

# FALSEWORK SCHOOL

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## AUTUMN 2016, MAKING AMERICA AGAIN

### VOLUME 6: FROM WHICH ONE NEVER RECOVERS UNSCARRED

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Our country's national crime is lynching. It is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an "unwritten law" that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal. The "unwritten law" first found excuse with the rough, rugged, and determined man who left the civilized centers of eastern States to seek for quick returns in the gold-fields of the far West. Following in uncertain pursuit of continually eluding fortune, they dared the savagery of the Indians, the hardships of mountain travel, and the constant terror of border State outlaws.

Naturally, they felt slight toleration for traitors in their own ranks. It was enough to fight the enemies from without; woe to the foe within! Far removed from and entirely without protection of the courts of civilized life, these fortune-seekers made laws to meet their varying emergencies. The thief who stole a horse, the bully who "jumped" a claim, was a common

enemy. If caught he was promptly tried, and if found guilty was hanged to the tree under which the court convened.

Those were busy days of busy men. They had no time to give the prisoner a bill of exception or stay of execution. The only way a man had to secure a stay of execution was to behave himself. Judge Lynch was original in methods but exceedingly effective in procedure. He made the charge, impaneled the jurors, and directed the execution. When the court adjourned, the prisoner was dead. Thus lynch law held sway in the far West until civilization spread into the Territories and the orderly processes of law took its place. The emergency no longer existing, lynching gradually disappeared from the West.

But the spirit of mob procedure seemed to have fastened itself upon the lawless classes, and the grim process that at first was invoked to declare justice was made the excuse to wreak

*"'But American racism!'*

*'So What? European racism in the colonies has inured us to it!'*

*And there we are, ready to run the great Yankee risk. So, once again, be careful! American domination -- the only domination from which one never recovers. I mean from which one never recovers unscarred." Am e Cassin, Discourse on Colonialism*

**This day of community study works with texts and artifacts that might allow us to grapple with the current ambience of everyday life and politics in the Berkshires and how its tenor and affect communicate with national and global discourses and trends.**

vengeance and cover crime. It next appeared in the South, where centuries of Anglo-Saxon civilization had made effective all the safeguards of court procedure. No emergency called for lynch law. It asserted its sway in defiance of law and in favor of anarchy. There it has flourished ever since, marking the thirty years of its existence with the inhuman butchery of more than ten thousand men, women, and children by shooting, drowning, hanging, and burning them alive. Not only this, but so potent is the force of example that the lynching mania has spread

throughout the North and middle West. It is now no uncommon thing to read of lynchings north of Mason and Dixon's line, and those most responsible for this fashion gleefully point to these instances and assert that the North is no better than the South.

This is the work of the "unwritten law" about which so much is said, and in whose behest butchery is made a pastime and national savagery condoned. The first statute of this "unwritten law" was written in the blood of thousands of brave men who thought that a government that was good enough to create a citizenship was strong enough to protect it. Under the authority of a national law that gave every citizen the right to vote, the newly-made citizens chose to exercise their suffrage. But the reign of the national law was short-lived and illusionary. Hardly had the sentences dried upon the statute-books before one Southern State after another raised the cry against "negro domination" and proclaimed there was an "unwritten law" that justified any means to resist it.

The method then inaugurated was the outrages by the "red-shirt" bands of Louisiana, South Carolina, and other Southern States, which were succeeded by the Ku-Klux Klans. These advocates of the "unwritten law" boldly avowed their purpose to intimidate, suppress, and nullify the negro's right to vote. In support of its plans the Ku-Klux Klans, the "red-shirt" and similar organizations proceeded to beat, exile, and kill negroes until the purpose of their organization was accomplished and the supremacy of the "unwritten law" was effected. Thus lynchings began in the South, rapidly spreading into the various States until the national law was nullified and the reign of the "unwritten law" was supreme. Men were taken from their homes by "red-shirt" bands and stripped, beaten, and exiled; others were assassinated when their political prominence made them obnoxious to their political opponents; while the Ku-Klux barbarism of election days, reveling in the butchery of thousands of colored voters, furnished records in Congressional investigations that are a disgrace to civilization.

