afraid of her response. This is a new phase of our friendship. We're not living in jokes, eating binges, or sarcastic complaints about this university. We're living in a land of high stakes founded on continuous I'm sorry because I'm fucking things up. This friendship was perfect when we were laughing while I remained in character. Now as I morph into the me that I hate, my time spent with ROD is filled with fear. I am afraid of her knowing about LP and our suicidal tendencies. If she knew about all of me, how could we even still be friends with it? I take out one of C1's sleeping pills. I want to forget the past few days, and perhaps a long nap will reset my brain. Before I can pop one of the pills in my mouth, Roommate enters. She sees my face and takes out one of her headphones.

"What's wrong?"

"I didn't do well on an exam."

She apologizes and gives me a partial hug. While we are hugging, I listen to Miley Cyrus.⁸⁰ Roommate tells me that the only way to cope with bad grades are through dates and sex. After she finishes any test or paper, her and BOYfriend have a date night and then romp session.⁸¹ She advises that I do the same.

I tell her, "I probably won't."

⁸⁰ She's probably listening to her top pop list.

⁸¹ Of course, she has demonstrated her favorite positions while on her yoga mat. And yes, she includes what she sounds like.

“Why not? You normally have the room to yourself.⁸²”

“I’m still a virgin and I am not ready to date right now.”

“Wait, how? Don’t be self-conscious. Your body type is so in right now.”

“I just haven’t.”

“We need to fix this. You don’t understand what you’re missing. This month we’ll find you someone.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“What do you mean? Everyone wants someone. Plus, this campus has so many rich boys to pick from. Maybe if you find someone, you’ll stop being so sad.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Wait, you know what would be funny, we could auction off your virginity. I heard a story of this girl who did it and she made so much money.”

“That would be hilarious.”

“Right, but seriously let’s make you some money, then you’ll definitely forget about midterms and anything else making you sad.”

Roommate rests her case and then leaves for date night.

⁸² Then why is there never any toilet paper here?

How to Sell Black Virginity

Me stands on top of a wooden auction block and is hidden behind a red curtain. She is naked. Her body is oiled. Her face has pink blush on her cheeks, forehead, and eyelids. Her lips are painted with pink lipstick. Her hair is styled like 1959 Barbie. Her eyes are wide because Roommate has ordered her not to blink.

Roommate stands by the red curtain. Her blonde ponytail is hidden under a black top hat, and she wears a black tuxedo. In front of Roommate is a crowd of four white men. Their right hands are auction cards. In their left hands, they hold tumblers filled with brandy. The group of men wear 80s power suits and top hats that are coated with mercury. Their eyes are glassed.

Roommate: Come one, come all. Come with your throbbing wallets. Come to have a taste of chocolate. Come to meet a girl so exotic that her very own kin named her Sahara.

Roommate pulls away the red curtains. Me stares at the men who gaze at her body.

Men: Turn her around.

Roommate grabs Me and turns her around, bends Me forward, smacks her ass, and then winks at Men. Me is turned back around. She still isn't blinking.

Roommate: Never been with a Black girl before, well now is your chance. Don't worry we won't tell about your little adventure.

Men: *(in a chorus)* Hot, tuh ta, ta, tot. She's no Beyoncé, but we'll take a bite.

Men laugh.

First Man: Look at that ass! It alone is a goddess of love.

Men cackle. Me remains still. Her eyes begin to burn.

Second Man: If she wasn't so dark, then I would date her.

Men mumble in agreement then they drink from their tumblers.

Third Man: If my grandfather saw that ass or even those tits, there is no way he would still say nigger.

The cohort of men laugh even louder. Roommate laughs along with them. Tears drip from Me's eyes. Roommate notices and from her pocket brings out a new set of eyes to quickly replace the watering ones.

Roommate: Shall we start the bidding? Let's start at one date.

First Man: One date.

Second Man: One date and a night cap at my apartment.

Third Man: Two dates and a movie night at my apartment.

Fourth Man: Three Dates and that is the highest I will go.

Third Man: Four Dates, a nightcap, one present of her choosing, and four months of dating.

Roommate: (*ecstatic*) Well then, we'll stop the bidding there unless someone wants to outbid. (*None of the men raise their auction cards. They grumble.*) Sir come get your winnings.

Third Man: (*Carries Me on his back.*) Hot, tuh ta, ta, tot! I shan't experience this by myself.

(*Third Man sets Me down in front of the other men. Third man's right hand is now a bucket to collect money.*) Kind gentlemen, I only ask that you leave that ass for me.

Men release the tumblers. The glass shatters on the floor. One by one, they take their favorite parts. First Man takes Me's tits. Second Man takes Me's lips. The Fourth and final Man takes Me's naughty bits.



sister, keep getting bigger
and bigger cause that baby.

got switches for legs
and arms and got a paper chest
sister, are you smacking on me
while i' m sleeping?

156

girl, you better stop

XXIII. Sex Talk

Despite Roommate's beliefs, I'm 87% sure that I am not sexually repressed. Since Roommate is always gone, I can rub one out whenever I feel the need. For me, having you time is better than with someone else. Let's imagine for a moment, if I ended up having sex with someone like me. Both of our funky selves would stay in bed, cry, then fuck, cryeat snacks, and then fuck again. Eventually, our joint smells would cause the dorm to be evacuated, quarantined, then demolished. Bed Buddy and I wouldn't care about the evacuation because we would be too depressed to get up from the bed after hearing the revving of the demolition truck.

... / ...

After puberty, Mother and daughter time turned into horror stories about why you need to keep your energy above your waistline. Saturday mornings while brothers were away learning Igbo from UB⁸³, Mother and I made meat pies, plantains, moimoi, black eyed peas, and puff puffs. As she kneaded the dough, she told scripted stories. The content was either from Oprah specials or her life.

Here's a story: one of Mother's neighborhood friends was seeing this boy and one-night Mother's friend was supposed to stay over; however, Mother's friend got called into work the late-night shift at the hospice center.

Always during the mid-part of the story, Mother took a dramatic pause, and I stopped what I was doing—normally the dishes—and turned around and processed her story telling face. No smile, eyebrows arched upward. Eyes pained but also livened by the lessons she was about to tell. Body wrapped in a green and orange wrapper that no matter how many times she washed

⁸³ Uncle Bigot

smelled like fried turkey.

The dramatic pause ends and so does my processing. She returned to the story.

The next day Mother's friend saw the boy's face and the two other women's faces on the news. Headline read, "Shooting in East Side Apartment Complex." Turns out the boy's main girlfriend came home and saw the boy in bed with another woman. The girlfriend killed the boy, the other woman, and then herself before the police arrived.

After the first story finished. We moved onto preparing the next part of the meal. As we peeled and cut the plantains into ovals, we moved into another story.

Second story, while in school to become a paralegal Mother made friends with the secretary. Everyone, including the men, called her Sugar because she was so sweet. She could stop a toddler's tantrum with just a smile, hug, and piece of hard candy; however, Sugar's husband hated the attention people gave her. He was not used to it. Before he was injured while working in a Chrysler factory, Sugar stayed at home and waiting on her husband. When he was no longer able to work, she got a job working as a secretary.

Though Sugar had friends who had friends who would fly her to the moon, wait for her to do whatever she needed to do, and then fly her back, it was not the type of love she wanted. She needed straight romance, a man to share her life with.

Once Sugar started working, her husband raised hell. Told her that she was not cooking right and was looking raggedy. Told her that the people at her office were not her friends and because she was abandoning him, he no longer believed she loved him.

Sugar told Mother and Mother said that she needed leave him, but Sugar was not willing leave a man she loved. One day Sugar did not show up for work and everyone became concerned. Turned out, Sugar had a massive stroke. She was only 43. Her husband left her,

saying that he still wanted to keep living his life. After the stroke, Sugar could not smile anymore.

All the Black women in the office pulled together their money and sent Sugar to the best adult care facility in the city. Still for every holiday, Mother sends cards to her.

By the end of the second story. The food was ready. Mother sat at the kitchen table and lit her Saturday cigarette. She asked, “What would have happened if these women left these men alone?”

She took another puff of her cigarette, and before Father and brothers arrived, she told me to remember that men aren’t shit. I have to protect myself above everything else because they never will be strong enough to love all of you.

Honestly, the specials worked. I’m terrified of anything romantic or sexual that goes beyond kissing. There’s no better form of birth control than my depression. It’s so good that currently I’m in talks with the FDA to synthesize it into the next big contraceptive. The only hang up is that the FDA is a little worried about the severity of the side effects.

And although my down-under is a cobwebbed icebox hidden behind a tundra of bushes, don’t think for a moment that I don’t know what I want. My Dear Reader, let’s travel back in time to 2008. I’m attending Christ, The Beholder, Academy, and am still repenting for past, present, and future sins. We are a year away from our first Black president, the song “Low” is teaching middle schoolers everywhere grinding 101, but most importantly, I’ve just seen my first pair of good boobs inside the girl’s locker room, and no, I wasn’t creeping or peeping.

... .-- . . -.. -.. / - / - . .-

The third coolest girl in middle school stood on top of a bench. Her painted purple toes danced on the locker room’s orange thermoplastic bench as she announced, “Look, I have

something to tell you.” Everyone gathered around her. After all, she was Cool Girl #3, the one who told all of us the glory of Victoria Secret between the passing periods. As we gazed up at our idol, she only wore her baggy gray gym shorts that were rolled up against her waist and a brown pushup bra that matched her skin. She shouted out, “I’m a video hoe!” then ripped off her bra and shook her boobs up and down, left to right, backward and forward as she popped her body. Everyone in the locker room began giggling and screaming “eww” and “gross” while playfully throwing shirts in CG #3’s direction. I joined in, tossing a sock toward her left boob while my body butterflied with joy.

School ended, I returned home and then retreated into the basement. There, I hid in the storage den as I reimagined CG #3 and felt the butterflies. From Sara Bareilles, I learned what the infamous butterflies in a body meant. I knew my attraction to girls was another secret that would now stand behind my depression. It would become the second truth that I feared to tell Mother and Father. While in this panic of my new discovery, I tripped into a broken bookcase, and from it fell a leather bible. After I picked it up, a polaroid of my Aunt kissing a woman slipped out from the New Testament. In the picture, she is alive with love. My Aunt has a healthy head full of dreads, and the wideness of her smile places her high cheekbones just below her eyes. I placed the picture on my heart, and the butterflies returned. Again, I knew what they meant, my Aunt and I were the same, and everything would be okay.

Though I knew this truth about me and comforted myself with the image of my Aunt, I pretended it wasn’t there until it became undeniable. After the whirlwind romance with Drummer Boy, I clung to HSBF for support, and it wasn’t till a routine porn search during the end of sophomore year that I fully connected the dots as to why I secretly hated HSBF for having a boyfriend. When she told me she loved him, we cried together, my tears weren’t ones of

mutual joy. Even after I knew this truth, I still pretended. High school me had a crush on every boy in my class. I figured that if I was always in a state of unrequited love, then I wouldn't have to think about where I stood on the Kinsey scale.

When I started college, some things became easier. Mother and Father weren't around, and I found friends with whom I did not have to pretend. At the beginning of my freedom, I kissed every person that said *hey* in the right tone; however, by the end of the night, I never could hold onto the warmth of their kisses. I was left cold and fixating on the void that swallows every essence of me. Now, when I kiss, I'm searching for an answer to my prayers. This prayer which I know is wrong, but still cannot deny is that I'll be able to spread the sadness that germinates inside of me just so I can know that I'm not alone.

XXIV. Office Hours

Naughty Cell Professor sits in front of her computer, and I'm across from her not knowing what amount terrified is appropriate for this situation. I'm at my baseline threat level of orange. I'm orange when walking on campus, when waiting on food in the dining hall, when sitting in class. On campus while I am bottle necked with anxiety, I'm never present enough to see whether the other students are orange, blue, or an excited pink as they are trapped in their own color spectrum of fear and pain. NCP hasn't started speaking. She keeps staring at her computer while scratching her mottled arms that are the color of bruised peaches. Next to her are crushed tin cans of sparkling water.

Did she have to drink all those in preparation for this meeting? Is this threat level red? Fuck, it is. Whatever you do, don't cry. Last year, you cried while in office hours for (In)Humane and crying got you the professor's Chipotle napkins to blow your nose, and an email from the professor saying, *I don't respond to emotional manipulation*. This statement was then followed with, *if you truly are feeling "unwell," the University offers counseling. I hear it's decent*. Lesson learned, and there are no napkins here. Whatever you do, don't cry.

NCP asserts, "You failed the exam."

"Sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? Many students fail exams. I watched you while you were taking the test. You're not good at test taking, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Tests are a major part of your grade in my class."

“I can withdraw from your class before finals.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

NCP then pulls up my discussion post about naughty scientists. She silently reads through the comments she’s made in the margins and then scrolls down to my grade. It reads, 90/100.

She asks, “Did you work with anyone in the class?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t find anyone.”

“You couldn’t find anyone,” she repeats. She’s pressing for the answer, *no one wanted to work with me*, but I refuse to give it to her. I don’t want to look completely pathetic.

I repeat, “I couldn’t find anyone.”

“You worked alone and still went over the word count.”

“I did. Sorry.”

“Please stop apologizing.”

“Okay.”

“Sahara, I’m giving you the following option because your discussion post was one of the best I’ve read. I’ll have your post count as part of your midterm, and I’ll raise your midterm grade to a 70. Instead of a test, your final will be a 15-page research paper on the topic of naughty scientists. How does this sound?”

I stutter out, “Good.”⁸⁴

“Do well on the paper and you might leave this class with a B. Don’t tell the other

⁸⁴ Is this a trap or are we now at threat level blue?

students I am giving you this option. The last thing I need is more of their complaints. If other students in the class find out, then you will take the final along with them.” NCP’s phone begins ringing. While on it, she tells me that she’ll email me more details about the final. She motions me toward the door. I thank NCP and rush out before she has time to change her mind. After exiting the office, I see C1 in her traditional Nigerian garb talking with SL.⁸⁵ She waves me over.

-. --- / .. /- - - /-. ..--..

“Sahara, you’re alive.”

“Barely.”

“Funny. SL and I are heading to an event for international students, and then are going to the Dorian. Come! The bartender there keeps asking about you.”

“I can’t. I have this Friendsgiving thing, and then have to start studying for finals.”

“Friendsgiving. Cute.”

Anger flickers in C1’s eyes. I assume ignoring all her text messages and passing on hanging out with her has started our cold war. In the ensuing silence, I look for any compliment to give. I tell C1 that her dress is beautiful even though I think the pattern of orange horses and gold billows against a hot pink background is country. After my compliment, she smiles.⁸⁶

“I know. I had the family seamstress make it for today’s event. Come with us, so I don’t have to be the only half African there.”

SL who is wearing a kilt and has enough leg hair for a set cornrows on each limb says, “Sahara, C1 tells me you’re part African too. What’s your African name?”

“My what?”

⁸⁵ Student Liver. If confused, see Party section.

⁸⁶ Question: How during my last months on earth did I end up becoming friend with season 1 Whitley Gilbert? Am I really that desperate for fun?
Answer: Yes.

“C1 told me all Africans have an African name so what’s yours?”

“It’s Akata” is C1’s response for me.

“Akata⁸⁷, cool.” SL says. He repeats “Akata” and draws out the ending a.

As his breath lingers on the letter, I quickly interject, “It’s Kesandu.”

C1 replies, “That doesn’t even sound like a Nigerian name. SL, that’s why her African name is Akata. Akata, you should come to the event and try some Nigerian food.”

“I’ve had it before.”

“Probably made by an American. It isn’t the same. Come on Akata, come with us and try some real African food.”

“I’m good.”

C1 and her lapdog, SL leave. While they walk away, I hear him saying “Akata.” He keeps lingering on that fucking a.

⁸⁷ *Akata*, I haven’t heard that shit since a Yam festival in middle school. While sitting at a crowded table with Carlo Rossi and Ata din din stained white linen, UB kept bumping my seat as he tried to squeeze through to get to the dance floor. Irritated from the seat bumping, I looked up to him, and UB says while holding two plastic clear cups filled with brandy, “Akata, move!”

XXV. Giving Friends

Dear First Year, if you survive midterms and elect to still be alive, then you'll be invited to a thing called Friendsgiving. Regardless of race or gender, most likely the food will be bad. College students are over studied, nourished on soylent, and generally broke unless they're a—part of the International Elite

or

b—a Donor Kid.

All this translates into cheap Chinese takeout, \$4.93 Rhubarb pies the size of saucers that are under baked and a day away from expiring, tubs of dried out mountainous hummus, wilted celery, and of course, no meat because it's too expensive or everyone is a cruelty, free vegan or vegetarian. Though all of this sounds unappetizing go to Friendsgiving. It's time away from studying. Maybe you'll be blessed and find someone like Mariah's partner. They are a chef who refuses to let anyone cook in their kitchen.

--- -. .- -. -- --. / -... .-

ROD and I walk to the address Mariah gave us, and as we make the trek, my face is buried in Mother's green infinity scarf that somehow still smells like her Rare Diamonds perfume. During this walk, this once eye-roll inducing smell is comforting and occupies both my nose and mind with memories of Mother spraying her perfume on the sides of her neck before she began carefully fixing her sheer Q+ work stockings. I use my picturing of Mother as an excuse not to talk to ROD. I need to keep this distance between us because I'm scared of what else outside of my scars she might see if she becomes even closer to me.

.-.- - / -. --- / -. -- --- ..- / -- . .- -.

ROD attempts to spark a conversation with, “How is your week going?”

“Good. Yours?”

“Good. I have my final date for my tattoo appointment. Are you still willing to go with me?”

“Of course! Sorry, I’ve been a mess, but things are gonna even out soon.”

“Let me know when you’re ready to talk about your sc—”

“I will. I need some time though.”

For the rest of the walk, our mouths collect more words to share with one another. We talk of home and upcoming finals. ROD is a History major with a minor in Public Policy, meaning that after her four finals her hands will detach from her wrists and then file for divorce, stating irreconcilable differences as the cause. I tell her in a whisper about NCP’s agreement with me, and she clutches my arm in excitement. Her sudden move causes both of us to lose our balance, and almost fall onto the ground, which is a mucous of mud, snow, and frost. After a game of slip and slide, we regain our balance, then laugh. Our laughter walks with us to Mariah’s partner’s apartment. Inside, we see Mariah wrapped in a lilac blanket while she drinks tea. She violently coughs. The tea spills, seeping into her blanketed lap. Mariah croaks, “I’m so happy both of you made it. I’m a little sick, but don’t worry, I’m sure I’m not contagious.”

With the blanket still wrapped around her, Mariah gives us a tour of the apartment. First, she shows us the sun room with two wicker benches that are across from one another. Stacked on each bench is ROYGBIV collection of blankets and pillows that are so massive even the Pea Princess couldn’t tell if a comet was tucked at the bottom. Next on the tour is Mariah’s partner’s room, and it is the neatest room that I’ve ever seen in my collegiate career. The bed is made and even has a skirt. The floor is vacuumed and standing on top of it are a polished desk and a

bookcase filled with Econ books. The best part of the room is the center wall. Filling the wall are polaroid pictures of them and Mariah on vacation together or hosting dinners. We exit the room and we see Mariah's partner. They're far into the oven as they are checking on the turkey. They're so far in that I'm worried their chestnut colored skin will roast in that open fire.

Mariah warns her partner, "Don't get that far into the oven while you're checking the turkey or else you will cook off your eyebrows." ROD and I's stare at each other with confusion. "Every day, they put coconut oil on their eyebrows to keep them thick."

"Who are they talking to?" ROD asks.

"Their aunt in Houston. She's the only person that they'll listen to when it comes to cook—" Mariah stops speaking and breaks into a fit of rattling coughs. ROD and I each take a step forward even though we're not sure how to help.

We ask her, "Do you need anything?"

"No, I just need to catch my breath." She takes some moments to breathe and then asks me, "How are you feeling about finals?"

"Fine, I need to lock myself in the library and hope they're selling catheters in the café."

Mariah laughs, and my mind rests in her smile. She responds, "Let's not break out the catheters and bedpans until your fourth year."

.. / .- . . - .-.. -.- / .- - - .- .-.. -..

We all sit down at the table, and before we commence feasting, Mariah wants us all to say thanks to whatever we believe in. Mariah thanks TC for this meal and is thankful that her thesis cohort actually gave helpful comments. ROD is thankful that her mother and sisters aren't visiting before finals. TC thanks their aunt for helping with the turkey. Before saying amen, they toss in an extra prayer for them to find a non-soul crushing consulting job before graduation. By the time it is my turn, my stomach grumbles. I quickly spit out that I'm grateful for everyone at

the table and I reach to start carving the turkey, before my hand can touch the knife, TC jumps up and screams wait. Everyone moves away from their seat backing and looks at TC, confused. They respond, “I didn’t take pictures.”

Mariah rolls her eyes and ROD and I relax back in our chairs. TC records a video and during the recording, they tell us to say something to remember this moment forever.

Mariah asks the camera, “Why do you have to record everything?”

TC responds, “We need multiple ways of remembering.”

“I’m here, you’re here, Sahara’s here, ROD’s here. We’re not going anywhere, and we’re not going to forget everything.”

“When you’re old and can’t remember, you’ll thank me for this.”

I see a response forming on Mariah’s lips, but her coughs and words don’t get the memo and are too busy fighting for space in her throat. Her coughs win, and she launches into another fit. TC puts down their phone and pats Mariah’s back. After the fit ends, TC serves us food. The portion sizes they give us are Midwest medium, which convert to West Coast extra-large or an East Coast large.

As they are pouring soup into Mariah’s cup, they say to her, “You need to go to the doctor.”

“I don’t trust doctors. They never remember my allergies or my medications.”

TC responds, “Doctors are terrible, but you need to go. There are some things that mint tea, soup, and saging your body can’t cure.”

TC kisses Mariah’s forehead and she agrees to visit the doctor. Mariah and TC’s love fill the room, and though I know they’re in love with one another, there’s a part of me, which grows

every time I see her, and it wishes for a moment,⁸⁸ they would no longer solely love each other, and Mariah and I would have a chance. To distract myself from their love, I eat. When guilt rises, I tell myself again and again—I can love something even if it’s only this food. I say this until the heaps of food are just small specks that my fork scrapes to get.

-.-- ..-- --

We finish eating and break out our Tupperware for leftovers. Everything is packed, including ourselves. While we are stuffed and hushed, ROD yawns. The room is so quiet we are able to hear the spit splitting from the bottom and roof of her mouth.

“I can’t deal with this silence anymore.” TC pauses as they take out their phone. “Tell the camera what you’re grateful for.”

There is another long break of silence. Eventually Mariah has enough room to take a bite of TC’s question. “I am grateful to meet your parents over break and to finish my thesis.”

“I’m grateful that my mom has finally stopped posting on my wall.” ROD says as she blows a stream of air to cool the tea filling her Maxine Waters mug. We can’t help but laugh. ROD’s mother is the busiest parent we’ve seen in the dorm, and I have my suspicions that everyone on the floor looks forward to her visits.

The first event that solidified ROD and her Mother in dorm folklore occurred during freshman orientation. Day two of move in, ROD’s mother found a condom wrapper in ROD’s jacket, and following this discovery was a screaming match. The RA at the time was too scared to interject and just watched. ROD and her mother’s fight ended with ROD’s mother tearfully crying and praying. She said if ROD’s father were alive today, he would be ashamed. She left the dorm, and ROD needed a friend. She called the guy she met last night, and they started having

⁸⁸ A moment that I would turn into a lifetime.

sex on the dorm room floor.⁸⁹ Before his second pump, ROD started crying. Not knowing what to do, he slipped out of her and then the room. Fast forward to the third week of first quarter, ROD, before the start of her discussion section, overheard the guy telling any listening ear that she cried during sex. ROD left the discussion section early and cried in the bathroom. After suffering from my usual bout of anxiety shits, I exited the bathroom stall, and I ran into her mid ugly cry. My gut reaction was to hug her even with the snot that bubbled out her nose. She told me everything that happened. I convinced her to call her mother once she was ready. That day in the bathroom, we exchanged numbers, and decided we were friends for life. ROD called her mother that night, and they apologized to one another. Her mother promised ROD that her father is looking proudly down at her. ROD's mother confessed her leaving for college reminded her of the day ROD's father died. With the help of the other Korean church mothers, YouTube, and her four little sisters, ROD and her mother have a better understanding of one another. Now whenever ROD's mother visits, she brings Jewel Osco bags filled with male and female condoms, a protection prayer, and canned red beans.

After thinking of ROD and her mother, I answer, "I'm grateful for moments like this."

TC stops recording and leaves for the kitchen to retrieve the dessert. They bring out a chocolate cake that reads, "Happy Friendsgiving" in gold lettering. I offer to cut it, and as I serve everyone, I know I do not belong here with all this love. When I am in these moments of love and happiness, LP reminds me they do not belong to me and cannot be turned into a lifetime. I am only a voyeur.

⁸⁹ ROD and her mother didn't have time to pick up the bedding from the college bookstore. The next best option was the floor blanketed by sweaters.

XXVI. Postscript

In case you're wondering, yes, I still hate C1's mouth for saying Akata but she's C1 and has connections for anything my heart desires, and it's pit pattering for an end of Fall quarter celebration. In her apartment, the fun department, she shakes a cocktail and we don't bring up Dorian or Akata. I hear the ice, the vodka, and the cranberry juice sloshing in the stainless-steel. She's smiling. Her teeth, perfect. There's music playing, but I'm too drunk to tell the song. She's cha-cha'ing side to side, and then back and forth. She pours me my drink and some of it lands on the glass table. C1 gets on her knees and licks it up. She then cuts two lines with her credit card and who cares what it is. Lean in. She goes first, then me. We rub the excess into our gums. She's shaking another cocktail. The sounds of the ice, the vodka, and the cranberry sloshing rings my ears like church bells. Praise, Him!

C1's wearing a velvet robe embroidered with peach orchids. The robe is a *I'm sorry gift* from BO⁹⁰, and he's begging for a picture of her in it. I snap pictures. Every third shot, she changes her pose. For the last set of photos, she opens her robe. I see bruises. She looks at me and I know to delete that photo. In it, her picturesque body is an Albright painting. She's a skeleton with light brown and purple flesh painted over it. She sits next to me and flips through the photos, trying to decide which one is the best. I tell her that she looks beautiful in all of them. She agrees.

"Sahara, I wish was different."

"How?"

"I wish I wasn't a student, and free to go wherever."

⁹⁰ Bar Owner

“Same.” I say as I drink more from my glass.

“BO wants to take me abroad spring quarter. I’m tempted to go.” She stares at herself in the mirror and tries to pat down her leave out that is as dry as cracked pieces of brittle. She returns back to the couch and whenever we sit on couches together, she speaks so close it feels as if she’s speaking into my eyes. “Sahara, we’re friends, right? Come with me spring quarter. We can make it an abroad independent study.” Before I can respond, she cuts more lines, and watching her cut is more important and becomes my response. The lines are set. This time I go first, and then her, and together we rub the excess into our gums, again, and sure, I think we are friends—we’re both at this school, and we both have unsaid issues, and we’re both Black, and women, and that’s all you need for friendship, right? C1 and I are still friends, we need each other, we’re the best of friends, better friends than Gale and Oprah and what if C1 and I are the next Gale and Oprah, and cutting lines is one of our favorite things because this feels right, I’m celebrating and feeling good, and I feel the taste of it in the back of my throat, and the taste is bitter and chalky, I’m ready for another go, but C1’s still talking about fucking BO and if I were 60 pounds lighter I might have a BO, and if I keep hanging with C1, I’ll probably get a BO too, and I’ll call him BO2, while I’m fantasizing about my vacation with BO2, C1 announces, “Together, we can leave the Midwest. This place is a clogged pore filled with cheese, cold weather, and fat people.” This bitch knows I’m from the Midwest—fuck her, fuck me, but not the coke or the vodka cranberries, that’s just unsanitary. Oh God, need a break, feeling a little too alive right now, LP is waking up, saying things I don’t want to hear, right now is honorable, respectable and a good, proper celebration, I’m having fun like when Father dances with his friends at his celebrations. Relax, don’t ruin it with these thoughts. Light a Menthol cigarette and pass it to C1, once in her hands, she stubs it out, opens it, uses the tobacco for a spliff, maybe

she's feeling a little too alive as well, she shakes another cocktail so fast, no too fast, yes so fast that my ears can't keep up with the rhythm inside the stainless steel, and as she shakes it, she tells me, "When you come with me abroad, we will have nights like this every single night." LP is completely awake and she's telling me she loves C1, and I'm starting to like C1 again, and LP knows that I'm worried about affording an abroad trip, but she reminds me that finances don't matter when you're convinced you should be dead. What the fuck LP, you know you can't say things like that especially when I'm this high that thought will crawl onto my pillow, and since I'll be too fucked up to even put on a bonnet, that thought will comb through my braids, walk into my ears, and leave its imprints on every coil of my brain, and while inside that thought will be sentences long, making me want to crack open the sentences' marrow, and slurp up whatever truth is inside, yes, I will slurp and swallow everything, and as I'm filling myself up, the truth will sink through all levels of my body until it reaches six feet under.

APRIL 1994 \$2

EBO

Hammer's Hilltop Mansion

Star Moves Into
\$20 Million Home

NEW AIDS SCARE FOR
HOMOSEXUALS:

The Increasing Threat
To Black Women

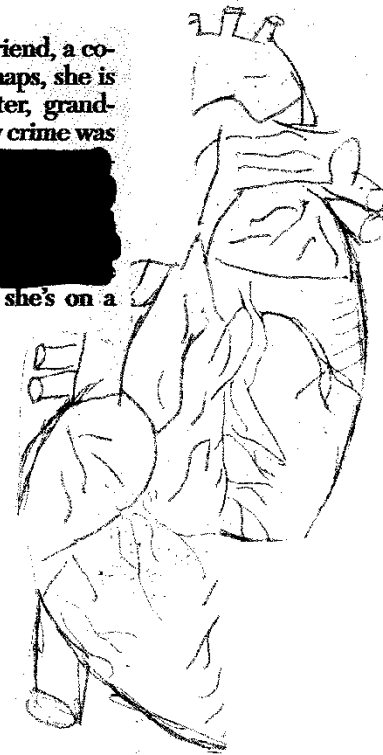
YOU know her. She is a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor. Perhaps, she is your mother, daughter, sister, grandmother, or an aunt. Her only crime was that she loved

death watch.

Even when the epidemic began forcing the issue of Black bisexuality out into the open, the stereotype rooted in the minds of many heterosexuals was slow to transform.

"Whether [we're] drug addicts or alcoholics or prostitutes or moms or grand-moms or teenagers, we're all at risk. If

Now she's on a



Even when the epidemic began forcing the issue of Black bisexuality out into the open, the stereotype rooted in the minds of many heterosexuals was slow to transform.

INVENTORS!

Can you patent and profit from your ideas?
Call AMERICAN INVENTORS CORPORATION
for free information.
Serving inventors since 1975.
1-800-338-5656

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK!

Join our satisfied authors in a complete and reliable publishing program. This program includes attractive books, publicity, advertising and quality service since 1959. All subjects are invited! Send for a FREE manuscript report & copy of *How To Publish Your Book*.

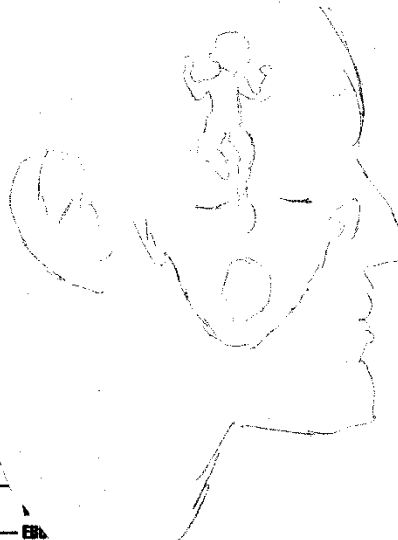
CARLTON PRESS 11 W. 32nd St. Dept. EBD
New York, NY 10001

SONGS AND POEMS NEEDED

★ TO BE SET TO MUSIC ★
Your Songs or Poems may
EARN MONEY FOR YOU
Send Poems or Songs for Free Examination!
Hollywood Artists
6000 Sunset Bl., Studio 208 A, Hollywood, CA 90028

EBD

4-
6



6
66
76
78

80 — EBD
82 — City. Love magazine
86 — EBDNY files
88 — Painting By Bart



sister,
even though
that baby got your loud mouth
if i could
i would
hold her forever

XXVII. Views

Crashed from last night's high, I arrive late to the train station and run toward my gate. I board seconds away from last call. In the window seat, I catch the views of the Midwest. Abandoned factories with shattered windows, empty fields of dried grass, and ranch homes with chipping and falling gutters. Sitting next me is a woman whose snores will not stop falling out of her. After she wakes up, her new noise is flirting into the phone. To try and get comfortable, I lean my seat back, but the woman behind me who has the habit of pacing up and down our train aisle while wearing a white hotel robe and no socks or shoes, exposing her toenails that are the color of graphite, says it's rude for me to lean MY seat back. I sit up straight and return to counting the abandoned factories or imagine running up the landfills.

-. . - - - . / - - - . - - - / - - .

I arrive in Novi and outside of the train station, I see Mother smoking her Saturday cigarette even though it's Tuesday. When she sees me, she uncrooks her wig and flings her cigarette into a pile of snow. I enter the car and Mother attempts to conceal the smell of smoke. She sprays her Rare Diamonds perfume on the sides of her neck and then her wig. Next, she sprays dollar store air freshener that's the scent of cinnamon apples and lavender potpourri. I watch the mist fall. Some dampens my right hand and creates a constellation like the moles on C1's body. Mother tosses the air freshener to the back seat and passes the perfume for me to put in the glove box.

As I close the box, she tells me, "You don't look good."

I remind her that I just survived finals. She kisses my cheek and tells me she'll try and let me rest, but she needs help preparing the house for company.

"What do you need help with?"

“Cooking and cleaning.”

“Which uncle is coming?”

“UB.”

After she tells me that UB⁹¹ is visiting, I’m ready to surrender my Winter break and board the train back to school.

“Why does he have to visit?”

“Because your father wanted to see him.”

“He’s an ass.”

“Watch your mouth in front of me. I don’t care what school you’re going to. You still don’t cuss in front of me.”

“Mom, he’s a terrible person.”

“I know, but he’s still your uncle, and did a lot for your Father while they were growing up. Show some respect.”

I roll my eyes. Mother drives with one hand as she twists the radio knob, searching for the right station. She lands on 92.3 FM. Throwback R&B plays in the background as we drive through the snow. Outside of the stores that Mother and I shopped at throughout middle and high school are laminated signs⁹² that read *going out of business*. My childhood church is now an empty, gated lot with plastic signs that read *SOLD*. Every visit back home, I’m forced to accept

⁹¹ Key Facts of UB:

- When this uncle found out Father was going to marry a Black American, he set Father up on three dates with good, strong Nigerian women who would give him pure Nigerian children.
- When this uncle discovered Father’s first child was a girl, he told him that an African woman would’ve given him a boy.
- When this uncle visits, he uses his presence as an opportunity to tell me that a fat woman is not a beautiful woman.

⁹² After a 2010 initiative mandated during an ill attended town hall meeting, *going out of business* or *closing soon* signs are required to be in bright colors. People who attended the town hall meeting thought that colorful signs could try and bring a little joy to the business owners and soon to be former customers. After all, red is such a harsh color, and then with all those red ledgers, why also have red signs?

parts of my childhood are no longer here because home doesn't look like home, and I wonder when it will cease feeling like it.

I ask Mother, "What happened to Mica's Pizza Place?"

"To where?"

"The diner we always went to on Sundays?"

She turns the steering wheel, not checking for oncoming traffic. She replies, "That's been closed for over a year. Those health code violations finally caught up with them."

"I really liked that place. They had the best French fries."

"You and your brothers loved that place. Your father and I hated it, but it was the only way to get you three to go to church."

"Father never came to the restaurant with us."

"Because he couldn't stand that place."

"No, he always chose to get lunch with UB instead of us."

"Your father did come with us."

"No, he never did."

Mother slams on the brakes, trying not to run a light that "magically" turned from green to red. After being thrown into my seat, I glare at her.

"Sahara stop talking back. I need to concentrate on driving."

Only constant on this drive back home is Mother's bad driving skills and her denial of Father's absence in our home. Everything else is different. Even Mother isn't the same. I see the gray hair poking out of her forearms. She looks shorter while in driver's seats and she squints her eyes more when she uncharacteristically does look for oncoming traffic. The gray hairs and her squinting eyes remind me that she is aging. One day, I will return home and she will not be there.

One day, a visit back home will be my last. Home, along with me, Brother, 1, 2, and Father will all disappear, and that's all okay. It's just a matter of who, what, and which order. I want to tell her this, but I know I should remain quiet. In this household, children especially if they are girls, should be seen and not heard.

... ..

At home, Brother 1 and 2 are fighting over the remote. Brother 1 sits on top of Brother 2 calmly saying, "We're gonna watch The Dark Knight Rises or else I'm breaking the remote."

Brother 2 is screaming that he can't breathe and would rather die than watch "The Dark Knight Rises," for a fourth time. It's his turn for the TV and he wants to watch "The Avengers." Mother scolds them⁹³ and Brother 1 stops sitting on Brother 2 to hug me. The hug is quick, not too long because the TV is still up for grabs. For the moment, Brother 2 has forgotten about the TV. He bounces around me, asking question after question.

"Did Mom tell you that I'm auditioning for the step team? I'm gonna be the Nigerian James Brown."

"Wow, the Nigerian James Brown, I haven't heard that one before." Brother 2 shows off his splits. I look down at Brother 2's hair. Oh Lord, his line is uneven. "Who's cutting your hair? They messed it up."

Once back up, he replies, "One of Mommy's friends she met at the thrift store."

"Don't let that friend cut your hair again."

"Okay!" He shouts in Mother's direction, "Mommy, don't let that old lady do my hair anymore. Sahara said she messed it up and the lady smells like booty." Brother 2 shows off his splits for me again, and then practices his moonwalk. "Sahara, did you come back with any

⁹³ Fights for the remote are another constant at home. Normally, Mother is the winner when she tells them to turn on Lifetime or the OWN network, her new favorite.

souvenirs? Did you learn anything cool? Did you already buy our Christmas presents?”

Brother 1 answers, “She’s in college dumb ass. She doesn’t have any money.” Brother 1 pauses the movie to ask, “Do you have any cool party stories?”

“None for a high schooler.”

Brother 1 presses play. Brother 2 laughs. He’s eight and still cute while Brother 1 is sixteen and in his angst. He refuses advice from everything ranging from using JBC oil on his dreads that are the length of chopped fingers, to which AP classes he should take next year. When he is not popping pimples and listening to Tyler the Creator, he’s in his room playing BioShock and planning his escape from home.

While Brother 1 is searching for a snack, Brother 2 changes the movie. Brother 1 notices and they’re back to fighting. Eventually, Brother 1 sits on top of Brother 2, and Brother 2 returns to shouting that he can’t move. While sitting, Brother 1 comments, “College is cool, isn’t? I can’t wait to leave this place.”

I don’t want to destroy Brother 1’s hope of escaping Michigan. He believes college is the closest thing to the American Dream he’ll ever get. I tell him in my best Little Mermaid voice, “It’s a whole new world.” He calls me a weirdo before leaving for his room. Brother 2 jumps up and says he was worried that Brother 1 would’ve farted him to death. He wants me to watch “The Avengers” with him, and though I could write a second thesis about why I hate superhero movies, for Brother 2, I can stop being insufferable for 143 minutes.

.- .- . / -.- --- .. /- . .-..

Before my bum can even settle into our orange couch, which is so stained and patinaed it looks brown, Mother calls me into the kitchen. She needs help picking the greens for tomorrow. Brother 1 and 2 smirk and return to fighting over the remote. I ask Mother why Brother 1 or 2 can’t help. She replies, “Did I ask them? No, I asked you.”