The alleged menace of universal suffrage having been avoided by the absolute suppression of the negro vote, the spirit of mob murder should have been satisfied and the butchery of negroes should have ceased. But men, women, and children were the victims of murder by individuals and murder by mobs, just as they had been when killed at the demands of the "unwritten law" to prevent "negro domination." Negroes were killed for disputing over terms of contracts with their employers. If a few barns were burned some colored man was killed to stop it. If a colored man resented the imposition of a white man and the two came to blows, the colored man had to die, either at the hands of the white man then and there or later at the hands of a mob that speedily gathered. If he showed a spirit of courageous manhood he was hanged for his pains, and the killing was justified by the declaration that he was a "saucy nigger." Colored women have been murdered because they refused to tell the mobs where relatives could be found for "lynching bees." Boys of fourteen years have been lynched by white representatives of American civilization. In fact, for all kinds of offenses--and, for no offenses--from murders to misdemeanors, men and women are put to death without judge or jury; so that, although the political excuse was no longer necessary, the wholesale murder of human beings went on just the same. A new name was given to the killings and a new excuse was invented for so doing.

Again the aid of the "unwritten law" is invoked, and again it comes to the rescue. During the last ten years a new statute has been added to the "unwritten law." This statute proclaims that for certain crimes or alleged crimes no negro shall be allowed a trial; that no white woman shall be compelled to charge an assault under oath or to submit any such charge to the investigation of a court of law. The result is that many men have been put to death whose innocence was afterward established; and to-day, under this reign of the "unwritten law," no colored man, no matter what his reputation, is safe from lynching if a white woman, no matter what her standing

or motive, cares to charge him with insult or assault.

It is considered a sufficient excuse and reasonable justification to put a prisoner to death under this "unwritten law" for the frequently repeated charge that these lynching horrors are necessary to prevent crimes against women. The sentiment of the country has been appealed to, in describing the isolated condition of white families in thickly populated negro districts; and the charge is made that these homes are in as great danger as if they were surrounded by wild beasts. And the world has accepted this theory without let or hindrance. In many cases there has been open expression that the fate meted out to the victim was only what he deserved. In many other instances there has been a silence that says more forcibly than words can proclaim it that it is right and proper that a human being should be seized by a mob and burned to death upon the unsworn and the uncorroborated charge of his accuser. No matter that our laws presume every man innocent until he is proved guilty; no matter that it leaves a certain class of individuals completely at the mercy of another class; no matter that it encourages those criminally disposed to blacken their faces and commit any crime in the calendar so long as they can throw suspicion on some negro, as is frequently done, and then lead a mob to take his life; no matter that mobs make a farce of the law and a mockery of justice; no matter that hundreds of boys are being hardened in crime and schooled in vice by the repetition of such scenes before their eyes--if a white woman declares herself insulted or assaulted, some life must pay the penalty, with all the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition and all the barbarism of the Middle Ages. The world looks on and says it is well.

Not only are two hundred men and women put to death annually, on the average, in this country by mobs, but these lives are taken with the greatest publicity. In many instances the leading citizens aid and abet by their presence when they do not participate, and the leading journals inflame the public mind to the lynching point with scare-head articles and offers of rewards. Whenever a burning is advertised to

take place, the railroads run excursions, photographs are taken, and the same jubilee is indulged in that characterized the public hangings of one hundred years ago. There is, however, this difference: in those old days the multitude that stood by was permitted only to gey or jeer. The nineteenth century lynching mob cuts off ears, toes, and fingers, strips off flesh, and distributes portions of the body as souvenirs among the crowd. If the leaders of the mob are so minded, coal-oil is poured over the body and the victim is then roasted to death. This has been done in Texarkana and Paris, Tex., in Bardswell, Ky., and in Newman, Ga. In Paris the officers of the law delivered the prisoner to the mob. The mayor gave the school children a holiday and the railroads ran excursion trains so that the people might see a human being burned to death. In Texarkana, the year before, men and boys amused themselves by cutting off strips of flesh and thrusting knives into their helpless victim. At Newman, Ga., of the present year, the mob tried every conceivable torture to compel the victim to cry out and confess, before they set fire to the faggots that burned him. But their trouble was all in vain—he never uttered a cry, and they could not make him confess.