Mother and I sit across from one another. She sees me sitting with my legs spread open, and she instructs me to close them. Instead of asking why, like I have for the last decade, I do as I've been told. From years of arguing, we have learned that with one another, we have to be careful with our gestures and our words. Our eyes, ears, and tongues are prone to pick things apart to fuel disagreements that turn into screaming matches. Mother believes that any form of disagreement is disrespect, but I believe it's genetics. Brother 1 does the same thing, but for him there's the excuse that men will be men. While I pick the greens and feel the graininess of the leaves against my fingers, Mother cuts plantains. She smiles when the song changes to "Give it to Me Baby."

"Your aunt loved this song. She used to wake me by hollering the lyrics to me."

"Was she a good singer?"

"Hell, no. She never could hold a tune. Your grandmother made her mouth along to the songs when we were at church."

My laughter warms the kitchen better than our "do you have heat money?" setting on the thermometer. I reply, "Ma, I'm reading her book."

"What book?"

"The one she wrote before dying."

"Honey, I don't think you can call that thing a book. I love your aunt, but she wasn't all the way there when she was sick, and bless her soul, but she wasn't that good of a writer." She sprinkles more Lawry's onto the cut plantains that sit in a green plastic bowl. "How did you find it?"

"Last summer before leaving for break, I found it while searching for another book in the library's Midwest section of the queer art archive."

“Why were you in that section?”

“Why does that matter?”

“I want to know what brought you to that section.”

“Ma, what are you really asking?”⁹⁴

“I can’t believe it made it all the way to your school. She was so happy on the day of her book signing.⁹⁵ She hadn’t been able to walk for weeks, but on that day, God sent her the energy to get up and walk to the table your Father and I⁹⁶ set up.” Mother stares at me and places her worn hands on my cheek. They smell of Lawry’s and her hands are slimed from the plantains. I press her hand harder into my cheek. She says, “She passed shortly after that day. Kenu,⁹⁷ I hope you never have to experience losing a sibling while you’re young.”

Guilt returns and warms my cheeks. I think about Brother 1 and 2 and their days after my death. I push that thought out of my head. After it’s out and I have the space to think, LP and I agree that Brother 1 and 2 will grow closer, Mother and Father may try and regrow their love, and they still will have 2/3 left. 2/3 is 67%, but in Naija culture, the boys are worth more than the girls. So, this bumps the percentage up to 75. Of course, the logic is faulty, and my actions will be painful for my family, but after hours of listening to LP, I know that this is the best-case scenario for a lingering problem with personal pain that’s festering into permanency.

-.-- --- ..- / -.. --- -. .----. - /- ---. / - --- / -.. --- / -

⁹⁴ I wanted to ask this question, but what happened was a pause. I promise that this is the first lie I’ve said in this thesis. Please, stay with me.

⁹⁵ She says book signing in a tone of disbelief. I could tell her that she’s right in believing it’s not a book, but a zine signing, and then she would ask me about what’s a zine and how do I know about it, and I would tell her it’s part of my queerstory, and she’ll ask your what, and I’ll break it down as queer history, and she’ll ask why are you part of that, and we will reach another impasse in our conversation.

⁹⁶ In her stories of the past, Mother makes sure to include Father. During that time, all they had was each other, and he was more present in the past, than now in the actual present.

⁹⁷ Mother’s nickname for me. When I was four, I asked Mother what my middle name was, she told me, and I struggled to say it and only ended up saying Kenu. Out of frustration, I told her to forget the other name. My new middle name was Kenu.

“Ma, do you still have copies of her book?”

“I might. They’re probably packed into one of the boxes in the basement, but I haven’t touched them since your Father and I left Detroit.”

“Do you think you could find them for me?”

“Why, aren’t you already reading a copy? Sahara, I’ll have to go through all those boxes, and I don’t have energy for that. Just read the one you have.”

“I want to read a family copy.”

“Why? The words will be the same.”

“Ma—”

Mother smacks her lips and responds, “You’re tiring me out. If it’s that important, I’ll search through the boxes, but I’ll need to buy bug bombs for the basement first, and then more trash bags so I can donate the old junk I find.”⁹⁸

I thank Mother with a kiss⁹⁹ and leave for bed.

⁹⁸ Every year around Christmas, Mother goes on a cleaning frenzy. Before New Year’s hits, she drives her white Subaru packed with trash bags filled with clothes that are still on their hangers, books with damaged spines, and shoes that have no pairs. Most donation centers in the area have been warned not to accept anything from Black, White Subaru Mom.

⁹⁹ What do I do with my family’s love? Where do I store it, since I’m unable to hold it within any chambers of myself?



143



XXVIII. UB

Christmas morning after opening presents of socks, ramen, granny panties, black bras probably meant for nursing, and gift cards, I return to my bedroom, and stare at the old “Gorillaz” and “Black Eyes Peas” posters that are on my beige maybe light blue or is it actually gray walls. My room’s draft causes the posters’ untaped corners to dance to imagined beats. I bundle myself with blankets and strategize about where to put my sadness while staring at UB when arrives to the house. As I am trying to figure out the right location for it, I hear Father asking me why I’m back in my room when the family is downstairs.

I return to the family. Mother’s sitting in the family room with Father and she’s listening to Al Greene. Father’s feet are propped up on his ottoman while he reads his latest issue of *The Surgical Digest*. Brother 1 is watching a movie on his phone that’s hidden inside the SAT book he’s holding while Brother 2 is dancing and pretending he’s boogieing down the soul train line.

.. - .----. ... / .- / .-- --- -. -.. .-. ..-. ..- .-. / .-. .. -. .

My mind permanently stages Mother and Father sitting together in the family room. In this room, they are the happiest. They joke with one another about their dead relatives and which ones are in Hell, and Father passes a piece of his orange over to Mother. She cradles the fruit in her hand and then brings it to her lips, savoring the sweetness. When in the family room, Father and I try to periodically talk to one another. He asks how finals went and I tell him that they went well, then I spew out all the random

scientific facts that I can remember.¹⁰⁰ Father looks up from his journal and smiles once his ears hear an interesting fact. Part of him still believes that one night after receiving Gabriel's threatening message, "become a doctor or I'll throw you in a burning bush," I will wake up with a stethoscope in my hand because I've stopped this nonsense and finally decided to become a doctor so I can feed myself.

Father closes his journal and turns on the news.

A toddler was shot by a stray bullet while in her mother's arms. The toddler's mother is crying. She doesn't know how she will afford the funeral and Christmas for her other children. Her segment is cut short for a special holiday update of how to cook a low-fat Santa cake.

Father scoffs at the news, saying that America is gun, gun, gun¹⁰¹ and food, food, food.¹⁰² He says he can't wait to leave this country. Everyone in the family hears this rant at least four times a week. Initially, his rants threatened the family room's happiness. Back when I worshipped the family room, there were days I worried and prayed against these tirades. I was terrified that his rants would unnailed the framed picture day photos and our vintage family portraits. Over time after listening to enough arguments between him and Mother about his future, we became habituated to his rants. Now the rants, like Brother 1 and 2 fighting over the remote, are part of our family room. After listening to Father, no one asks if Mother is going with him or whether he will miss Brother 1 and 2.

¹⁰⁰ After years of guess and check, I think I've learned how to function in Fathers' equation for a good daughter.

¹⁰¹ Father's understanding of America being gun, gun, gun began during his pediatric rotation in medical school. According to Mother, during his rotation, he watched children with bullets bigger than their eyes die on operation tables.

¹⁰² Father's understanding of America being food, food, food started as a child. As a child living during the Nigerian Civil War, the Americans were the ones who brought food during the Igbo pogrom.

We assume nothing except that one day Mother and Brother 1 and 2, will start receiving calls with a plus sign in front of a string of numbers. His rant ends when the doorbell rings. Mother turns down the music and enters the kitchen. Brother 2 opens the door for UB. I greet UB and see that he has aged into a miserable old man. I'm positive that even though his too tight and worn-out Coogi sweaters bunch around his growing stomach and fat lumps his head, he will be the first person to comment on our family's appearances.

I join Mother in the kitchen. From there, I observe Father and UB. While soccer plays on the television, they speak to each other in Igbo and their tones raise until they hit a peak, and then descend into laughter and sighs. I return to UB and Father carrying a tray that has two Heinekens, a bowl of chin-chin, and a plate of fried turkey meat. UB grabs the meat. Father thanks me. I return to the kitchen.

.... - .-- .-- .-- / --- -- . -- .- .- .- / ..- ..- .- .- .- .- .- .-

Brother 1, 2, and Mother are heaping food into our special crystal serving bowls, which are so heavy I didn't get the strength to carry them until after my first period. Since I wasn't home for Thanksgiving, Mother decided this Christmas dinner should have a Turkey Day flair. Brother 1 lifts the turkey, carefully walking it over to the table. Brother 2 goes back and forth from the stove to the dining table. He sets the table with jollof rice, collard greens, stew, egusi soup, yams, fufu, white rice, mac & cheese, stuffing, plantains, fried goat meat, homemade cranberry sauce, and puff puffs. The steam from the food mists Brother 2's glasses. He wipes them clean and continues setting the table, making sure to quintuply check that forks and knives are clean, straight, and that the plates are centered on the reindeer placemats that he proudly picked out himself.

UB shouts to Brother 1 and 2, "Come join the men and let the women do what they know."

Brother 1 looks to Mother. She gives him the eye and it says, “You can go sit with them, but you’re not eating in this house again.”

In response to Mother’s eye, Brother 1 and 2 respond in unison, “Uhh, we want to help.”

We finish setting the table and Mother calls over UB and Father. UB looks at the food in disgust,¹⁰³ but everyone knows this meal is one of Mother’s best and his greedy self will eat every bit and will even take some home. When he finishes his staring, he offers to say grace. He prays in Igbo—the language he knows Mother and I don’t understand. When Mother and I sense that UB is finished, we say Amen. He continues speaking in Igbo to which Father responds, “Maybe we should speak in a language that everyone understands.”

UB laughs and cuts into his goat meat. The meat splits and the red sauce from the stew creates a pool of sauce underneath the division. He looks at Mother, then me, and cuts the meat even more, and even begins mangling the stew’s bell peppers. As UB cuts, he says, “If you married someone from home—” Mother’s eyes flick toward UB, she’s heard all variations of this sentence.¹⁰⁴ Mother says nothing. She looks at me and Brother 1 and 2, and Father. When her eyes land on her children, they are caring, smothering us with reminders that we are loved, despite this hate from our family. When they land on Father, they ask, “*Are you gonna let him run our house, again?*”¹⁰⁵ Father remains silent,

¹⁰³ Though the other Naija women disrespect Mother, they can’t disrespect her cooking. It’s the best in both the Western World and East Nigeria.

¹⁰⁴ Variations of the sentence I’ve heard: If you married a Nigerian woman, we could’ve kept speaking our language, or you would’ve had all sons, or God would’ve had more favor on you.

¹⁰⁵ Last Christmas after UB’s last visit, our family participated in Boxing Day. Mother and Father fought with screams. Brother 1, 2, and I all took turns crying as we listened and watched their verbal fights in action. We didn’t see the purpose in leaving. Mother and Father were so loud, there was nowhere else to go, and household screams are more disturbing when disembodied.

and UB straightens up his posture. He knows in our house he can act however he wants. When he's inching toward the line of saying too much, he always reminds Father that as children, especially after their father was killed during the war, there was never enough food. UB gave most of his rations to Father and went to bed dreaming of bushmeat.

UB looks taller in his seat. He tells me to fetch him his Heineken that he left in front of the TV. I oblige and when I return, he asks, "What are you eating in school? You've gotten fatter since the last time¹⁰⁶ I saw you. Remember my dear, a fat woman is not a beautiful woman."

Mother's eyes are still on Father. UB pops a plantain into his mouth, chews as he complains about the plantains' shape, and then he complains about the thickness of the stew, and then of the dryness of the rice, and then of the moistness of the goat meat, and then of the mac and cheese being too fattening and American for a Nigerian family, and then of the placemats looking too pagan because of their decorations, and then of Brother 1's acne, and then he begins picking a dried out scab on Brother 1's lower cheek, and then he lectures Brother 2 because of his disinterest in playing soccer, and then he lectures Mother about her unwillingness to host an upcoming MBAISE meeting, and then lectures me for not studying science, and then lectures Father for not going back home to Nigeria more, and then lectures us for not going to church twice a week and how we need to be more grateful, and then after lecturing he returns to complaining, he complains of

The fight ended when Mother started throwing food at Father. Droplets of turkey blood, pink hunks of turkey meat, bell peppers, and white rice lived on our floor. That day for dinner, even though takeout is one of our family's many taboos, we had pizza from Mica's Pizza Place. For days, Mother refused to clean up the dinner she threw on the floor and while she smoked her Saturday cigarette in front of us in the kitchen, she told us not to clean any damn thing. After four days, Father cleaned everything up while all of us slept.

¹⁰⁶ Last time he saw me was in 10th grade, and he's also gotten fatter since then. There must be something in the water.

the cheap American fabric that is causing his clothes to shrink in the dryer, and then of the American stress that caused him to lose all his hair, and then of the cold American weather penetrating his bones, and then of the Americanized Nigeran women who don't know how to handle a real African man. Eventually, even Father grows tired of UB.¹⁰⁷ Father wipes his mouth with a napkin and asks, "If you know so much about home, family and food, why don't you invite us over?"

"I don't have a wife to cook for me."¹⁰⁸

"Because they're always leaving you."

"Nnaa, this is how you treat me. After, everything I've done for you. I am your only family."

My father slams his fist on the table and responds, "Chineke meh, this is my family."

Brother 1, 2, and I stare down at our plates, trying to hide the swallowed shock and laughter. I shove more food down my throat. Brother 2 stares at UB and his almond eyes are stuck open. Brother 1 excuses himself to use the bathroom, and while we are at the silent table, we listen to cackles that echo from the bathroom.

¹⁰⁷ It's about damn time

¹⁰⁸ UB still hasn't discovered that men...can cook too.

XXIX. Mass

There's an unspoken social contract between Father and me that while home for break I will take a sabbatical from my pagan ways and attend church. When I am perched next to him on the pew, I think of the typical pagan questions. Did the first Christians ever think of themselves as cannibals? Why can't the body of Christ have the juiciness of a Double Whopper®? If nuns are married to the man upstairs, how do they consummate their relationship...you know, get to know Him in the biblical sense...;)

... .. / --, --- / .-. --- - / .. -. / -.. -..

As I get ready for Mass, I scroll through the missed messages from the Black Excel group chat. Mariah is currently in the hospital. While walking down the stairs, she was hit with another bout of coughing, lost her footing, and fell. She hit her head, but TC assures us that everything is fine. They send us photos, a video recording, and messages the length of midterms. Multiple times, I look at every photo, watch every video, and read every message. I rest in the details of every word until I am convinced that Mariah will be okay.

After I'm assured that she will be fine, I think of the right thing to send to her. I need to send a message better than "get well soon" but that is not as clingy as a sonnet. I message ROD for advice because I trust her expertise. She tells me to only send "get well soon." I joke that I want to send a sonnet, but she reminds me I'm not Mariah's partner and since she's in a closed relationship, I might be crossing a boundary. I respond, *I know*. She then asks, *do you really?* Though ROD has more experience than me in love and lust, I can't agree with her and only send, "Get Well Soon." I tell ROD that I'm sending the sonnet, and she doesn't respond. I know she's disappointed with me, again.

My brainstorming for the sonnet's opening lines is interrupted when Father tells me that it's time for Mass. While putting on my snow boots, I listen to Brother 1 and 2's Razzie worthy performances of coughing and sniffing as they tell Father that they are too sick for church.

.-. .-. / .-. .-. / .-. .-. / --- / .-. .-. .

The drive to church is short and only has enough time for Father to ask standard questions about school. Standard questions receive the standard responses of good, great, and yes. As he is turning into parking lot, he comments, "It's good that you are liking the school. A colleague at the hospital tells me how her daughter wants to transfer, and it's going to cost money. You go to school to learn, not to like it. If I had told my mother, I didn't like school, she would've caned me, and then had my headmaster cane me for such nonsense."

I respond yes and even nod, hoping that the combination of physical movements shows Father that there are no parts of me that disagree.

.-. .-. / .-. .-. / .-. .-. / --- / .-. .-. .

We enter the church and sit in our back pew. The church is as dilapidated as I remember it. The carpet that is torn and perpetually wet now lifts from the floor. The cross behind The Father is crooked and located underneath one of the ceilings' many water stains.¹⁰⁹ In my boredom, I treat these water stains as inkblots to test my madness. About fifteen minutes into Mass, the madness test becomes boring. Only then do I stop staring at both the ceiling's stains, and the cross' left side that is faded and rotting. I turn

¹⁰⁹ While in middle school, The Father, hoping to raise money for the church, had Channel 11 news crew come, and report on a water stain that allegedly looked like the Virgin Mary. After the report, no members outside the church donated money, and we ended up losing a few members of the congregation. The members who left who were tired of being part of the St. Water Stain Church.

my attention to the stain glass windows that are located behind the cross. These windows are coated with decades of dust. Stuffing the motes of dust that circle around behind The Father are crusades worth of backwashed sermons. Whenever he inhales the motes, he remembers whatever he's supposed to preach.

The Father breathes, swallows some motes, and begins his message. He talks about loyalty, then prays for our elected officials to think of protecting the sanctity of marriage, our country, and its true citizens. Everyone says amen.¹¹⁰ While The Father speaks, a baby stares at Father and me. Their wide blue eyes watch our every move. Immediately, I know that this is a case of First Black Person, and I wish Brother 1 and 2 were here so we could play our game.

First Black Person first went into production after Brother 1, 2, and I noticed babies shock when they saw us. Now, you can't solely blame the parents, there aren't many black people in this town, my family is the only Black family who attends the church¹¹¹, and the token Black friend is booked through 2016. With all these factors considered, it is understandable that Father and I are the first Black people that this baby is seeing.

Unable to resist a quick round of the game, I take a break from thinking of Mariah's mock sonnet to play. This game works by making the scary faces at a baby while the parents aren't looking. Whoever gets the kid to stop staring first is the winner. There are bonus points for getting them to cry. I keep contorting my face to such extremes that Deleuze would be très très proud of me. My winning face has arched

¹¹⁰ I wonder how many amens this all will take.

¹¹¹ While I was in middle school, there was another Black family; however, the mother divorced the father and moved the kids to Atlanta, and the father stopped coming to church.

eyebrows, an open mouth with my lips curled back, and eyes rolling to the back of my head. The baby starts crying. Boom, baby, I'm the winner. I cannot hold onto my winning face for long. It's time for communion.

The pew before me stands. Everyone waddles out then waits in line until they are fed with body and blood. It's my turn to be fed, and while waiting in the procession of sinners, I notice The Father's labored breaths, his coughs, and sneezes.

What in the whore of Babylon hell? The Father is sick.

In line, I start praying like it's the ninth hour. I start praying that I do not get Sick Father as the communion giver. It's my turn. I look up and see The Father's sweating forehead and his weak smile. He hands me my wafer, telling me it's the Body of Christ even though I know damn well it's petri dish of Influenzas. I swallow and return to my pew.¹¹²

.... / -.. --- -. .----. - / :- ...- . / - .. -- . / ..-. --- .- / - :- -

Before Mass ends, we are told we have a special guest who came all the way from Africa. Some parishioners turn and smile at Father and I, and I'm tempted to play First Black Person, but I'm worried that Father might notice, and will tell me I'm a little off.¹¹³ The church goers dressed in flannel button ups and sweetheart dresses stop smiling when a nun from the back pew walks toward the front of the church. She's wearing a giant gold cross and red sneakers that read Prada along the mouth. She takes the stage and thanks the Lord, looks around the church, and then thanks us for being here today to worship. She reminds us the beauty of a church need not rest in its interior, but in the parishioners'

¹¹² If Jesus was able to heal a leper, then he should be able to stop the flu.

¹¹³ This is Father's way of saying crazy. People he thinks are off include: our next-door neighbor who uses our water hose, Mother when she started menopause, and Brother 1's fifth grade teacher.

love for God. Her loud voice wakes all the sleeping newborns and stops the toddlers from trying to rip pages out of hymnbooks.

After her backhanded compliment, she tells us she's here to gather donations for her mission trip to Africa. To pity pocket us, she shares the story about the poorness of Africa, about how during the trip she felt what it was like to be hungry and she lost 15 pounds. She opens her arms and then spins in a circle for all of us to see. Despite the fact she's wearing her habit and we couldn't tell if she's expecting the antichrist, the crowd chuckles at her weight loss, and someone shouts, "A blessing in disguise."

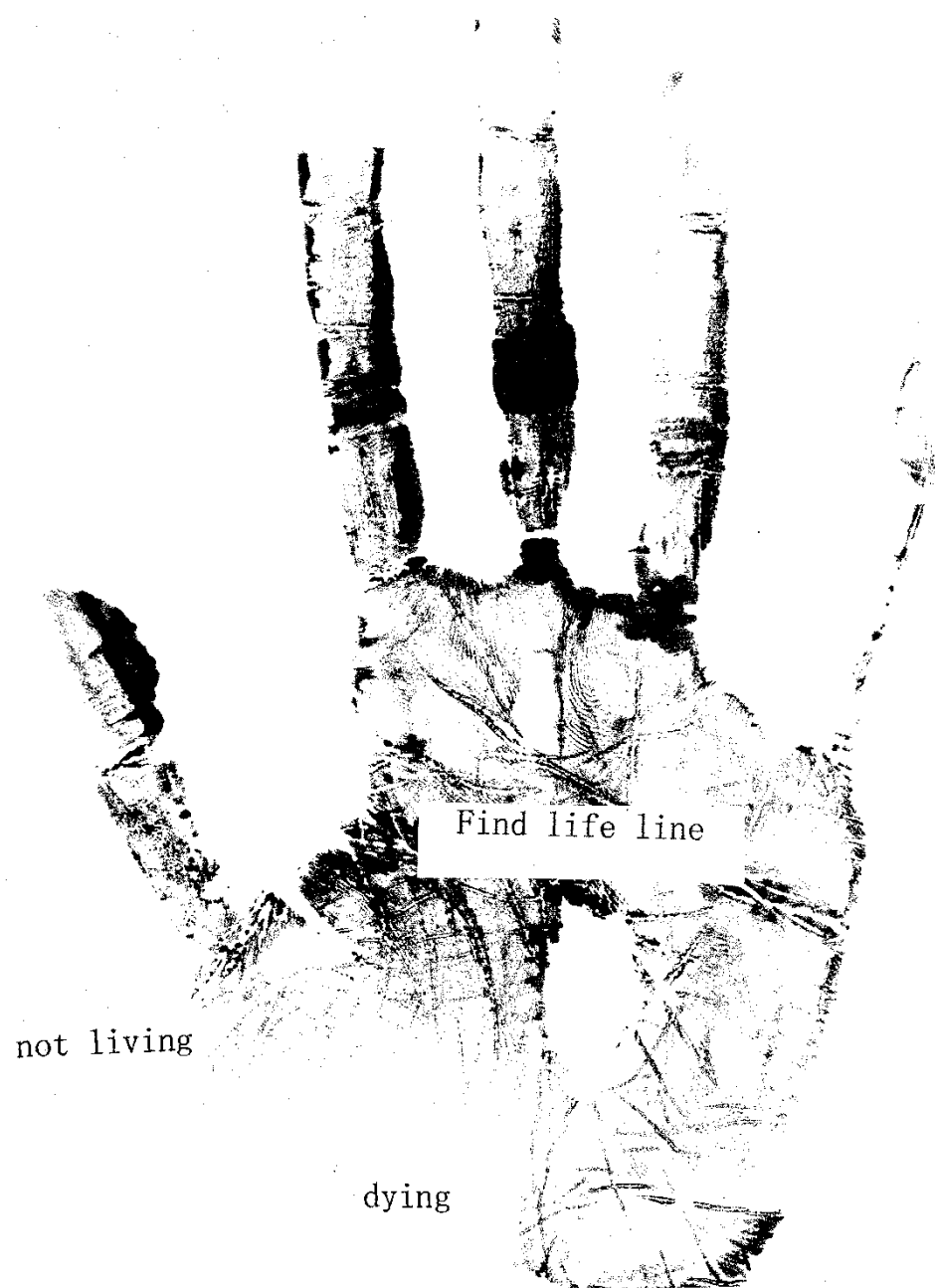
The nun asks for no more interruptions then continues on. She fixates on her gratitude for the US because here we have actual cities and God. Her voice stops echoing through the church and I think she's done until she summons over two more nuns from the depths of the church. They run to the front with a projector and a portable projector screen. As they are setting up, they trip over cords, and struggle to get the screen to turn on. During their struggle, one of the nun's veil falls off, exposing her Ringo cut. They stop the fight against the technology, and the veiled nun tries to help the other reveal herself. Head Nun turns around, irritated, and orders the other two nuns to set up more quietly. She returns to smiling when facing the congregation. The other two nuns wait until she's done speaking to notify her that they're done setting up. Head nun flips through slides. In them are pictures of hungry children who have an average of 7.666 flies on their faces. When Head nun is finally done propagandaing, the parishioners clap, and donation baskets are passed from pew to pew. The basket reaches us, Father puts nothing inside.

During the drive back home, Father mumbles, "They come and colonize then only

talk about the hungry African. It's all they know."

I respond, "Or the scamming prince."

Father and I smile at each other.



XXX. Sick

It's been two days since I sent the sonnet to Mariah, and I haven't still received any response. I repeatedly check my phone and complain text ROD about how my priest got me sick, and that Mariah hasn't responded. I'm scared that she and her partner are looking over the poem, trying to decide how to ghost me once school is back in session. Why did I even listen to ROD? What did I think would happen, after reading the poem, Mariah would fall in love with me?

$$\dots / \dots - \dots - \dots - \dots - \dots / - \dots - \dots$$

I delete the poem from Mariah and I's text message thread¹¹⁴ on my phone and on my computer. Then, I come up with excuses. For a bit, I'm convinced to tell Mariah that it was a drunken mistake. The backstory—I was partying with old friends from high school and we're all nerdy English majors, and after drinking all the literary cocktails that we could conceive with ingredients stolen from our elders, we started writing sonnets to our college friends. Second possible excuse, my damn little brother. The backstory—one of my brothers, let's say Brother 1, got my phone and decided to send a sonnet. Sure, it's not the best excuse but Mariah doesn't know my siblings and one of them could be a Shakespearean creep.¹¹⁵

As I swallow my flu medicine, I stare at the bathroom mirror with its rusted edges and a surface smudged with handprints and speckled with creamy dots of toothpaste spit. While here, I recite the first excuse, and gradually become more comfortable with pretending I have a social life while back home. After a while, I become exhausted from either reciting or an active

114 Golden Rules of Texting

1. Never send winky faces unless you're a murderer looking for your next victim.
2. Only assholes keep on read receipts.
3. If a text is deleted, then it never happened.

¹¹⁵ The second excuse seems a little too elaborate. Let's stick with the first.

ingredient in the flu medicine, and I fall asleep with my phone hidden underneath my pillow.

I wake up to two notifications. The first being an alert that my grades have been posted, and the second text is from Mariah. Of course, I check Mariah's text, first. Turns out, she's been sick in bed too, and just finally checked all her messages on her phone. She loves her poem and tells me that she plans on framing it in her room. Our texting is cut short because she has to explain to TC why she doesn't want to go to a hospital. The doctor isn't much help and constantly insists that her headache is simply a sore head from her fall. Mariah's sick of her doctor recommending an ice pack and ibuprofen for a headache, which feels like her brain is being sawed in half. I encourage her to go back to the hospital but tell her to bring an apple just in case. Mariah asks what's the apple for. I tell her, well an apple a day keeps the doctor away *iff* you keep throwing apples at them. She laughs at my joke, and, maybe it's the flu medicine, Tylenol, and congestion, and possible dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea-ing, but after I read her text, I'm the highest I've ever been in my life, and yes, this includes my time with C1.

-.-. .-. --- ..- -.. / ----.

To test out if this high is strong enough to ward off grade anxiety, I check my grades.

B, B+, B-.

Wait, what?

I text Mariah and ROD. Both of them send an endless stream of congratulations. Mariah tells me that if we're feeling better after the new quarter's first week, she's treating me to dinner at any restaurant with two-dollar signs next to the name. I nestle back into my bed with my phone on my heart. I can't think of a better way to start the new year.

XXXI. Resolutions

1. Cry Less
2. Eat Less
3. Drink Less
4. Think Less
5. Be Mess Less

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen



132

that money not coming till the 33rd

XXXII. Sunset

In my dorm, I drink a DIY tequila sunset¹¹⁶ while I try to rip off some of the lamination on the cover of my Aunt's zine. After the top right corner and a little bit of the spine are both free, I grin as I feel the original paper. The tips of my fingers memorize worn softness. I place the zine back into the safety of my backpack and begin reviewing my syllabi for Winter quarter. The classes I've settled on are Double Consciousness, Biological Warfare, and Colonial Africa. Phone rings, and it's a security alert, warning students and faculty that the campus police are looking for a robber. The description of the perpetrator says Black and tall. It sounds more like an order for coffee than a person. TC messages Black Excel, warning that anything black and tall should go into hiding. A Black Excel member says he'll put his dick away, almost all members groan his response.

I begin drinking my second Tequila Sunset, but this time I'm out of orange juice, and so it's straight Cuervo chased with Crystal Light. Phone rings again, and it's the first message from C1 since our celebration. She tells me I need to come with her to a themed party tonight. She promises it'll be best party of my college career. I tell her no. She promises she'll bring any drug I want. I tell her no again. She promises she'll pay for drinks at a bar that doesn't card. Despite the promises, I tell her no again because I'm hanging out with ROD. C1 says I can bring her. I respond, okay, we'll come, and C1 stops replying.

C1 wants. I take. This is the cycle of our friendship. I take the free booze, drugs, and specs of luxury to prolong belonging on this campus. She needs me to see her. Between us, I'm

¹¹⁶ Recipe for Tequila Sunset:

- Two-ish shots of tequila
- Whatever amount orange juice you can get
- Maybe some sugar or salt if the rim is clean.

not sure who's the parasite.

.-- . / -... --- - / .- .-. .

ROD and I enter the apartment party. It's a three-bedroom high rise apartment with no furniture inside.¹¹⁷ On the living room floor, along with the partiers, sit green and gold pillows with beaded fringes. Moroccan lamps with green light bulbs crowd the apartment's corners. Hookah smoke from the master bedroom filters the apartment's air. The second bedroom is the self-proclaimed opium den. I peek inside, and I spy with my little eyes: students a snorting, and a smoking, and maybe even a shooting.¹¹⁸ Someone slams the door in my face, and I leave to search for ROD. I find her in the dining room and projected on the walls is a French film. Besides being a makeshift movie theater, the dining room is the nucleus for alcohol. While we wait for a clear path toward the drinks, we watch a student scribbling notes as they watch the film. A love scene appears on the wall, and during it, a man and woman's body intertwine as they wear black and pink motion capture suits. Their bodies project over dented and holed walls. Eventually, the scene ends, and the student takes a break from notetaking and joins us in the drink line. There, I hear the host's voice and immediately recognize it as C1's botfly, SL. He is wearing a sweatshirt that reads SWEATSHOP on the chest.

A partier says to SL, "Fuck man, it's your third eviction in a row."

SL smiles then drinks out of a tumbler. He says, "It is a skill that requires much dedication, precision, and a plethora of noise complaints."

"Who would've thunk I'm in the presence of someone so great?" SL bows. "So, my

¹¹⁷Pro Tip—if you want your apartment to look like a Donor Kid's, don't have furniture. No furniture in your apartment is the nouveau thing to do. What's edgier than having your parents buy your furniture, and returning everything to buy pillows and ironic bird art?

¹¹⁸Last year in *Modern Family*: A survey of American Cults, there was a couple who everyone in the class thought were hipsters committed to the image. It wasn't until they were caught stealing a professor's laptop during office hours that it was revealed they were opioid addicts.

greatness what have your neighbors said so far?”

“Nothing. They’ve tried calling cops on me, but the city police know my dad, and campus cops know who I am. When the cops come, I give them a drink, a snack, and they go on their way.”

“Has your dad finally budged?”

SL finishes drinking out of the brandy glass. He slams it down on the ground. His curled brown hair falls into his face.

“He has! He finally bought the apartment unit downtown. Viva la revolution!” SL steps over the glass after spotting ROD and me. He puts his arms around us as he speaks. “Sahara, this is ridiculous. No friend of C1 waits in line for a drink.” He shoves a brandy glass into each of ROD and I’s hands. I try to convince him that we would rather get our own drinks but SL laughs. He finishes his drink then says, “Sahara, it’s alcohol, and if C1’s stories are true, I know you want it.”

I smile and drink. ROD looks at me, disgusted. She places her glass on the floor along with a collection of other glasses and excuses herself outside for a smoke. My phone begins buzzing wildly in my back pocket. I assume that it’s a string of text from ROD that all say fuck this guy. Even SL can hear the constant notifications. I mute my phone without looking at the messages. SL moves in closer to me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you and your girlfriend. You should go smoke with her. I don’t want cause a fight.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Well that’s unfortunate, I was hoping tonight would end with all of us.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ I’m convinced SL’s thesis will be titled “Waiting for 3Some, a restaging of *Waiting for Godot*.”

..-. ..- -. -. -. -. -. / -. -. . . -. . . -. . . -. . .

Someone calls for SL to sign for the liquor delivery. After he leaves, I can find a clear path way toward the drink table. On the table are laminated cocktail instructions along with bottles of gin, absinthe, vermouth, Campari, champagne, stout, and a St. Germain bottle.

I try to make myself a Negroni that ends up smelling like shoe polish and then leave to find ROD. I find her sitting on the balcony, finishing a cigarette. I sit next to her and sip what I can of this drink, which is pure nigrosin poison.

“Sahara, we should go back to the dorm.”

“How about in a bit? There’s still drinks.”

“Fuck the drinks. The people here are assholes.”

“They are, but what’re we gonna do instead. Sit on my bed and bitch about classes starting.”

“Even that’s better than being in this dick’s playhouse.”

“Just try to make it fun.”

“Sahara, why? We can leave.”

“Leave, but you two just got here,” C1 responds. She’s holding a long cigarette and wearing a flouncy floral dress made by *Skinnny Republic*. “I promise that more non-Donor Kids are coming.”

“Well that’s great. It’s a lil’ too one percenty right now,” ROD replies.

“I bet you don’t feel that way when your scholarship deducts your tuition balance because of us.” C1 snaps. The air escapes between the three of us. I’m losing more excuses to sustain this friendship. C1 bursts into laughter, wasting part of her drink on the floor. “I’m

kidding. Who cares who's paying for what?¹²⁰ This place is still a misery show." A partier passes C1 a tequila bottle. She knows to pass it to me, and I drink from it. ROD asks C1, "How do you know the host?"

"I met him at a party during first quarter, and then we dated for a bit before I got back together with my boyfriend."

Of course, she used to date SL. Donor Kids stick together. C1 notices a new friend in the crowd and gives them a quick side hug and then side kiss on the cheek. After she finishes planning a vacation with said long-lost friend, C1 returns to what's trying to pass as a conversation with ROD. As the conversation sputters like a dying engine, I drink more tequila, trying to unhear the justifiable judgement in ROD's voice. Part of me wishes that I didn't invite her. LP tells me that ROD is counting how many times I sip the tequila bottle, that ROD is sick of my shit, and is a few weeks away from ending this friendship. I keep talking with LP, trying to negotiate her silence. She ignores all pleas, ROD's voice dims, and LP becomes louder. Yes, I'm an idiot for coming here, and I'm an idiot for not wanting to leave. I need a distraction from LP, ROD, and C1, from this party that is a decadent debacle.

I take out my phone and see almost hundred notifications from the Black Excel chat. I scroll them, seeing a series of *RIPs* and *sorry for your losses*. I ignore the bigger blocks of text. I need to scroll back to the first message to find the joke that's provoking these responses. I get to the first message and see it's from TC. It says, something I can't believe. This has to be a joke, one that isn't funny. I call TC and am sent to voicemail. I read the messages again.

Mariah

Dead?

¹²⁰ Can someone please tell that to Sallie Mae?

.-- .-. .- .- .- / -... / .- .- .- .- .-

I pass the bottle back to C1. I feel sick. Sicker than I've ever felt before. I open the apartment door and try to push past various crowds of people in order to reach the stairs. But my sickness moves faster than my legs. I lean over the bannister and vomit. A crowd of people shout, "Umpahh." Another smaller crowd that was blocking the staircase now move out of my way. ROD runs up behind me, rubbing my back as I'm hovered over the bannister.

She asks, "Sahara did you drink too much?"

"No, no um," I wipe my mouth and my heart crawls out my chest toward my throat. I puke on a dress and part of a shoe. It's not until C1's is gripping me by my wrists that I realize I have puked on her. She screams, "Sahara, what the fuck? Learn to hold your shit." I shake my wrists free and return to my original position on the bannister. "You take care of her." C1 shouts to ROD. She slams the apartment door. ROD pushes back my braids.

"Sahara, we gotta go. Can you walk?" I nod yes, softly, trying to prevent tears from leaving my eyes. "What's wrong?" We walk down the stairs. The partiers watch us.

My heart crawls back from my throat and slips into my sac of a stomach. With my throat freed, I attempt to talk. I stutter to ROD, "Mariah's dead."

XXXIII. Mariah

The day before your funeral, I went to the lake by my dorm. I sat on the rocks, trying to freeze. From afar was a Rubik's cube colored freighter ship that never seemed to move. Did it manage to freeze in this weather?

My hands rested in my pockets as I watched the waves move sheets of ice. My mind was quiet. Even LP was quieter than usual. She didn't know what to say, yet, and without her, I hoped. I hoped that the cold would've frozen the mind movement. Hope was senseless, but I listened to it because senseless hope was different than rage. Ignorance felt refreshing.

TC told the Black Excel group chat that you died from internal bleeding in your brain. Your doctor told them that the combination of your fall, your coumadin, and ibuprofen was an unfortunate mistake. It was his mistake that caused for TC to sob into your body at the hospital and at your funeral. It was his mistake that filled Black Excel group chat with rage. It was his mistake that he still hasn't apologized for. It was his mistake that caused you to join The Unfortunates.

When I returned to my dorm after your funereal, I searched for a razor. I had none, so I broke the wine glass that I stored in my desk's bottom shelf. With a shard, I cut until ROD entered and caught me. I've learned that grief makes me careless with hiding pain. She screamed at me. I screamed at her. I told her to get the fuck out. She left. I stared down at my hands that were covered in blood after making a maze of my thighs and stomach. I crawled into bed and while alone began laughing because all of this was/is unfortunate. Mariah, I need to find you and my Aunt so that the three of us can bond at how funny it is that the unfortunate world always gets you. Together, we can spend an eternity laughing because after all this pain and exhaustion, what else is there?

Growing up, I thought of death but never saw it. My Aunt and grandparents were dead either before my time or before I could form any memories of them. As a child, death was the place loved ones stayed, and I thought of this place as an exclusive play pen meant for those who loved you the most. At times, I told Mother I couldn't wait to die so I could meet my grandparents and my Aunt. When I told her this, she pinched me, and tried to explain death wasn't something to wish for—it came when it was meant to.

I didn't believe Mother until my first grandparents' day in first grade. I told my teacher that my grandparents were dead. She told me that I could spend the time coloring with the other students whose grandparents couldn't make it.¹²¹ As I colored, I watched grandparents knit, build foam airplanes, and play with puzzles. I watched them give their grandchildren an infinity of hugs and kisses. I started crying. I wanted my grandparents. One grandmother asked where my grandmother was, and I told her in Heaven. She felt so sorry for me that she adopted me into the day's activities. While she tried to teach me how to knit, I started crying again because this old lady wasn't my grandma, and once I started crying again, my adopted grandmother's real granddaughter started crying because she never wanted her grandmother to die.

Mother picked me up early, and I told her that I wasn't getting in the car and wasn't ever going back to school again. Eventually, we made a deal. I could skip school on Grandparents' day and stay at home with her. This deal lasted until middle school. By then, teachers stopped celebrating that day.¹²²

In middle school and high school my understanding of death slightly changed. It still was

¹²¹ While my grandparents were in heaven, theirs were in Florida. A student assured me that Florida and Heaven were the same place.