This condition of affairs were brutal enough and horrible enough if it were true that lynchings occurred only because of the commission of crimes against women—as is constantly declared by ministers, editors, lawyers, teachers, statesmen, and even by women themselves. It has been to the interest of those who did the lynching to blacken the good name of the helpless and defenseless victims of their hate. For this reason they publish at every possible opportunity this excuse for lynching, hoping thereby not only to palliate their own crime but at the same time to prove the negro a moral monster and unworthy of the respect and sympathy of the civilized world. But this alleged reason adds to the deliberate injustice of the mob's work. Instead of lynchings being caused by assaults upon women, the statistics show that not one-third of the victims of lynchings are even charged with such crimes. The Chicago Tribune,

which publishes annually lynching statistics, is authority for the following:

In 1892, when lynching reached high-water mark, there were 241 persons lynched. The entire number is divided among the following States:

Alabama.....	22	Montana.....	4
Arkansas.....	25	New York.....	1
California.....	3	North Carolina...	5
Florida.....	11	North Dakota.....	1
Georgia.....	17	Ohio.....	3
Idaho.....	8	South Carolina...	5
Illinois.....	1	Tennessee.....	28
Kansas.....	3	Texas.....	15
Kentucky.....	9	Virginia.....	7
Louisiana.....	29	West Virginia....	5
Maryland.....	1	Wyoming.....	9
Arizona Ter....	3	Missouri.....	6
Mississippi....	16	Oklahoma.....	2

Of this number, 160 were of negro descent. Four of them were lynched in New York, Ohio, and Kansas; the remainder were murdered in the South. Five of this number were females. The charges for which they were lynched cover a wide range. They are as follows:

Rape.....	46	Attempted rape.....	11
Murder.....	58	Suspected robbery...	4
Rioting.....	3	Larceny.....	1
Race Prejudice.....	6	Self-defense.....	1
No cause given.....	4	Insulting women....	2
Incendiarism.....	6	Desperadoes.....	6
Robbery.....	6	Fraud.....	1
Assault and battery...	1	Attempted murder....	2
No offense stated, boy and girl.....	2		

In the case of the boy and girl above referred to, their father, named Hastings, was accused of the murder of a white man. His fourteen-year-old daughter and sixteen-year-old son were hanged and their bodies filled with bullets; then the father was also lynched. This occurred in November, 1892, at Jonesville, La.

Indeed, the record for the last twenty years shows exactly the same or a smaller proportion who have been charged with this horrible crime. Quite a number of the one-third alleged cases of assault that have been personally investigated by the writer have shown that there was no

foundation in fact for the charges; yet the claim is not made that there were no real culprits among them. The negro has been too long associated with the white man not to have copied his vices as well as his virtues. But the negro resents and utterly repudiates the efforts to blacken his good name by asserting that assaults upon women are peculiar to his race. The negro has suffered far more from the commission of this crime against the women of his race by white men than the white race has ever suffered through his crimes. Very scant notice is taken of the matter when this is the condition of affairs. What becomes a crime deserving capital punishment when the tables are turned is a matter of small moment when the negro woman is the accusing party.

But since the world has accepted this false and unjust statement, and the burden of proof has been placed upon the negro to vindicate his race, he is taking steps to do so. The Anti-Lynching Bureau of the National Afro-American Council is arranging to have every lynching investigated and publish the facts to the world, as has been done in the case of Sam Hose, who was burned alive last April at Newman, Ga. The detective's report showed that Hose killed Cranford, his employer, in self-defense, and that, while a mob was organizing to hunt Hose to punish him for killing a white man, not till twenty-four hours after the murder was the charge of rape, embellished with psychological and physical impossibilities, circulated. That gave an impetus to the hunt, and the Atlanta Constitution's reward of \$500 keyed the mob to the necessary burning and roasting pitch. Of five hundred newspaper clippings of that horrible affair, nine-tenths of them assumed Hose's guilt—simply because his murderers said so, and because it is the fashion to believe the negro peculiarly addicted to this species of crime. All the negro asks is justice—a fair and impartial trial in the courts of the country. That given, he will abide the result.