¹²² More and more grandparents were either dead or in Florida.

the place for loved ones, and eventually became the place where I wanted to be. On earth, I was a living dead monster tethered by shame and then guilt. I hoped that one day I could gain the courage to free myself from the guilt. As my last breath went up toward death, I would return to the place I belonged.

-. . - - - . / - . . . - - - . -

Now, my understanding of death has changed, and it is even more divided. I can accept my death for myself, but Mariah, I can't accept your death. It wasn't meant to happen. When the words your and death come near, I want to scream them away because you can't be gone. You still feel so close.

At your funeral, I tried to hold back my grief because I wasn't sure how much of it, I was allowed to have. I was a friend that worshipped you, but while knowing you, I never considered that you were daughter whose mother would never see you in a graduation robe, you were an aunt would never take her nephew to the movies again. I knew that you were a partner because I wanted to be yours. I knew you as a friend because I indulged in every moment of our friendship. These days, it's too late for me to learn more about you from you, and it's too soon for me to forget about the parts of you I worshipped. All I am left with are memories that double as regrets, and I don't know which direction they should take.

Autopsy

Black Person 6 lays naked on a surgical table. Man enters stage and begins the mummification process. During the seventy days, Man removes heart, brain, mouth, and then embalms BP 6 with tears and screams. After the body is embalmed, Man wraps BP 6 from head to toe with campus newspapers that read Unfortunate News.

The process of mummification is complete.

Black Person 6 becomes Black Body 6 and is brought back to life. The sound of BB6's stifled screaming permeates the stage.

XXXIV. Phone Call

I tell Mother of Mariah's death, and as I cry¹²³ to her on the phone, she calmly quotes Galatians 5:19. Mother promises anyone who kills, and murders will not inherit the kingdom of God. For them, Earth and all its money is the only kingdom. This sadness as it is loosening my grip on the phone, chokes me, preventing my response. In my silence, Mother recites the Lord's Prayer. Her faithwords are frantic as they attempt to calm me. I stop heaving and shaking. I tell her that I am just tired and stressed. Yes, tired and stressed, and we,¹²⁴ I mean I just need a meal and some rest, and after, I'm rest, I mean rested, I will call her back, but before I can hang up the phone, she makes me recite Galatians 5:22. As I recite the fruits of the spirit, she repeats amen.

Amen.

Amen.

(A) (Men). A, prefix, meaning without. Men, those who rule, who hate, who love, who control, who kill, who free, who enslave, who damn and save, includes doctor, Mariah, and Me.

(B) Amen=Without men.

¹²³ There are two times in my life that I've been inconsolable in front of Mother. First was the grandparents' day incident of first grade. Second moment of inconsolability occurred in 2008 during the annual MBAISE fourth of July celebration. UB, while in front of a woman who would become his second wife, chastised me for not knowing Igbo. Both UB and his future ex-wife laughed, and I laughed along with them until I escaped to the porta potty. There, I cried while ants crawled over my sandal straps.

By the time the ants reached my kneecaps, Mother found me and as she tried to console me, all I could do was ask, "Why did Father never teach me?"

She held onto me so tight that the Pink Lotion in my hair stained her peach top.

Mother and I left the porta potty and then she went to Father. After whispering in his ear and I think threatening to make a scene, Father yelled at UB and his future ex-wife.

¹²⁴ LP don't completely take me over just yet. Please, let me finish this conversation with Mother first.

Need an Amen, but there is no church. Because in this ivory tower in this kingdom in a land far, far away, I do not know how explain to Mother that they have inherited this earth and have made themselves gods, and in this world or country or state or city there is nothing that we can do, and if there was a God and if He did save us, then He only did it to prolong our suffering. So, rejoice and be mad because we don't belong here or anywhere and since, they will find ways to keep killing, we might as well beat them to the punch.

Amen, kingdom come, and we will be done.



XXXV. Aftermath

The week after Mariah's death, rage and hysteria fueled campus. TC's phone rang nonstop with interview requests by college reporters who didn't care enough to get TC's pronouns right. A pre-med student organized a forum at Shockley Hall, but only invited LC¹²⁵ as the representative of the BSC.¹²⁶ Tenured professors desperate for details emerged out of their caves to discuss the unfortunate news. Students threatened canceling their University health insurance. The University sent frantic emails promising the University Hospital is safe and will always have the students' best interest at heart. After the first week, TC decided to take the quarter off and left the Black Excel group chat but promised to return once they were ready.

... .. / / / /

Now in week two, my rage, grief, and sadness has melded into tar. It burns me, but when the hurt is this bad, the pain is expected and seems deserved. For days on end, LP and I think of Mariah, and of this pain and how it feels oh so right. To survive these thoughts and these days, I take two of C1's sleeping pills, remain in bed, and imagine my body sinking into the mattress so that the silver coils pierce my flesh, bones, and brains to keep it all locked in place.

... .. / /

Roommate enters. She sees me hunched over with my bonnet on while I read my phone. BSC fought for another town hall meeting, and the University obliged. Dean [REDACTED] will lead the meeting and this time, it is open to the public. Members from the Black Excel group chat tell those of us who are going to *wear your battle armor*. Last year during the town hall meeting addressing Jen's suicide, University police began arresting students for allegedly disturbing the

¹²⁵ The Lone Caucasian who made the mac and cheese.

¹²⁶ Black Student Coalition

peace and making threats against the University. The charges were dropped against the students only after they published a public apology in the University's newspaper.

Roommate exits the bathroom. She sits down on her bed and asks, "Do you have mono? You've been sleeping a lot."

"No, I've been pretty tired lately."

"I feel you. After Naomi died, I slept for what felt like months. Sometimes you just need to pass out like Sleeping Beauty."

"Who's Naomi."

"My childhood poodle."

I get up from my bed, take off my bonnet and prepare to leave for the town hall forum. I open my drawers, searching for my battle armor. All I have are thrifted sweaters and thigh tattered jeans. I settle on the armor of a black waffle shirt and black leggings. I move over to my desk to find my escape weapon. I take out C1's apology tequila and beer.

As I'm pouring the tequila into a flask, Roommate moves over to my bed and picks up my bonnet. "Why do you wear this?" After asking, she puts the bonnet on her head. Laughing as she quips, "Look, I'm just like you."

I ignore her and continue filling my flask, but she repeats the question. I respond, "It's to protect my hair."

"Why do you have to protect your hair? It's just hair."

"My hair is fragile."

"Is that why you don't like it when I try to touch it?"

"Yea, that's why." I respond only after I'm finished packing the flask into my backpack.

"Huh, that's so weird. I don't know how you do it. I could never imagine being Black. It

seems like a lot of work.” Roommate picks up her tote bag. Inside, a roll of toilet paper peeks out of it. She leaves the room. My face is hot. My eyes wet with tears. I breathe deeply to stop myself from screaming. Once I am strong enough to fake a smile, I leave for the town hall meeting.

-... / ... - .- .- - .- .- .-

“They don’t care about us.” “They don’t. Remember what happened to Jen?” “To who?” “Jen” “Her name was Angela?” “No, it was Jen.” “They just want us “Are you sure her name was Jen?” for diversity quotas.” “Yes, I’m positive her name was “To them that’s all we are good for.” Jen.” “Who is “You’re right. Her name Jen. Angela was the one who died my first year. Damn, it’s getting hard to keep up.” leading this meeting?”

“Dean “The Sellout” [REDACTED].” “Damn, he’s leading.” “Right.” “This is gonna be a mess.” “They couldn’t get anyone else.” “You know “There’s no one else.” he’s the University’s personal nigga on retainer.” “But he thinks “I think it’s about to start.” he’s the HNIC.” “He does!” “Doesn’t he remind you of “Why are the police here?” a wannabe Samuel L. Jackson?” “You know why, “He does, but his head is lumpier.” too many black people here.” “This is bullshit. We aren’t safe anywhere.” “I bet “They’re killing us everywhere” it was Dean [REDACTED] idea to bring the police with his wanna be Alex Foley ass.”

I listen to the chatter while I sit at the front of meeting with ROD and HB 1.¹²⁷ Until today, I’ve avoided ROD, and even ignored her text messages about her tattoo appointment. When she takes off her wool pullover, I see the soundwave tattoo printed on her inner forearm. I’m letting this friendship die, and I am waiting to mourn it. I recite to myself, *shhh, stop*

¹²⁷ The best Hair Braider on campus.

thinking. I need to remain calm and out of myself because the moment I sink into this acidic mind, I'm living with LP, and she burns through me as she searches for what else to kill.

The meeting hasn't even started yet, and Dean [REDACTED] is already reading from his University script while he wears an emerald suit and has a gold lapel pin of our University's insignia on his jacket. Circling around the room's terra cotta colored walls are panel paintings that retell the First Thanksgiving. In this retelling, the blonde-haired settlers arrive to America, build houses, sign peace treaties, and welcome the indigenous people into their home to share a meal.

Dean [REDACTED]'s protruding eyes stare down at us with annoyance as he recites, "Here at this University, we have always valued all students. As we continue to move forward with this academic year, this University will continue to provide resources to help all students. In response to the recent events, we have temporarily hired grief counselors who are available to the students who are enrolled in the University's health insurance plan."

HB 1 shoots out of her seat and asserts, "That's not enough." We stand with her and this response becomes a chant we repeat. ROD, HB 1, and I interlock our hands. On the walk over to the meeting, I had planned to talk and scheme and fight with the members of Black Excel. I had planned to actually be here, to try and drag myself out of myself, and prove that I'm strong enough to fight to right Mariah's death, but my hands won't stop shaking even while they are interlocked with ROD and HB 1's hands. In this room while encased in frustration, all I know is that Mariah deserved to live, and while in this thought, grief and guilt fill me. How am I alive and she is dead?

--. . - / --- ...- . .- / -.- --- ..- .--.. ..-

Just shut the fuck up, shut the fuck up because this isn't about you. Do whatever you can

to become strong enough to be here and fight for Mariah. I release my hands from ROD and HB 1's grip, and begin biting my nails, their beds, and the side pieces of flayed finger flesh, but that's not enough of a distraction. I return to chanting, "that's not enough, that's not enough, that's not enough," and I wonder when enough will be enough.

Dean [REDACTED] straightens out his emerald suit, smiles and displays his veneers that are too big for his mouth as he recites, "While I understand your frustration, we must respect each other and this University. If you continue with this hostility, then I will end this meeting and ensure that another will not be called this quarter."

His comment silences us, and Dean [REDACTED] returns to talking at us, reminding us we need to appreciate everything this University offers. As Dean [REDACTED] stands on his stage and prescribes to us how we should feel, my thoughts keep jumping between Mariah and my Aunt. I turn to ROD and HB 1, telling them, "I have to use the bathroom." While in the hallway, I lean against a cobblestone wall, and I drink from the flask. At first, I listen to students questioning Dean Richard before other deans and professors take the stage. I leave after I begin crying.

On my walk back to my dorm, HB 1 texts me, asking where I went. I respond that I was feeling lightheaded and needed to get something to eat. Quickly, she replies that she can meet me at the dining hall. I reroute to the meeting spot and after I swipe my card, a dining hall worker passes me a piece of gum winking while saying, "It's five o' clock somewhere."

.... .-.. -.. / -.- .- / .. - /

At the dining table, HB 1 sits across from me. Her red tipped crochet locs fall against her neon green lettered shirt that reads *Brooklyn*.

"This is bullshit. It's bullshit Sahara."

"I know."

“After you left, Mariah’s thesis advisor listed action items she wanted the University to uptake. Guess how they responded?” HB 1 flips her hair so that all of it is behind her shoulders. “A dean told Mariah’s advisor that she’s not a community organizer and that as an untenured professor she should concern herself with teaching. And the University has the nerve to wonder why three Black instructors left last year.”

“They don’t want us here.”

“Exactly, they don’t give a fuck about us. But they’ll soon see they can’t keep treating us like this. I’m going to email the president and Dean of the College every day.”

“What will you say?”

“I don’t know but I’m going to say something.” HB 1 pulls out a stack of flyers from her tote. “I made up some flyers with Mariah’s advisor’s action items.” The flyer opens with an explanation of the incident, then bullet points for how the University can show it cares for its Black students. A bolded bullet point advocates for establishing and funding a Black Student Orientation, which is focused on how to sustain health and happiness while enrolled at this University. I stop reading when HB 1 says, “Come handout these flyers with me.”

I giggle and then mumble sure as I reach for a glass of water that spills into my lap.

“Fuck me,” I say as the water drenches my jeans and underwear.

HB 1 leans forward and sniffs my breath. “You left the meeting to get drunk. Is this all a joke to you?”

“Isn’t everything?”

HB 1 blinks her eyes in confusion as she takes her flyers and then leaves.

XXXVI. Phone Call

“Mother what’s it like losing a sister?”

“Kenu, why are you asking this?”

“I just wanna know.”

Mother sighs into the phone and then yells at Brother 1 and 2 to stop hitting each other before she continues. “It’s like having your heart and home robbed of everything you loved, and every day you’re left waiting for it all to return.”

“How did you get through it?”

“I filled my heart and home with you and your brothers. Without my children, I would have nothing.”

“Mother don’t say that.”

“Why?”

“It’s too much to ask from your kids.”

“You asked me a question and I answered it. What more do you want me to say?”

“Something else. Anything but that.”

“Well, as your aunt would say, it is what it is. I can’t tell you anything else. You and your brothers make my life and this marriage to your father worth it.” Brother 1 and 2 are yelling at each other in the background. “Sahara, I have to go. I love you, but honey, please stop wallowing. I know it’s hard losing a friend. You’ve had your time mourning her. Now, it’s time to see how blessed you are to be alive.”

“I will. I love you too.”

I hang up and let the phone fall onto my desk. I drink the last of my flask and take two of Cl’s sleeping pills. As I wait for them to kick in, I bury my Aunt’s zine underneath last quarter’s

stack of books. I cannot make my Aunt or Mariah always here. I need to move forward and stop remembering the past. All it's causing is present pain. One long nap is all that I need and once I'm awake, I swear I can get back in it.

XXXVII. Back In

C1 meets me at my dorm. With her are three cases of *Are you still mad at me?* beer, and two nips of *It's time start partying again* tequila. She passes me a nip and as I sip, I watch her hesitance to sit anywhere. I apologize for the messiness. She says, *it isn't you, but you know, dorms just make me itchy. I don't know how you do it.* C1 is perched on Roommate's chair as I try to find an outfit that's worthy of C1's approval. The winning outfit is a baggy black mesh shirt, with a red push up bra, and high wasted black leggings that have leather pipping along the side.¹²⁸

C1 gets up from Roommate's chair and stands by my desk, examining the stack of books on it. As she judges every book, she comes across my Aunt's zine and flips through the pages.

"I hate stuff like this." She says as she re-hides the zine back into the pile of Chopin, Nabokov, Henry James, and Shakespeare.

"Like what?"

"Books like this from Black people who self-publish when they really don't have any business being published in the first place. Honestly, it's embarrassing for us."

"I think the writer was just trying to tell her story her way."

"No, she's a pandering embarrassment. I don't understand Black people who write like this...Who wrote that anyway?"

I pick up the stack of books and place them near my bed. "It doesn't matter. Are you ready to leave?"

¹²⁸ These are the last pair of leggings that haven't succumbed to thigh rub. Dear Lord, please let them keep holding down the fort.

“Yes, the sooner we leave here, the better.”

ROD sees C1 and I leaving the dorm in party wear. She asks us, “Where are you going?”

“Out with C1.”

“Where?” ROD watches my eyes and I avoid hers.

Reluctantly, I look up to her and respond, “To a concert.”

“Where at? I’ll come too.”

“It’s pretty far and tickets are expensive. I doubt you will want to come,” C1 replies.

“Try me,” ROD states as she pulls out her phone waiting to search for the address. With hesitation, C1 tells her where we are going. ROD repeats the address to make sure she typed it correctly. “I’ll head over after I finish some work.”

“Fine.” C1 responds. She grabs me by my wrists and leads me down the dorm’s staircase.

First stop on our adventure, the apartment party. During the walk, C1 talks about BO. Her and him are going to spend a weekend together in the Dominican Republic. Her and him are back in it and are in love now more than ever. Her and him are excited for another vacation away from campus. Her arm is locked into mine. She promises that before the quarter ends, we will have a trip together because traveling is the only way to survive this place, and complicated people like us have to stick together.

... / ... / ...

C1 and I enter an apartment that’s hosting a pregame. Inside, the smell of cat piss, cinnamon air freshener, and wet carpet welcomes us. As we push through to the kitchen, C1 says she loves the grunginess of this apartment.¹²⁹ C1 abandons the voyage to the kitchen to snort. I continue pressing forward, slinking past frat boys and girls. In the kitchen, I drink, and count the

¹²⁹ Does this place make her itchy too?

number of moldy loaves of bread that sit on top of the fridge. There are 13. Despite it being a health hazard, I remain in the kitchen next to a pot on the stove with xanadu colored molded chili inside it. I stop looking in the pot, and my eyes follow the roach that after eating the chili, strolls on the white linoleum flooring and then disappears into her corner home.

The kitchen becomes too full of wildlife. Between the roaches, the students, and the apartment cat with half a tail, I'm losing breathing room. I leave to watch a game of beer pong. The players fling white balls into cups. The ball always misses the target and rolls into an enclave of spiders and roaches playing poker. After some intense negotiating with the spiders and roaches, a player retrieves the ball. Maybe next week every beer pong player will die from some disease, and the University can send more emails and newsletters promising the safety and care of students.

A team wins and they roar to celebrate. Each member of the losing team is required to take a sip from the vodka handle. All losers have sipped, and the handle is passed to other people at the party. By the time the handle has reached me, the entire room's bacteria are somersaulting off the rim. I drink from the plastic bottle. Don't even try to waterfall.

C1 returns. Her snort was Act I. She's ready to leave and start Act II with me as a performer and audience member. I take two PBRs with me. C1 explains that we are walking toward the 66 bus that will then take us to the Green line, so we can transfer to the Orange line, to then transfer to the Pink line, to then transfer again to the Brown line, after which, we will flag down a taxi that will drive us to the venue. She says the music will be worth the journey. I finish the beers on the first and second trains, and for the rest of the journey, C1 lets me sip tequila from her sparkling blue flask that reads, "naughty is nice."

-.-- --- .-. .- / -. .- .- --. - -.-- / / -. --- - / -. .. -. .

We arrive at the venue and SL greets us. He leads us through the building. The walls are made of concrete, and the black and red lights, which are synchronized to trap beats highlight the rows of heaving bodies. The wooden floors below the dancers are warped from decades of spilled drinks and water leaks, but the owners aren't worried. The deafening beats that enter our hearts and bloodstreams possess everyone's bodies so that when we pound our feet, we momentarily hammer the floorboards back into place.

C1 and I begin to tire from dancing. Desperate for a pick me up, we leave for the bathroom. C1 tips the bathroom attendant. She gives us red and white peppermints and allows both of us to enter into the largest bathroom stall at the same time. The stall's entrance is a subway train door that is covered in graffiti and tattered neon concert flyers. Every time a bathroom stall opens, an automated voice shouts out, "mind the fucking gap." C1 is ripping upcoming concert flyers off the door as I stare at the pieces of the tattered toilet paper that litters the ground.¹³⁰ She screams to everyone in the bathroom, "I want to see all you bitches at the next show." Someone screams, "yas" back.

C1 takes out another flask. This one reads, "Best life, blessed life". She pours white powder into it, shakes it up, and we take turns gulping everything down. She finishes the last of the flask, and her next announcement to others in the bathroom is that she has to pee. Another person, maybe the same person screams, "yass" again. C1 pees and then asks if I need to go also. Though I've been holding it for an hour, and feel a UTI maturing in my whoha, I say no. I don't want her to see my hairs, my fat dimples, and cuts, again. We exit the stall and three girls wearing matching Gucci tiger belts enter after us.

We search for SL, pushing through crowds, swiping away grazing hands desperate for a

¹³⁰ Do you think I can collect them to make a roll that is worthy for Roommate?

feel. As we wade through waves of people, we are baptized in sweat. C1 grabs my hand and keeps repeating that she loves BO. I cannot stop smiling and am falling in love with every person I see. I feel the energy of their lives, and I need to become infected by it. C1's grip becomes tighter. She's decided that after her next trip with BO, she wants to go on a spring break trip to Turks and Caicos, and it won't be fun without me. I don't respond. Instead, I concentrate on moving through the crowd. My breathing becomes heavy. I'm hot, thirsty, desperate for infection.

-. .- .- / -. --- - / .-. . . .- .- .- .- .- .- .-

I dance with some man, and while dancing he pulls me in harder, too hard, no just harder. His hand enters my leggings and then underwear. Some Man touches the inside, and the hand movement creates wetness and excitement. He bites my neck, pulls me in harder again, this time the pull hurts my hip bone. His hand exits inside and then underwear to travel down thigh, he keeps traveling until he feels jagged skin. Hand exits, and Some Man disappears.

-. .- .- .- .- / -. .- .- .- .- / -. .- .- .-

Out the corner of my eyes, I see Mariah entangled with LP. They're kissing one another. I can't tell who, but one of them tells me to join. LP stops kissing, and then unzips her body to swallow Mariah. LP disappears. My breathing is the heaviest it's ever been. More people pass by me, wait no through me, wait no by me, no, through me. After passing through me, they swipe me away like smoke. After it feels like I have disappeared into the air, we finally find SL.

He exclaims, "Sahara look who I found!"

It's ROD. She greets me and then asks if I am okay, asking low enough so that C1 and SL cannot hear. All of us exit to the smoking terrace. Though it is freezing, the cold provides a relief from the concert heat. We shiver as we puff and try to make the conversation last until we are done with our cigarettes. During a pause, C1 pitches her spring break trip. She says, "Sahara,

you have to come with us on a spring break trip. We will drink and dance. You don't even have to pay now. You can charge your share for the resort on a credit card."

"Come on Sahara, I'm coming too. It's going to be the best trip yet."

After his comment, SL stubs out his cigarette. C1, ROD, and I still have a way to go. While outside the music vibrates the terrace's floor and C1 begins dancing as she talks more about her spring break trip.

"Come on Sahara, you can't spend all of your life mourning Mariah. She would want you to come and have fun. Charge it to a card and then ask your parents to help pay it."

"I don't have a credit card."

"Use your parents' then."

"C1, I can't."

Before I can say more, SL returns. He begs C1 to join him inside. She lets her unfinished cigarette fall on the floor and joins him. I pick the cigarette up and concentrate on the gray ends.

"Sahara, why are you here?" ROD demands as she flicks a cigarette toward the stars.

"They're fun."

"They're privileged fucks."

I respond, "Why are you here?"

"I'm worried."

"I'm not your little sister. Stop worrying and find something else to take care of."

"Fuck you and your shitshow. I lost a father. I lost a friend, too. And I'm losing a friend right now, but you don't care." ROD zips up her jacket. "You don't want anything outside of being sad because you only care about yourself and your pain. Sahara, I get it. Talk to me when you're ready to live."

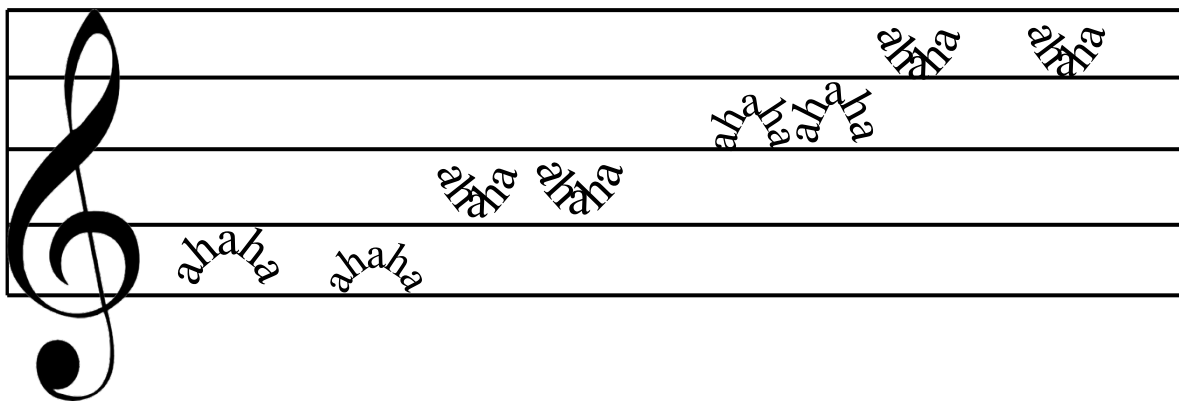
ROD leaves. I stub out my cigarette and walk to the bathroom. It is desolate except for the clunky wet now gray wads of toilet paper on the floor. I watch myself in the mirror and practice the smiles I will feign for the rest of this night. It's getting hard move my lips upward, the high is disappearing. I'm returning to my original self, and everyone can see.

XXXVIII. 3AM

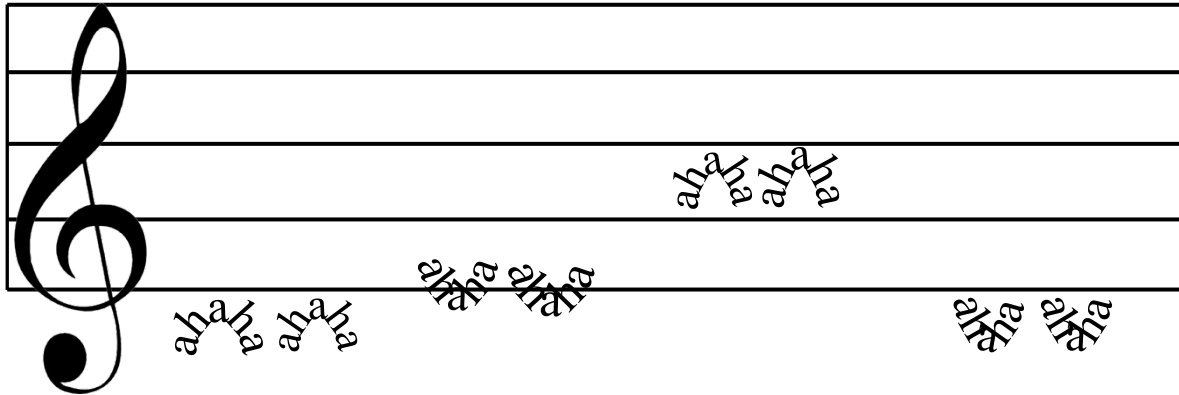
3AM and the city zings. Cars run red, slide green, and ignore yellow. We go into the drugstore and buy booze, chips, candy, and eggs. We migrate until we stand in front of a museum. Our hands are shoved into our pockets until it's our turn to smoke. Someone passes to me, and I take in whatever's inside. The one who I pass to spews words. She keeps spewing, people join in, and the group spewing turns to bellowing, singing, and screaming.

One of us grabs me by the shoulders and instructs for me to stand still because it's time to play the Burroughs game. I stare at an audience of white faces. The instructor places a beer can on my head. The audience throws eggs until the can is shot off. There's egg on my face and yolk dripping from my braids. All I can do is laugh then drink.

3 turns to 4. Someone turns to me, nudging me to join in on the restarted group singing. This time it is the chorus of "Downtown." I know some of the words, so I melodically scream.



Next to where we stand are two tigers that glare at one another. One of us tries to climb but falls off. He, the climber, keeps trying again and again until one of us pulls him off. Angry at the tug, the climber fights the tugger. The rest of us are divided between laughing at the violence or singing louder.



We run into the street, and collectively wave at a taxi. It stops inches away from us. The driver whose face is a blur swears and tacks on extra fees as we pile in. The ride is long. He's taking the streets. Why blame him? In this drive, he sees the money, the waste, the wasted money.

Dear First Year, there's something about school that drives us beyond intelligence, beyond madness, and into waste. It's injected into us. Lives in our wisdom teeth, in the ends of our hair, in the appendix, in the fluctuating fat cells. We are living dumpsters, dumpster scholars crowded in taxis instead of alleys.

XXXIX. Message

Wake up. Mouth dry. Thoughts blurred. Check phone. See a string of messages from the Black Excel group chat. HB 1 updates us about the progress since the town hall meeting. The University is hesitant to fund an orientation that's solely for Black students. Some of the deans are worried about the message the orientation will send to nonblack students. As a response to the University's reluctance, BSC and its allies are having a sit-in at the University hospital and outside the College Dean's office. HB 1 wants all of us there to show our support and she is planning on making rounds to everyone's dorms so that we can all walk over together. A knock echoes from my door. I hesitantly open it and see HB 1.

"Sahara, did you get the message in the Black Excel chat?"

"Yea, I did."

While handing me a flyer, she asks, "You coming? Some of us are in the lobby. We can wait for you."

Quickly, I brush my teeth, push out the DADS, and join them in the lobby. It's 15 degrees out and we're all bundled in scarves, or blankets that double as scarves, and have pocket warmers stuffed in our jackets. As we exit, Front Desk Lady hands us small cups of hot chocolate to drink during the walk over.

.. -- .- --. .. -. .-.. / ... -. -. .- . / -- . .

In the hospital, we sit in the lobby, silent, smelling the iodoformed air underneath the fluorescent lights as we wait to be seen. Once noticed, we hand out xeroxed flyers to those who are willing to receive them. Old grandmothers with iv drips, people delirious with fevers, nurses with wrinkled Betty Boop scrubs all take the flyers and sit with us, and as we sit still and silent,

we remember Mariah and all those we have lost.

. -. -. / --- -. / ... -. . -. .

Dear First Year, I apologize for the previous scene. If I could change time, I would've changed my decision and gone with HB 1. I would've sat with her and everyone else who supported the sit-in.

Instead, I told HB 1, "I can't."

"Why?"

"I'm tired."

"You can't come and support because you tired. Sahara, your message is loud and clear. You don't give a damn about us and what we're trying to do."

HB 1 snatched the flyer out of my hand and left my door. I returned to my bed and received two texts from C1. The first was her in a white bikini with friends who are lifting her up toward the sun. The second was a message that read, *this could be us in Turks & Caicos*.

Turks and Cankles

Curtain opens on C1 and Me sitting on a beach and sipping martinis. So fabulous, yes?

C1 wears a white bikini and her long blonde wig blows in the wind while Me wears a baggy black sweat suit. Fit black men and women wearing blonde wigs and swimwear march with high knees onto the stage. They kneel before C1 and fan her while she's reading "Cook Me Thin."

C1: Isn't this so great? I can feel all the toxins melting out of me.

Me: *(Wipes her forehead)* Yea, me too.

Spotlight gets brighter.

C1: *(Staring in disgust)* You must be hot.

Me: *(Underneath Me is a giant puddle of sweat)* No, I'm fine.

C1: *(Me's puddle of sweat inches closer toward Her and the fanners.)* Are you sure?

Me: Yes.

A fanner slips on a puddle of sweat and snaps her neck. Fanners in speedos carry her off the stage. A new fanner appears from offstage and recommences C1's fanning.

Me: Maybe I will change into something else.

A fanner brings out a bikini the size of a pomegranate seed.

Me: I don't think this will fit.

Fanners and C1 break out into a chorus of laughter.

C1: We will fix you.

A new fanner enters the stage. He is pushing a giant-sized pot that sits on top of a burner. A group of fanners helps Me inside. One of them then turns on the burner.

C1: We will just follow this recipe and we can cook you thin! Isn't this amazing?

Me: (*Face and body melting*) This is great!

Fanners continue fanning C1.

XL. Gears

It's good that Roommate is never here and staying at her BOYfriend's apartment, even I'm disgusted living like this...food stained sheets with piss spotting, a floor covered in empty packets of ramen, used brown pads that are curled into themselves, I'm always in bed...in bed, I can think and be with myself without worrying anyone else will see, in bed, I can cry, I can pee, I can cut, in bed, I can plan how I will kill myself once I have enough energy...in bed, I read Advisor's bolded emails that warn me if I don't attend my Double Consciousness class today, then I'll be dropped from the course, and if I'm dropped, I'll be a part-time student, and if I'm a part-time student, I'll lose all my aid, and Advisor will notify my parents, I can't afford that, I need to get up and pretend one more time, LP and I have concurred this life isn't mine, and it's about high time I be done with it, the only problem is that dying takes a lot of energy we don't have, for now, I stay in bed, here, I'm not living, not dying, and if my Aunt could see me, she would turn off "I will always love you" and tell me that my pissy ass needs to go take a shower cause I'm stinking up the whole block, this isn't fun, I need to think of a game, something outside of Guess the Smoker, outside of Warm Bum, outside of First Black Person, there has to be a game we can play right?, we can play, play this final game of pretend, right?, I walk around the minefield that is my dorm room floor to creep into the bathroom, there, I flush the toilet that's been mellowing for too long, I sit in the tub with my clothes still on, not ready to see the damage I've done to this body, I turn the showerhead on, the water hits, then drenches, I struggle to pull the weight of drenched clothes off of me, I need to get to the skin and try to wash it clean with a washcloth that may have been used to clean the floor back when I still cleaned, I douse the

washcloth with soap, and then scrub the layers of dirt, scabs, and skingunk that sleeve my body, after I am clean enough, I try and put LP away for an hour and play this final game of pretend, I throw away my underwear, and the drenched clothes in my trash bin, I figure they are too filthy to wash, come on Sahara get back in it, come on now just play the game, just do the jig: come on now, come on, git up girl, git git, come on now, come on, git up girl, git git, I get up after returning to the bed for an hour or so, and dress in whatever is mostly clean, I've missed the first two hours of lecture, and by the time I arrive in the hall, there's only 15 minutes left, when the professor's back is turned, I slip into a wooden arm desk chair in the last row, from there I see Double Consciousness Professor's arms are sleeved with tattoos of gears and clocks, half of her head is shaved while the other half is in locs, her skin, russet, I hold in my observations of her, not exactly sure what they are compiling into, DCP ends lecture, and I try to slip out of the chair, but a piece of splintered wood snags the side of my leggings, causing for me to tug until a hole in the cheap fabric is ripped, after I'm freed from the desk, I notice that DCP was watching me the entire time, I walk down the aisle's rubber stairs, my gate, shaky, walking doesn't feel right, I want for someone to grab me by my braids and drag me through campus until we reach my bed, I approach her and make sure to stand several inches, maybe it's even a foot away, LP screams at me, she tells me that I'm still not clean, too dirty, too disgusting to be seen, LP keeps screaming while I am in front of DCP, I'm too tired, no preoccupied, wait no tired, to concoct a smile, did I even brush my teeth? LP laughs, TEHEHE, TEHEHE, TEHEHE, DCP interrupts LP and I, by saying, if you were here the last weeks, you would've heard my warning of getting here early to avoid the seats in the back, sorry I missed the first lecture, I was sick, I respond, she stares at me, then I see the concern that furrows her eyebrows.

She replies, “I appreciate you coming to lecture even with you still being sick. I have a harsh attendance policy but—”

My eyes are to the ground as I reply, “I understand. I’ll drop the class. Have a great quarter.”

“Wait, Sahara, I truly appreciate you coming to lecture despite not feeling well, it shows your commitment. Have you gone to the doctor?”

“No, but I’m pretty sure that I will be fine. I just need to muster up some energy.”

“Well, if you decide you need to go to the doctor, please be careful while at the University hospital. A doctor there is responsible for killing one of my advisees.”

I feel unsteady while our eyes meet each other. I want to collapse into the myself and then onto the floor. Tears rupture out of me. I cannot stop crying.

- / ...- --- .-. - .-

DCP holds onto my shoulders as we walk toward her office. I am still crying. LP screams in my mind, convincing me that the minute that we are free from DCP, we’re going to cut, and then after we will drown ourselves in pills. We’ve had enough fun, and the jig is up and has ended in my embarrassment. In her office, DCP asks if there’s anyone who I can call. I text ROD asking if she can come get me. After a few moments, she responds that she’s on her way.

“Did you know Mariah well?” DCP asks as she hands me a box of tissues.

“Kind of, she was a friend.”

“Have you talked to anyone?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I’m just tired.”

ROD knocks on the door. She sees the redness of my eyes and rushes to my side. DCP

tells us that we can have her office while she is teaching her next class. I continue crying. I'm avoiding DCP and then ROD's eyes, I keep rocking back and forth, again and again, I keep saying sorry, I'm so sorry, and am so sorry that I'm such a burden, but I just can't do this anymore because I just can't anymore and I don't know why I'm this weak and sad. As I'm apologizing, ROD jumps up and hugs me, and says, "I love you, I love you, I love all of you." I keep listening to her voice and the mantra: I love you. I love you. I love all of you. We get up and leave the office to walk back to our dorm. I tighten my grip on her words.

I ask ROD to stay with me in my dorm room because I know that alone I will not survive the night. She enters into bed with me, she is positioned on the outside and becomes a shield of protection as I am curled into her arms. The next morning, ROD helps me clean my room as I call the therapist Mariah recommended what now feels like another lifetime ago.

XLI. Inside

Dear First Year before starting therapy, you will have these thoughts about how therapy will go. You will think that as you sit on the couch, which is so old the colonial ghost haunting it left because they wanted a change of scenery, your therapist will brew a cup of tea, and both of you as a prelude to therapy will talk about how beautiful Cannes is this time of year. After discussing the beauty of Cannes, your therapist will begin braiding your hair and will tell you it's going to be okay. Mid hairbaid, you're hit with a series of epiphanies.

- a.) Momma and Poppa really did love you. They just had a different way of showing it.
- b.) You need to stop believing you're still the kid who was pushed off the monkeybars.

You need to believe in yourself, stand up to your coworkers and boss, and stop agreeing to overtime that you're not getting paid for.

- c.) You're not angry at the world. You're angry at... Yourself.

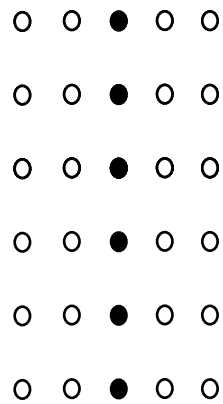
Post breakthrough, you gleefully pay your bill of \$450, and on the drive home you blast "Holding out for a Hero" because YOU ARE THE HERO. You go home, cut your hair, tell your spouse that you're leaving them, and that you're taking the fish, but they can keep the kids.

.-- - / -. --- -. -.

For my first therapy appointment, ROD waits for me outside. She knows how nervous I am because she too has heard the horror stories of therapy gone wrong for people like us. Stories of forced hospitalization, of surprise meetings with deans to force academic leave, of forced medication treatment, of unapproved calls made back home, of worse depression and new debt.

I lie on the questionnaire and say I'm the medium level of sad, that I've never had suicidal ideation, and do not engage in any behaviors of self-harm. On the paper as I am filling in

the bubbles, I make sure that every bubble matches the logic of someone who is in the middle.
The questions don't matter, I only need to show I'm doing perfectly fine.



Yes, I'm the medium level of happy, and am just the typical stressed, over-worked, malnourished college student. Before I enter for my appointment, ROD whispers, "This will be good. But if anything happens, I'm right outside." She knows I'm not typical. She's seen me, and LP, and somehow, she's still here. Lying isn't doing good for me, or ROD, the only person it is helping is LP, but still when I'm in this blue armchair, I can't shake the feeling that this isn't right. While I stare at the room's marigold walls, LP whispers to me that ROD's outside because she pities me. If it's not pity, then she's outside because she doesn't want to carry the guilt of me killing myself while her friend. Therapist prepares to start our session. She's wearing an orange, black, and gold headwrap, and a long black turtle neck dress. She reads out my responses to the questionnaire and all I can imagine is punching my fist through the room's sash windows so that the glass will shred my wrist and forearms.

She takes a break from her introduction and asks, "Sahara, where were you?"

"What do you mean?"

“While I was talking, you didn’t seem fully present.”

“Sorry, I was thinking about all the work I have to do after this session. It’s okay if we don’t use all the time, right? I might have to leave early so I can get started on my assignments.”

“I would prefer for you to stay the entire length of the session. What assignments do you have?”

“The usual. Papers and discussion posts,” I say as I stare at the brass bowl, which rests on the table next to her. Filling the bowl are apples, grapefruits, clementines, and kola nuts. Therapist accepts my answer and returns to the introduction. She talks about how billing works, how to contact her during an emergency, and the type of therapy she practices. During all of this, my eyes concentrate on tracing the blue fleur-de-lys that pattern the honeydew carpet.

“Your last name is—”

“Nigerian,” is how I finish Therapist’s sentence.