But this question affects the entire American nation, and from several points of view: First, on the ground of consistency. Our watchword has been "the land of the free and the home of the brave." Brave men do not gather by thousands to

torture and murder a single individual, so gagged and bound he cannot make even feeble resistance or defense. Neither do brave men or women stand by and see such things done without compunction of conscience, nor read of them without protest. Our nation has been active and outspoken in its endeavors to right the wrongs of the Armenian Christian, the Russian Jew, the Irish Home Ruler, the native women of India, the Siberian exile, and the Cuban patriot. Surely it should be the nation's duty to correct its own evils!

Second, on the ground of economy. To those who fail to be convinced from any other point of view touching this momentous question, a consideration of the economic phase might not be amiss. It is generally known that mobs in Louisiana, Colorado, Wyoming, and other States have lynched subjects of other countries. When their different governments demanded satisfaction, our country was forced to confess her inability to protect said subjects in the several States because of our State-rights doctrines, or in turn demand punishment of the lynchers. This confession, while humiliating in the extreme, was not satisfactory; and, while the United States cannot protect, she can pay. This she has done, and it is certain will have to do again in the case of the recent lynching of Italians in Louisiana. The United States already has paid in indemnities for lynching nearly a half million dollars, as follows:

Paid China for Rock Springs (Wyo.) massacre.....	\$147,748.74
Paid China for outrages on Pacific Coast.....	276,619.75
Paid Italy for massacre of Italian prisoners at New Orleans .....	24,330.90
Paid Italy for lynchings at Walsenburg, Col .....	10,000.00
Paid Great Britain for outrages on James Bain and Frederick Dawson .....	2,800.00

Third, for the honor of Anglo-Saxon civilization. No scoffer at our boasted American civilization could say anything more harsh of it than does the American white man himself who says he is unable to protect the honor of his women without resort to such brutal, inhuman, and degrading exhibitions as characterize

"lynching bees." The cannibals of the South Sea Islands roast human beings alive to satisfy hunger. The red Indian of the Western plains tied his prisoner to the stake, tortured him, and danced in fiendish glee while his victim writhed in the flames. His savage, untutored mind suggested no better way than that of wreaking vengeance upon those who had wronged him. These people knew nothing about Christianity and did not profess to follow its teachings; but such primary laws as they had they lived up to. No nation, savage or civilized, save only the United States of America, has confessed its inability to protect its women save by hanging, shooting, and burning alleged offenders.

Finally, for love of country. No American travels abroad without blushing for shame for his country on this subject. And whatever the excuse that passes current in the United States, it avails nothing abroad. With all the powers of government in control; with all laws made by white men, administered by white judges, jurors, prosecuting attorneys, and sheriffs; with every office of the executive department filled by white men--no excuse can be offered for exchanging the orderly administration of justice for barbarous lynchings and "unwritten laws." Our country should be placed speedily above the plane of confessing herself a failure at self-government. This cannot be until Americans of every section, of broadest patriotism and best and wisest citizenship, not only see the defect in our country's armor but take the necessary steps to remedy it. Although lynchings have steadily increased in number and barbarity during the last twenty years, there has been no single effort put forth by the many moral and philanthropic forces of the country to put a stop to this wholesale slaughter. Indeed, the silence and seeming condonation grow more marked as the years go by.

A few months ago the conscience of this country was shocked because, after a two-weeks trial, a French judicial tribunal pronounced Captain Dreyfus guilty. And yet, in our own land and under our own flag, the writer can give day and detail of one thousand men, women, and children who during the last six years were put to

death without trial before any tribunal on earth. Humiliating indeed, but altogether unanswerable, was the reply of the French press to our protest: "Stop your lynchings at home before you send your protests abroad."—Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in America," 1900

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When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.

The route is often associative. You smell good. You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written. Sister Evelyn is in the habit of taping the 100s and the failing grades to the coat closet doors. The girl is Catholic with waist-length brown hair. You can't remember her name: Mary? Catherine?

You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person.

Sister Evelyn never figures out your arrangement perhaps because you never turn around to copy Mary Catherine's answers. Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike or she cares less about cheating and more about humiliation or she never actually saw you sitting there.

Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough. After it happened I was at a loss for words. Haven't you said this yourself? Haven't you said this to a close friend who early in your

friendship, when distracted, would call you by the name of her black housekeeper? You assumed you two were the only black people in her life. Eventually she stopped doing this, though she never acknowledged her slippage. And you never called her on it (why not?) and yet, you don't forget. If this were a domestic tragedy, and it might well be, this would be your fatal flaw—your memory, vessel of your feelings. Do you feel hurt because it's the "all black people look the same" moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?

An unsettled feeling keeps the body front and center. The wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing your stomach in toward your rib cage. When you look around only you remain. Your own disgust at what you smell, what you feel, doesn't bring you to your feet, not right away, because gathering energy has become its own task, needing its own argument. You are reminded of a conversation you had recently, comparing the merits of sentences constructed implicitly with "yes, and" rather than "yes, but." You and your friend decided that "yes, and" attested to a life with no turn-off, no alternative routes: you pull yourself to standing, soon enough the blouse is rinsed, it's another week, the blouse is beneath your sweater, against your skin, and you smell good.

The rain this morning pours from the gutters and everywhere else it is lost in the trees. You need your glasses to single out what you know is there because doubt is inexorable; you put on your glasses. The trees, their bark, their leaves, even the dead ones, are more vibrant wet. Yes, and it's raining. Each moment is like this—before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen. What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? The moment stinks. Still you want to stop looking at the trees. You want to walk out and stand among them. And as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you.

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind.

As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. It is not only that confrontation is headache-producing; it is also that you have a destination that doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable, hasn't happened before, and the before isn't part of the now as the night darkens and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going.

When you arrive in your driveway and turn off the car, you remain behind the wheel another ten minutes. You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash. Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend.

Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you have already settled into your window seat on United Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row. The girl, looking over at you, tells her mother, these are our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's response is barely audible—I see, she says. I'll sit in the middle.

A woman you do not know wants to join you for lunch. You are visiting her campus. In the

cafe you both order the Caesar salad. This overlap is not the beginning of anything because she immediately points out that she, her father, her grandfather, and you, all attended the same college. She wanted her son to go there as well, but because of affirmative action or minority something—she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it?—her son wasn't accepted. You are not sure if you are meant to apologize for this failure of your alma mater's legacy program; instead you ask where he ended up. The prestigious school she mentions doesn't seem to assuage her irritation. This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. The salads arrive.

A friend argues that Americans battle between the "historical self" and the "self self." By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning. Then you are standing face-to-face in seconds that wipe the affable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say? Instantaneously your attachment seems fragile, tenuous, subject to any transgression of your historical self. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant.

You and your partner go to see the film *The House We Live In*. You ask a friend to pick up your child from school. On your way home your phone rings. Your neighbor tells you he is standing at his window watching a menacing black guy casing both your homes. The guy is walking back and forth talking to himself and seems disturbed.

You tell your neighbor that your friend, whom he has met, is babysitting. He says, no, it's not him. He's met your friend and this isn't that nice young man. Anyway, he wants you to know, he's called the police.

Your partner calls your friend and asks him if there's a guy walking back and forth in front of your home. Your friend says that if anyone were

outside he would see him because he is standing outside. You hear the sirens through the speakerphone.

Your friend is speaking to your neighbor when you arrive home. The four police cars are gone. Your neighbor has apologized to your friend and is now apologizing to you. Feeling somewhat responsible for the actions of your neighbor, you clumsily tell your friend that the next time he wants to talk on the phone he should just go in the backyard. He looks at you a long minute before saying he can speak on the phone wherever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course.

When the stranger asks, Why do you care? you just stand there staring at him. He has just referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers. Hey, I am standing right here, you responded, not necessarily expecting him to turn to you.