Therapist replies, “I know, I’m Nigerian too. I was going to say it’s powerful.”

“Really? I don’t even know what it means.”

“If you want, I can tell you.”

“Sure.”

“It means great being.”

“Cool,” I respond, and I’m not sure whether she’s here to sniff my lack of Nigerianness.

“How do you feel knowing what your name means?”

“Nothing really. Just a word that’s from a language I can’t speak so I’m not really attached to it.”

“Sahara, what do you feel attached to?”

“My family, my friends, and school. I’m so grateful for all my parents’ sacrifices so I

can have the privilege of studying here.”

“If you don’t believe that, then you don’t have to say that to me. You don’t have to placate what you’re feeling because you’re afraid of scaring me or seeming ungrateful.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sahara, I’ve been a therapist for seventeen years, I can tell when someone is hurting. From my experience I’ve learned that when a patient fills in mostly middle bubbles, they’re hiding a truth. So, can I ask you again where did you go during the start of the session? It felt as if you weren’t completely here.”

“Sure.”

“So, where did you go?”

“Sometimes, I get trapped in sad thoughts.”

“What do they say?”

“They remind me everything that’s wrong with me.”

“What happens after the reminder?”

“I think of ways to hurt myself.”

“Do you ever end up hurting yourself?”

“Yes, I cut with whatever I can find.”

“You don’t sound too worried about these thoughts or your self-harm. Why is that?”

“I’ve been sad like this since I was a kid.”

“So why are you here?”

“My best friend thought it would be good.”

“Do you think this will be good?”

“Not really, and I don’t think I’ll be able to afford this.”

“Sahara, don’t worry, we will work out a sliding scale.”

“What’s that?”

“It basically means that you will pay what you can. With money aside, do you think that this will be good for you?”

“Sure, it’s worth a try, right?”

“I think you owe it to yourself to try. Let’s make a promise. How about we see each other two times a week, and when you get trapped in your thoughts, try to write them down.”

“Why?”

“It can make these thoughts real, but in a different way. It’s helped patients in the past, but if it doesn’t help you, then we will try something else. Writing them down, helps me to understand more how your pain works.”

“Okay.”

Therapist stands up from her chair, she reaches her hand into the brass bowl, and an army of bracelets fall down her wrists and touches the fruit. From the bowl, she picks up a kola nut, and she then hands it to me before she continues speaking.

“Before I start working with any of patients, I always give them a kola nut as a way of welcoming you into this partnership. You can keep it or eat it.”

“Thank you.”

“Sahara, no matter what, I’m here to help you, and in this room you and your thoughts will always be safe.”

I take the kola nut and cradle it in my palm. The outside is pale fuchsia and has a brown line that loops around it. While in my head, I think of the kola nuts that bottom the paisley print lined drawers inside the kitchen island’s cabinets back home in Michigan. Though I’ve held kola

nuts in my hand before, this one that is the size of a peach's pit, feels so heavy. Heavy. Heavy like my body on the dancefloor. No. Heavy like my body in bed. No, not that. Heavy like—like, something, which is weighted with joy.

During ROD and I's walk back to our dorm, my hand rubs the kola nut and my fingertips memorize the feel of the looped line's indentation. As I try to figure out which heavy is embodied in this nut, I think of Therapist working with me, and I wonder which me will end up surviving, and where the other versions of me will end up going.

XLII. Direction

TA for Biological Warfare wears an old high school shirt that reads *ToxicRobotics*. His old white shirt has holes around the collar, and sweat stains burned into the underarm. TA looks shocked when I take a seat at the back.

In front of me are four rows of steel desks. At these desks are black high heeled shoe shaped chairs of Swedish design. The students in the chairs are trying to figure a population. I'm confused and keep staring at the SMART board. Students who have figured out the problem file out one by one.

Lab ends.

I keep staring at the screen, the screen tints to a darker shade of gray, the black letters are morphing. TA glares at me. He comes over and snatches the computer mouse away from my hand. He solves the problem in ten minutes. As he's packing up, TA quips, "If you were in class, then you would know how to solve the problems."

I'm left alone in the lab and keep staring at the SMART board. I'm too tired to cry, too frozen in my seat to cut. I can't keep going at this rate. There has to be a change.

XLIII. Inside

I tell Therapist of LP, of suicidal plans, of school, of courses, of Mother, and of Father. I tell her of Brother 1 and 2, of my Aunt, of being a terrible friend to ROD, and of C1, and then of Mariah. Therapist listens and then asks of Mariah. Instead, I tell her of school, of dreaming of dying, of being a bad Nigerian, of being a spoiled American, of hating Novi, of thoughts and other what-nots. She asks whether I still think of Mariah. I try and tell her of other things, of being a mutt, of being too scared of going to class, of the things LP says to me while in therapy sessions, of anxiety shits that smell like vodka and rancid meat, of my fat, of this, and not too much of sad that.

She interrupts my fact listing with, “Do you still think of Mariah?”

This is her third time asking about Mariah. I don’t think our sixth session will end without me speaking about her. I readjust myself in the armchair, leaning back as far as I can until I’m pressed against the armchair’s wooden backing. Therapist and I stare at one another and the silence ices inward. I don’t have a joke to crack open this sheet of silence. Therapist is watching, waiting.

She states, “Let’s try and talk about her today. Do you still think about Mariah?”

“Yes. I think about her death. Missing her. Not really getting a chance to know more about her.”

“When you think about her, where do you hold her and her death?”

“Close to me.”

“Do you think you’ll ever be able to let her death go?”

“I don’t see the point of letting it go.”

“Why?”

I snap back, “I don’t see the point.”

“Sahara, even if you don’t see the point of letting her death go, can part of you imagine what letting go of both her death, and your grief might feel like?”

“So, you want me to forget her?”

“No, I didn’t say that. What I’m trying to ask is, if you’re always so preoccupied with death, where do you hold your life?”

XLIV. White Oprah continued...

In my room, I distract myself from Therapist's question with finally taking down my hair. I can't put it off for any longer—my buildup has started braids of their own. Three hours in, my arms are sore, my fingertips numb from unraveling. I'm not even close to finishing a quarter of my head, and I still have to try and understand all my missed assignments for Biological Warfare, whatever is in the syllabus for Colonial Africa,¹³¹ and then think about a final project for Double Consciousness.

When I finally unravel and reach a braid's root, I'm yanking on it, trying to get it free, and once it is, I toss the discarded pieces of hair onto the floor. My floor is covered with pieces of cut and unraveled braids that range from the size of Laffy Taffies to TI 89 Calculators. My body aches from being stuck in the same position, and I limp over to the mirror. While there, I see all the hair that's left to take down. I scream, "fuck it," and start cutting the braids. The braids fall into the sink, the bathtub, the toilet, the trashcan, the dirty corner between the lower door hinge and wall. I smile. Even though my hair looks like the Cynthia doll, at least it's free.

As I exit the bathroom, Roommate enters, and she looks at my head as she limps into the bedroom. She sits on her bed and is still staring while her hand tries to roll the pain out of her flesh. To avoid talking,¹³² I put in my headphones and open the BW textbook and start trying to figure out 2007's outbreak population vector for measles in Japan. Her stares are too loud, I take out my headphones.

I report to her, "I wanted something different, and I'll clean up everything today."

¹³¹ It's probably white anthro nonsense.

¹³² It's been so long since we've been in this dorm room together that I think we've forgotten how to interact with one another, but if she touches my bonnet again, she's catching these hands.

“Oh no worries. I love the new do,” she says as she stares at the hair that’s littering our dorm room.

“Thanks. How are you doing?”

“Okay, but I think I pulled something at the gym.”

“Oh no,” I respond and return deciphering why measles had the nerve to run North, South, East, and West in 2007.

“It’s such a bummer. Working out is the only way to keep me distracted from life stuff.”

“I feel that. Sometimes, running errands is a nice little distraction. You know, we’re running low on toilet paper.”

“Huh, maybe I’ll do a little retail therapy. What else do you do for life distractions?”

“Listening to music, but I haven’t had a chance to discover anything new. I’ve fallen behind with my classes.”

“Wait, I have the PERFECT playlist and the PERFECT thing for a life distraction.”

Roommate staggers to her desk drawer and takes out a charcoal face mask. On a sticky note writes down five songs.¹³³ She hands me the sticky and says, “Take a break, put on this face mask, it’s great—super healing and rejuvenating. While it’s on, listen to these songs. Oh, and once you’re done, do you think you could get some toilet paper? We’re running low again.”

.-- -.- / -. --- - / --. .. ---. / .. - / .- / --. ---

I listen the songs and put the mask on my skin. It burns. Does this mean the healing is happening?

133 1. “Get Free” by Major Lazer,
2. “Happy” by Pharrell Williams
3. “Work B**Ch” by Britney Spears
4. “We Can’t Stop” by Miley Cyrus
5. “Roar” by Katy Perry

Playlist for Healing

1. “My Love is Your Love” by Whitney Houston
2. “Free Your Mind” by En Vogue
3. “Brown Skin” by Inda.Arie
4. “Feels Good” by Tony! Toni! Toné
5. “Let’s Go Crazy” by Prince
6. “Get Free” by Major Lazer
7. “Respect” by Aretha Franklin
8. “Flawless” by Beyoncé
9. “Pretty Girl Rock” by Keri Hilson
10. “I Will Always Love You” by Whitney Houston

“Have you thought about where you keep your life?”

“I thought about it, and I know you asked this a week ago, but I still don’t have an answer. I’ve been trying to focus on school. Here, I don’t have any life.”

“Sahara, have you thought about transferring schools?”

“Then I’ll have to apply to school again. What if the next school is worse? What if I don’t get any scholarship money? I don’t know whether the problem is me or the school.”

“Why does it have to be either or?”

“It just is.”

“What if it’s both.”

“So, you agree there’s something wrong with me.”

“Sahara, I’m not going down that thought path with you. Your mind operates differently and sometimes medication can help with its mechanics.”

“So, on my own, I’m beyond saving.”

“No. I didn’t say that. Sahara, failure and death aren’t the only two options for your life. LP might tell you they are, but if you fully believed her, then you wouldn’t still be in therapy.”

“I don’t know why I’m still coming.”

“No one is forcing you to be in therapy or here in school. You keep deciding to come back. In the past, I’ve had patients who by the fourth session decided to leave this school.”

“I can’t leave school. I don’t think that I can do that to my parents. They were so proud that I got in. Some happiness even returned to their marriage.”

“For a moment try and forget about them. Trust me, I personally know how hard it is to

escape from the cultural pressure on both sides, but for a moment, let's take your Mother and Father out of the equation. Without considering them, do you really want to stay here?"

"I'm not sure. I wish I could function, and not live in my head. But I don't think pills are the answer."

"Sahara, therapy and medication aren't answers. They're support systems. You might stay on campus, you might try medication, you might keep seeing me for the rest of your time in school, you might do all of this, and still have days you cut and feel suicidal, but you're trying, and you're using the support that's around you."

"There's no guarantee."

"Exactly, there's no guarantee, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try."

XLVI. Outside

After the session ends, I join ROD at the Voices of Reason diner. We share a pizza with sauce so dry that its only purpose is to paint the pizza a pale red. The layer of cheese is hardened and cracked open. The taste is cheap, and for us, this means it's bearable. I think ROD and I have entered a new normal. Most conversations only center around therapy. I don't think the image of me crying while surrounded by my room's filth will ever leave her mind. I know that I need to move beyond the embarrassment, but I can't, just yet. Everything that I've put ROD through these past two quarters continues to play in my mind. When I'm tempted to try and destroy this friendship, I remind myself that she knows and loves me. She loves me. She loves even the nasty bits of me.

-. .- .- .- .- .- / .- .- .- .- .- .- / .- .- .- .- .- .- / .- .- .- .- .- .- / .- .- .- .- .- .- / .- .- .- .- .- .- / .- .- .- .- .- .-

The waitress comes and refills our coffee. I concentrate on scratching the laminate. I keep going until it the sticky grime gets under my nubbed nails. While scratching I think of the sound of Mariah scratching her head, of Jen, and of how both of their pictures hang side by side in this diner along with the other customers who have died.

I tell ROD, "I'm sorry." She has the last of the pizza stuffed in her mouth. Her cheeks are puffed out with food. Her eyes, confused. She tussles her hair and then with her Xena t-shirt wipes a coffee stain off her glasses.

"For what?"

"Being a shitty friend and completely abandoning you to hang out with C1."

"You were pretty terrible this year. It hurt me when you said that shit about me not being your sister."

"I was scared of scaring you away. I get these thoughts in my heard and I wish I could

bang them out, so they live somewhere else. But they stay with me, and I'm terrified of infecting other people with them."

It's okay for you to be depressed and have these thoughts, it's not okay for you to isolate yourself, and call me only when you need something. That's just shitty. I love you, and you're a sister to me, but this friendship can't stay like this."

"It won't. I'm learning how to be open. I now know with a 100% certainty that can't keep living like this. I'm been an ungrateful friend, but that time is over." I grab ROD's hand. "If you get another tattoo appointment, I'm there for the consultation and actually tatting. If you wanna do couples' therapy for this friendship, I'm down. You're my ride or die, and it's time that I start being yours."

"Come with me to this Gaming lock-in spring quarter."

"I'm there. I'll even buy a Zelma shirt."

"It's Zelda."

"That's what I said." ROD and I fall back into our familiar smiles. "I do have one last favor to ask."

"You stop looking at me with those eyes?"

"What eyes?"

"The oh shit this a sad bitch eyes."

ROD cackles and then responds, "I'm actually looking at that haircut of yours. We have to fix it. It's so bad."

"Is it that bad? I wanted something different."

"It's really bad, but it can be fixed." We laugh. The brew in our dirty cupped coffee vibrates with us. ROD stops and attempts to breathe. She picks up the coffee mug and declares,

“To a fresh start.”

I repeat, “To a fresh start.” Our cups clank. Coffee flies out and dampens the dried out pizza.

“Sahara, I’m happy you’re talking to someone.”

“I am too, but my therapist wants me to start on medication, and I kinda don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“It seems like white nonsense.”

“So, you’re willing to get high off coke, which is actually white nonsense, but you aren’t willing to try something that can make you feel better, does that make sense?”

“Well damn when you put it like that.”

During our walk, she shows me wigs that she’s bookmarked for me to look at. The wigs all range in style from grandma to great grandma. I take out my phone, snap a picture of my hair, and message the Black Excel groupchat, *halp!!* People respond with tips and tricks. HB 1 promises she can do my hair tomorrow and will give me the Nigerian Princess special which includes a deep condition, fresh cut, and styling. Even after solving my hair emergency, the chat is still ignited with notifications of us celebrating. We celebrate the three students who kicked out LC from the BSC. We celebrate the petitions for wage raises and auditing options for the dining halls workers. We celebrate the shared study guides and notes for all of us who haven’t been able to get back into the swing of classes since Mariah’s passing. All night, we celebrate and share our love for one another. We are no longer simply surviving. We are beginning to thrive.

... - .- .- - - .- .- .- .- / - - - - .- .- .- .- .-

The next day, my knees are pressed against a plush red bathmat while I kneel over HB 1’s bathtub. She applies her deep conditioning treatment into my hair. I pray this treatment isn’t

secretly Nair. We haven't had a full conversation since I let her down with not attending the sit-in at the hospital. I wonder if she has forgiven me as she massages my scalp. My eyes lift forward and see the beginning of the gold decal stick on crowns that decorate her tile walls. The mini gold crowns match her shower curtain that is patterned with this insignia of royalty. At the center of the shower curtain sits the words, *Boss Bitch*. HB 1 leads me out the bathroom and into her kitchen. She decided that after her first year, she would never live in a janky ass double again. So, she hustled and saved, secured her suite, and now two years later, it's the perfect spot for a hair studio.¹³⁴ In her kitchen with a floor that is half red carpet, half cream tile, sits a royal purple office chair. Next to the chair is HB 1's treasure trove, a glittery pink styling cart packed with banana clips, pressing combs, braiding hair, edge control, flat irons, plastic caps, face masks, gold and silver braid jewelry, wig brushes, brush brushes, wide tooth combs, combs as skinny and tiny as spaghetti noodles, rubber bands, hair ties, styling strips, and spritz.

The chair faces a blank wall and as I sit, HB 1 says, "If you want to watch anything on Netflix, then I can turn on the projector." HB 1 points to the projector that she has elevated on a DIY platform behind us. HB 1 puts a plastic cap over my head. She takes out clay, lavender oil, and apple cider vinegar. She asks, "Can I put a face mask on you?"

"Yes, but don't hate me if you end up touching my pimples."

"Sahara, I would never hate you. Keep your eyes closed and relax." She places clumps of the mask on my face, and slowly smooths them out in circular motions. Lavender fills the air. Though the clay is cool, HB 1's touch is warm. The silence between us is gentle. I peek my eyes open and I see the outlines of her forest green pixie cut wig.

¹³⁴ Dear First Year, for legal reasons I will say the following, we don't pay HB 1. She's not running a business out of her dorm. Sometimes a friend will happen to leave \$20-150 on her dresser after HB 1 did their hair. If someone decides to leave money on a dresser and refuses to take it back, you can't punish HB 1 for that. People drop money all the time.

“I’m sorry for not being there when you—”

“It’s fine, but we really needed you there. We only survive if we stick together. We don’t have the luxury of disappearing when we want to. We need to fight for one another.” HB 1 taps my shoulder so that I will open my eyes. She tells me, “Get your life together, so you can fight with us.”

“I’m trying. I’ve started talking with someone and think I might have to stop hanging out with a friend. We aren’t good for one another.”

“Oh really, what was their name?”

“C1.”

“Oh, her. She’s back from galivanting. Keep away from her. I know we all got pain, but she’s something else.”

“What do you mean?”

HB 1 leaves for the bathroom and returns with a hot washcloth. She lays it flat on my face as she tells her tale of C1. “During C1 and I’s first year, we were part of the BSC. She was super excited to explore her Blackness for the first time, and we were so excited to be part of her journey. Things were great until she kept bringing her boyfriend around. He’s this old ass dude with lurking eyes. She invited all of us to his bar for free drinks and a bunch of us went. Like hell yea, free drinks, downtown, this is basically an episode of *Girlfriends*.” HB 1 removes the face cloth and wipes the mask away before rubbing moisturizer into my skin. We return to her bathroom and wash the conditioner out my hair. Over the water’s roar, I hear HB 1’s ignited words. “A couple drinks in, her boyfriend started saying all this problematic shit, then started feeling up on all of us, and grabbing C1 in any kind of way. We asked him to stop, and he made us pay for the drinks. The bill was \$450, and he said, ‘Make sure you tip 30%.’ So, I’m pissed,

but trying to stay calm. While I'm calm, other members are freaking out that they don't have the money and are scared he will call the cops. I tell the other members of BSC to leave and that I will handle the bill. I put down an empty visa card, looked him in his tattered face, and told him and C1 that I was going to the bathroom upstairs. My ass ran out of there so quick. The next day C1 apologized to me and said he didn't mean it. I told her that she couldn't bring him around anymore, and if she didn't feel safe setting those boundaries with him, I would help, and would be there for her if she decided to leave him. After that, she snapped at me, and told Dean Richard that I did hair out of my old dorm. I almost got expelled. Thank goodness I didn't have a digital trail of the payments."

HB 1 begins blow drying my hair until there are no cool spots left on my scalp. She's clipping my ends as I respond, "That's insane."

"Then get this, she comes to my dorm to get her perm. I may have left it in too long, but I was so angry by the sheer audacity of her coming to me after almost getting me expelled. Trust me, I know how hard it can be to leave someone you love who also hurts you. It took my sister years to leave. And when pain like that isn't transformed it's transmitted. All of us stopped messing with her because she kept trying to hurt us."

HB 1 applies mousse on my hair. She wraps styling strips around my head, and places me underneath her dryer. I dose off, thinking of C1 and the facts about our friendship of self-indulgence. I was so much of a parasite that I didn't even care why C1 escapes the way that she does.

XLVII. Dosage

Doctor started me on 10 mgs. After my body adjusts to the dosage, the plan is for me to take more pills bit by bit until I've reached 40mg. I keep taking these meds, even though it's causing vivid dreams, upset stomach, a three-drink limit, stank breath, spitting up, insomnia, decreased masturbation, hot flashes, dizziness, diarrhea, did I mention vivid dreams? Example, last night I dreamed of a man whose hand was a cane, and he pointed toward people standing inside glass cases. Example, another night I dreamed Roommate auctioned off parts of my body to the highest bidders.