He is holding the lidded paper cup in one hand and a small paper bag in the other. They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say.

Now there you go, he responds.

The people around you have turned away from their screens. The teenagers are on pause. There I go? you ask, feeling irritation begin to rain down. Yes, and something about hearing yourself repeating this stranger's accusation in a voice usually reserved for your partner makes you smile.

A man knocked over her son in the subway. You feel your own body wince. He's okay, but the son of a bitch kept walking. She says she grabbed the stranger's arm and told him to apologize: I told him to look at the boy and apologize. Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.

The beautiful thing is that a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers.

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?

It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry.

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

In Memory of Eric Garner

In Memory of John Crawford

In Memory of Michael Brown

In Memory of Akai Gurley

In Memory of Tamir Rice

In Memory of Walter Scott

In Memory of Freddie Gray

In Memory of Sharonda Coleman-Singleton

In Memory of Cynthia Hurd

In Memory of Susie Jackson

In Memory of Ethel Lee Lance

In Memory of DePayne Middleton Doctor

In Memory of Clementa Pinckney

...

because white men can't police their imagination  
black men are dying

Some years there exists a wanting to escape you,  
floating above your certain ache-still the ache  
coexists.

Call that the immanent you-

You are you even before you grow into  
understanding you are not anyone, worthless,  
not worth you.

Even as your own weight insists you are here,  
fighting off the weight of nonexistence.

And still this life parts your lids, you see you  
seeing your extending hand as a falling wave-

I tell he she we you turn only to discover  
the encounter

to be alien to this place. Wait.

The patience is in the living. Time opens out to  
you.

The opening, between you and you, occupied,  
zoned for an encounter, given the histories of you  
and you- And always, who is this you?

The start of you, each day, a presence already-

Hey you-

Slipping down burying the you buried  
within. You are everywhere and you are nowhere  
in the day.

The outside comes in- Then you, hey you-  
Overheard in the moonlight. Overcome in the  
moonlight.

Soon you are sitting around-publicly  
listening, when you hear this-what happens to  
you doesn't belong to you, only half concerns  
you. He is speaking of the legionnaires in Claire  
Denis's film Beau Travail and you are pulled back  
into the body of you receiving the nothing gaze-  
The world out there insisting on this only half  
concerns you. What happens to you doesn't  
belong to you, only half concerns you. It's not  
yours. Not yours only.

And still a world begins its furious erasure-  
Who do you think you are, saying I to me? You  
nothing.  
You nobody. You.

A body in the world drowns in it-

Hey you-

All our fevered history won't instill insight, won't  
turn a body conscious,  
won't make that look  
in the eyes say yes, though there is nothing to  
solve  
even as each moment is an answer.

Don't say I if it means so little, holds the little  
forming no one

You are not sick, you are injured- you ache for the  
rest of life.

How to care for the injured body,

the kind of body that can't hold the content it is living?

And where is the safest place when that place must be someplace other than in the body?

Even now your voice entangles this mouth whose words are here as pulse, strumming shut out, shut in, shut up-

You cannot say-

A body translates its you- you there, hey you even as it loses the location of its mouth.

When you lay your body in the body entered as if skin and bone were public places, when you lay your body in the body entered as if you're the ground you walk on, you know no memory should live in these memories

becoming the body of you.

You slow all existence down with your call detectable only as sky. The night's yawn absorbs you as you lie down at the wrong angle

to the sun ready already to let go of your hand.

Wait with me

though the waiting, wait up,

might take until nothing whatsoever was done.

To be left, not alone, the only wish- to call you out, to call out you.

Who shouted, you? You

shouted you, you the murmur in the air, you sometimes sounding like you, you sometimes saying you,

go nowhere,

be no one but you first-

Nobody notices, only you've known,

you're not sick, not crazy, not angry, not sad-

It's just this, you're injured.

Everything shaded everything darkened everything shadowed

is the stripped is the struck-

is the trace

is the aftertaste.