Despite these side effects, I told Therapist and ROD I would try. Trying includes me not becoming folded into thoughts, which means me throwing away razors, me keeping the room clean, me showering every day, me eating enough food to fill me but not enough to clog the sink with all the spit up, me telling Mother that there are days I get sad, me trying to believe Mother when she says she loves me, me writing down LP's words on paper and then burning the paper, me putting an ice cube or snapping a rubber band on my thigh or my wrist when I'm desperate to cut, me writing down things I did even if I spent most the day crying, me telling Therapist of my fucked up imagination, me screaming into a pillow when LP becomes too loud, me promising myself that if I can survive this night, then I can survive the next one and the other nights thereafter, me saying no to drugs and yes that includes pot...for now.

A lot is happening to Me. Will Me survive?

-.-- --..-- / -.-- / / .-- .. -.. -..

After therapy while on the bus, I return a missed call from Mother, but Brother 1 answers.

“What do you want?” He shouts. Brother 2 is singing “Uptown Funk” in the background.

“Why do you have Mom’s phone?”

“She’s busy helping Brother 2 with his audition.”

“Fine, I’ll call back later.”

“Where do you gotta go?”

“I’m in school. I have work to do. Plus, I wanna talk to Mom.”

“Well, she’s busy. Talk to me.”

“You won’t get it. It’s grown up stuff.”

“I’m almost 17, which is almost 18. Try me.”

“18 isn’t grown and almost doesn’t count.”

“18 is grown. Once I’m 18, I’m going to school, and not coming back home. I don’t even know why you come home for breaks.”

“After being away, you’ll start to miss home. I know Mom and Dad are sometimes are assholes, but they’re trying.”

“What’s wrong with you? When did you start missing home?”

“Home isn’t that bad.”

“You’re just tired of eating ramen.”

“No, I’m not dumbass.”

“Then, what’s up? Come on, you can tell me. I’m almost 18.”

“Fine, I’ve been sad lately and am taking something to help with it.”

“Like medicine?”

“Yea, like medicine.”

“Don’t tell Mom or Dad. Don’t tell them until you’re ready. Remember how they freaked

out when they thought I was taking Adderall, but it was mints.”

“Yea.”

“If they find out, they’ll freak out. Mother will start a prayer circle and Father will say *oh my God*, until God comes down to see what’s up.”

“Fuck, you’re right. I just want to talk to someone about it. My doctor thinks it might help me after a few weeks, but only after a few weeks.”

“Try it out to see. Maybe I can look up some stuff online to see if people have some tips, but you’re okay right? You’re annoying and all, but you’re still my older sister. I, you know—”

“You what?”

“Come on, man. I love you, and if anything happened to you, then we would have to have your wake and UB would come.”

“We can’t have that.”

“Right, Dad’s finally agreed with Mom and isn’t allowing him to visit anymore.”

“Well, that’s a little progress.”

Healthy Things Done Today

1. Showered for more than fifteen minutes
2. Washed Face
3. Brushed teeth twice
4. Oiled Body
5. Wore Clean Clothes
6. Went to Class
7. Took Meds
8. Replaced bathroom napkins with toilet paper

... - .. -... -.. / - -. -.- .. -. --.

It's two weeks into medication and I've lost five pounds. Who needs Atkins and AA when you have antidepressants? Last night, I ate glass noodles, corn, and carrots, and watched the sink swallow the specks of food. Last week, I tried drinking, but ended up passed out in the dorm lobby. Front Desk Lady helped me upstairs before RA returned from wherever RAs hide. FDL told me that if she sees me drunk like those white kids again, she'll beat the black back in me. When I told Therapist, she couldn't help but laugh at FDL and her old school ways. After she laughed, she reminded me that in time my appetite will return, and that it's important to grow comfortable in my mind and body. She warned me that I probably won't be able to drink as much as I used to for a while,¹³⁵ I told her before we start all the body positive stuff, let's make sure that LP doesn't take me over, again. Therapist agreed to the deal.

-.-- --- ..- / -. . - - / .- . ---. - - .. - / -.-- --- ..- .- -.. -.-.

Dear First Year, I'm trying to unlearn almost two decades worth of thought patterns. I'm trying to say no to afternoon drinks, nose candy, and cutting. Some nights, I repeat to myself, I don't need them, I don't need them, I don't need them; however, saying no is hard when you're used to quenching your appetite for self-destruction.

Today, I am meeting with C1, even though I have been declining her invitations to go out, and I haven't since a few weeks in the quarter. We meet at Dorian, and she orders drinks for the both of us. It is the middle of the day and I can see the bar in the sober light. Wallpaper is peeling from the walls. After a new bartender sweeps up pieces of shattered glass from behind the bar, she pours water into the vodka when she thinks no one is watching. This place isn't Oz.

I ask C1, "What happened to the other bartender?"

¹³⁵ Upon hearing this news, my liver became so excited that it agreed to stop filling for divorce from the rest of my body.

“Who?”

“The woman who had my number.”

“Oh her, I don’t know.”

“Is she okay?”

C1 looks at me confused. “Probably. She found a new job. If you’re so concerned, then text her.” After saying, *text her*, she winks at me, then guzzles the last of her cynar and soda. I sip from my bottle, trying not to get too drunk from the cider. I think of Bartender and realize that years of living in my mind has made me forget that people can leave, and still be okay. C1 passes me a shot. As we take it, we make sure to look into each other’s eyes to ensure we don’t have seven years of bad sex. The bags underneath her eyes are puffy. There’s a bruise on her right wrist. Her red lipstick is faded, some of it rests on her pearly tooth or in a smear underneath her chapped lips.

“C1 are you okay?”

“Yea, why wouldn’t I be?” Our friendship isn’t strong enough to reach past this question. So, we move onto another question that is punctuated with familiarity. “Sahara, are you coming to this spring break trip? We have room for one more in the suite. Come, but don’t be a buzzkill.”

“I’m sorry but I won’t be able to go on the trip.”

“Whatever. You ready for the next round?”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t.”

“I thought you were my party friend. You don’t want to have fun anymore?”

“It’s not that. I’ve started therapy and some new medication. I’m working on drinking less.”

“Sahara, you don’t need any of that. You’re just gonna end up a pill head like everyone else on campus. You need to have fun and enjoy your life. Come with me on my vacation, and I promise everything will be better.”

“This is something that I want to try and if it doesn’t work, I’ll go back to the same old me.” I finish my cider. The waitress asks if I want another. I respond no and ask for the check. I tell C1, “I honestly can’t even afford the trip.”

“How are you affording therapy?”

“I have a sliding scale. Honestly, it’s—”

“Whatever. I’ll find someone else.”

The bill comes. She offers to pay, but I decline. I put down the cash, and we hurry out the bar before BO gets word that C1 is here. Though they have a vacation planned, C1 and BO aren’t on speaking terms. I wait on the bus while she’s waiting on her Uber. C1 is going uptown for a party. I head back to campus for therapy.

When I enter my dorm, Front Desk Lady tells me that a package has arrived for me. While she complains about the University kids who keep forgetting their ids, her clementine shaped lips shimmer with sparkling burgundy lipstick. She has me sign for the package and I rip it open. Inside is one copy of my Aunt's zine, and a note from Mother that reads, "*Kenu, it took some time to find but here is your copy. Your aunt loved you so much.*" After opening the zine, I see another note that is scribbled onto the cover's back. This note says, "*To my Sahara, don't let anything stop you from telling your story. I will always love you. Love, Aunt Nita.*" While my eyes obsess over the note, I am left wondering how could Mother forget my aunt left a copy for me? Though I'm furious, I put my anger aside because all that matters is that I have it now.

"Are you crying?" FDL asks.

Behind me is a line of students who are annoyed that I'm taking so long. One of them shouts out, "Hurry up."

FDL responds by placing an *Out of Office* sign on her window. The students collectively grumble, and then return to their dorm rooms. She asks me again if I am crying. Before responding, I touch my cheeks. They aren't wet. My eyes must be watering.

I reply, "No. I'm happy and shocked. This is a copy of my aunt's zine that she left for me before she passed away."

"Let me see that." I hand it over. FDL flips through the pages. She grins and her eyes begin to water as well. "This is so beautiful. Baby promise me that you'll never forget this moment, and how happy it made you feel. Make it always present even when it's in the past."

She hands the zine back to me. I tell her, "I won't" before I leave for ROD's room.

Upstairs in her room, ROD tosses the pile of clothes on her bed to the floor. While next to each other on her bed, we marvel over the zine.

ROD comments, “This version feels so much more real than the library’s copy.”

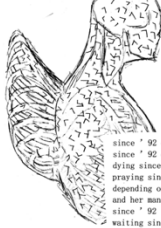
I respond, “Right, I’m not sure how. I can’t believe she left this for me.”

“Sahara, this is amazing. This is yours, forever.”



all these tears
got to be going somewhere

'92 who knew when malice green died,
i was dying too
since '92 been sick with THIS
since '92 everyone known in the
neighborhood since '92
since '92 can't work
since '92 gonna won't i look



since '92 eating oysters and soups
since '92 crying since '92
dying since '92
praying since '92
depending on sister
and her man since '92
since '92
waiting since '92



196



JULY 19, 1990-12, 1990 A LONDON PUBLICATION
JET

ARTHUR ASHE'S
New Book, 'Days Of Grace,'
Tells Of His Three Burdens:
Race, AIDS And Davis Cup

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen

sister asked what are we
gonna do about THIS
told her doctor
said there's
nothing to do
sister said didn't
ask about doctor
asked about us

can't think about us
cause body isn't
size with THIS
all i asked sister



please keep loving me,
never leave me
please make me always here

who's gonna find me
who's gonna bury me
nobody touching



the neighborhood
girls who got THIS



"just let me come, i
need this center."



give me life or no death
life with THIS living death

Jet's Top 20 Albums



Title	Artist and Label
1. NEVER LET ME GO	Luther Vandross (A&M)
2. REMIXES (J. JARVIS) (J. JARVIS)	J. Jarvis (J. Jarvis)
3. PETER FOR DA PLAYS	Al Green (A&M)
4. IT'S ABOUT TIME	Luther (A&M)
5. can't dance in heaven	Boyz II Men (J&R)
6. living in bed	Wendy (A&M)
7. stuck with sister's a man's a books	MCs (J&R)
8. stuck with THESE	Wendy (A&M)
9. PRECIOUS	Boyz II Men (J&R)
10. TELL ME WHY YOU LEFT	Charles Brown (J&R)
11. PRODIGAL	Johnny Gill (J&R)
12. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
13. SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
14. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
15. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
16. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
17. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
18. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
19. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)
20. THE SILENCE	Boyz II Men (J&R)

not living not dying



sister,
even though
that baby got your loud mouth
if i could
i would
hold her forever



need that money that white money
need that white money to be seen



that money not coming till the 33rd



I place the zine in my backpack and hug ROD before I leave for therapy. With Therapist, I come up with battle strategies for finals. With her help, I write an email to NCP,¹³⁶ asking her to write a letter of support for me to have my in-class exams and missed assignments made into research papers, which would be due by the end of the quarter. By the end of my session, NCP responds that she is more than willing to help. My homework at the end of therapy is coming up with my final research paper ideas. It was easy coming up with convincing final ideas for Colonial Africa and Biological Warfare. For CA, I pitched a research paper about the Nigerian Civil War. Then for BW, I pitched a research project on the representation of the AIDS crisis, using my Aunt's zine as a primary source. My ideas along with NCP's letter of support was enough to convince them to allow the change.

Double Consciousness was a different story. By the third week, everyone in the class already had outlined their final research papers, which DCP wanted the class to treat as a practice thesis. There was no way that I could catch up with the research needed, while also working on my research papers for my two other courses. The only solutions I came up with were to withdraw or ask for an extension, bullshit the assignment, and pray for something above a D. With these two options in hand, I emailed DCP.

¹³⁶ Naughty Cells Professor

Umail- Office Hours Availability?



Sahara@umail.com

Office Hours Availability?

6 messages

Sahara <sahara@umail.edu>
To: DCP <DCP@umail.edu>

Wed, Mar 4, 2014 at 3:21 PM

Hello DCP,

I hope you're having a great week. I was looking over the syllabus and saw that you are willing to offer accommodations for students. Are you available anytime this week for office hours to discuss a possible extension for the final project?

Sincerely,
Sahara

DCP <DCP@umail.edu>
To: Sahara <sahara@umail.edu>

Thurs, Mar 5, 2014 at 5:11 AM

Dear Sahara,

This week has been good but busy with coordinating the new course and the memorial celebration for Mariah. I'm afraid I won't be available for my office hours this week. I am more than willing to offer you an extension of a week; however, I fear that an extension of a week still will not be enough time. If you are willing, I would recommend you take an incomplete in the class and use the summer or part of next year to finish the assignment. Please let me know as soon as possible of your decision.

Sahara <sahara@umail.edu>
To: DCP <DCP@umail.edu>

Thurs, Mar 5, 2014 at 1:03 PM

Thank you so much for this offer, and after much consideration, I think taking the incomplete for this course is my best option.

DCP <DCP@umail.edu>
To: Sahara <sahara@umail.edu>

Thurs, Mar 5, 2014 at 2:42 PM

Okay, I will contact your advisor and finalize the logistics of it all. I am excited to see your project. Will your project be critical or creative?

Sahara <sahara@umail.edu>
To: DCP <DCP@umail.edu>

Thurs, Mar 5, 2014 at 2:43 PM

So far, it's a creative assignment formatted like a mock thesis.

DCP <DCP@umail.edu>
To: Sahara <sahara@umail.edu>

Thurs, Mar 5, 2014 at 2:47 PM

Looking forward to reading!!! Good luck with finals :)

XLIX. Inside

“Sahara, where do you want to start today?”

“My professor is willing to give me an incomplete so that I have enough time to finish the course paper.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I’m worried that I’ll end up disappointing my professor even after she was willing to give me a second chance.”

“How would you disappoint her?”

“By writing a bad final project.”

“What would it mean for you to write a bad final project?”

“It would mean that I’m a terrible, worthless idiot who can’t do something as simple as writing.”

“Do you really believe that you’re a terrible, worthless idiot? Even when you take into account how hard you’ve been working to heal yourself.”

“If I didn’t believe it, then I wouldn’t have said it.”

“Well, I believe there’s another part of you that believes you’re stronger than what you remember.”

“If that part’s there, then why can’t I see it?”

“It takes time, and you have yourself self-trained to see the other part. Resulting in a refusal to see anything that exists outside the truth you and your depression have created for yourself.”

“What do mean?”

“Stop fighting against parts of yourself. What if you were to accept that your mind works differently, accept, that despite the madness of this school, you belong there for some reason, accept your life as it is now, and see if through accepting, there is another battle that you can fight. Sahara if time didn’t matter and there was something else that you could fight, what would it be?”

I’m stunned to silence. Part of me listens to Therapist and her words construct images of my time here, of my Aunt, and of Brother 1 and 2, and how I can fight for them. The other part thinks of how I want to fight.

I respond, “I would fight the bullshit that killed Mariah. I would fight the shame that my Aunt carried into her death. I would fight LP. I would spray graffiti all through this bullshit tower. I would scream out a battle cry for everyone to hear.”

“Well alright then. Together, let’s figure out your battle plan.”

Couples' Therapy

LP and Me sit on a long white couch directly across from Therapist who is writing on her legal pad. Therapist wears a giant white turtleneck and has a green silk shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Me wears a rockabilly dress with green and blue polka dots. Her hands are covered with white gloves. Her hair, pin curled. Next to Me, LP sits with arms folded. Her hair is short and slicked back. She's wearing a black suit with a white button down and a skinny red and white pin striped tie. Everyone in the room is smoking cigarettes.

Therapist: What brings both of you into couples' therapy today?

LP: I don't know. Ask her.

Therapist: Me, what brings both of you in today?

Me: Although LP is my life partner, I think it best if we consciously uncouple for a little bit.

LP: Well, sugar plum that ain't happening. I'm not going anywhere and you're sticking to the plan.

Therapist: What plan?

LP: We were supposed to be Bonnie and Clyde. But now she's changed her mind again. First, it's yes, I'm going to die, and now it's no I'm going to live. *(Takes a giant huff of her cigarette.)* Tomorrow, it'll be I only want to die a little bit. I can't keep up with her anymore. *(LP leaps out of her seat. She's running her fingers through her hair.)* And get this, she's downsizing the house that I've lived in for almost two decades.

Therapist looks confused. She isn't exactly sure what she's gotten herself into, but she needs to find a way out. Her dinner reservations are in 20 minutes, and the restaurant is a seventeen-

minute drive away.

Therapist: I think that it might be healthy for both of you to compromise.

LP: How? There's no compromising with her! Look at her, she's a mess.

Therapist: *(Looks at Me)* Actually, she looks copacetic.

LP: *(Flabbergasted)* What you're on her side now? You know what, we're leaving. I don't trust this quack anyway. She's trying to separate us. *(Grabs Me by the arm)* Who is she anyway? I've known you for almost twenty years. Her, she's just magically appeared and wants you to make all these changes. I know the true you. If you're not ready today, then tomorrow, and if not tomorrow, it'll be the day after that. You always come back to the same conclusion. This shrink is wasting our time and our money.

Me: *(Snatches her arm away)* Dear, I've decided I'm going to live.

LP: *(Sits on the couch. Arms return to being folded.)* No matter what you say, no matter what you do, I will always be here.

Me: I know, and I also know you're moving out.

LP: *(Hands on forehead)* Where will I live?

Therapist: *(Therapist looks at her wrist, staring at an imaginary watch.)* Well that's our time for today. For next session, let's work on figuring out where LP can live.

L. Inside

Therapist begins our last session before spring break with, “Have you thought about how you’re going to fight?”

“Yes.” I bend down and bring out the personal copy of my Aunt’s zine. The binding is stapled and loose, the cover isn’t laminated or branded with any University sticker, the paper smells of mothballs and home. This zine is completely mine, and as it is cradled in my hand, I tell Therapist, “I’m going to tell my story, and use my story as a way to house LP, and say fuck the University, fuck the racists, fuck the bougies, oh and to possibly pass my class. When I’m done, I might release it for future first years to read.”

“Alrighty then, hopefully, you won’t drop too many f bombs in your story.”

“Don’t worry, I have a litany of swear words I’ll use.”

Therapist’s face breaks into a smile as she replies, “I know you do.”

LI. Toilet Paper

In my dorm, Roommate and BOYfriend wait for the taxi to take them to the airport because for their spring break, they're springing in the Hamptons. Roommate wears a white hat that's the width of a Boeing 747 wing, and BOYfriend has on shorts the color of Pepto-Bismol. All of us wait in the dorm in awkward silence. I'm sitting at my desk, trying to think of an opening for my project. I jump from idea to idea, only taking a break from scribbling on computer paper when I hear BOYfriend tell Roommate, "Babe, bring some toilet paper for the trip. You always have the best kind." Roommate's face turns red with embarrassment and she looks to me. She takes a roll of toilet paper and puts it inside her suitcase. As Roommate and BOYfriend leave, ROD enters. She asks for an update about my project, and I tell her that I have an ending that just might work.

"Well, let's hear it."

"Wait not here." I say as I move toward the bathroom.

"You want to read it to me in the bathroom?" She responds with confusion.

"Of course, it's our spot."

ROD laughs as she rolls her eyes and follows me into the bathroom. There, I stand in the bathtub and ROD sits on the toilet. I clear my throat and begin. "Dear Committee, it has come to my attention, that smoking kills, along with police, loner white boys, and looks. While embroiled in the process of trying to live, I have written this honors thesis. It is dedicated to the First Years who haven't yet died from alcohol poisoning, exhaustion, or overdosing. This work has been a labor of love and of hate. In it, you will find juxtaposition, verisimilitude, French, Freud, and anything else I've wasted 60K a year to learn. I would like to thank my Advisors: Mr. White

Supremacy, Mr. Capitalism, Ms. Racism, and of course my Life Partner for all the guidance they have provided during this process. Yours Truly, Sahara.”