I they he she we you were too concluded yesterday to know whatever was done could also be done, was also done, was never done-

The worst injury is feeling you don't belong so much to you-

---from Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 2014

The season turned like the page of a glossy fashion magazine.

In the park the daffodils came up and in the parking lot, the new car models were on parade.

Sometimes I think that nothing really changes -

The young girls show the latest crop of tummies, and the new president proves that he's a dummy.

but remember the tennis match we watched that year?

Right before our eyes

some tough little European blonde pitted against that big black girl from Alabama, cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms, some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite -

We were just walking past the lounge and got sucked in by the screen above the bar, and pretty soon we started to care about who won,

putting ourselves into each whacked return as the volleys went back and forth and back like some contest between the old world and the new,

and you loved her complicated hair and her to-hell-with-everybody stare, and I,

I couldn't help wanting the white girl to come out on top, because she was one of my kind, my tribe, with her pale eyes and thin lips

and because the black girl was so big and so black, so unintimidated,

hitting the ball like she was driving the Emancipation Proclamation down Abraham Lincoln's throat, like she wasn't asking anyone's permission.

There are moments when history

passes you so close you can smell its breath, you can reach your hand out and touch it on its flank,

and I don't watch all that much Masterpiece Theatre, but I could feel the end of an era there

in front of those bleachers full of people in their Sunday tennis-watching clothes

as that black girl wore down her opponent then kicked her ass good then thumped her once more for good measure

and stood up on the red clay court holding her racket over her head like a guitar.

And the little pink judge had to climb up on a box to put the ribbon on her neck, still managing to smile into the camera flash, even though everything was changing

and in fact, everything had already changed -

Poof, remember? It was the twentieth century almost gone, we were there,

and when we went to put it back where it belonged, it was past us and we were changed.

--Tony Hoagland, "Change," from *What Narcissism Means to Me*, 2003

## DIALOGUE

Claudia Rankine: I don't like using the word racist because if you use it it means you are an angry black person. Angry black people are the old black and everyone knows that's pathological. The new black is accomplished, assimilated, and integrated. The new black reaches across the aisle. The old black is positioned in a no-win situation where to express an opinion based on what you see, experience, feel or deduce risks falling right into some white folk's notion of black insanity.

It's not a chance to take. The path is preordained: to think this is to be that. Don't go there. Don't be like that. Supreme Court Justice Roberts simply forgot the right words to swear in our first black President. He was probably nervous. Don't go there. Don't be like that.

So if white people are not allowed to use the n-word, and we know that is a understanding rarely disregarded, then apparently black people are not allowed to use the r-word or, in news jargon, play the race card. But sometimes, I have found, you have to hazard a little insanity.

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I once had a colleague who wrote what some readers perceived to be a racist poem. When I first read it I thought, "What?"

"What!"

Why I stuttered I don't know but sometimes the purity of an emotion gets tripped-up by thought: This poem is an exploration of narcissism in our society, a parody, perhaps. Nonetheless, certain phrases from the poem stuck in my craw. Phrases like "I couldn't help wanting / the white girl," this "tough European blond," "to come out on top, / because she was one of my kind, my tribe, / with her pale eyes and thin lips" were being "pitted" against phrases like "so big and so black," "big black girl from Alabama" with "cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms" and "some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite." Were these

phrases intended as a performance of the n-road?

I let the book close on the desk and stared out the window through non-existent trees. There is a parking lot out there. And though my emotions can at times feel wrongheaded, sometimes you just have to say it—what the fuck? It took me a minute, the kind that folds out into months, to get over the actual words on the page.

When I brought my gaze back to the poem, rereading, it occurred to me the poet was outing a certain kind of white thought. I already knew the nice white lady and her husband who always held the door open for me (thank you)

might be thinking of me as the "so big and so black,"

"big black girl from Alabama," but I wanted my colleague to tell them right there in his poem that that kind of thinking...well, it's just not right. But his point, it seemed, was this was whiteness thinking, surely not all of whiteness, and the black girl as "unintimidated" as she was was simply a sign of the end of the twentieth century. Lord, the times they are a changing. And for this brand of whiteness that is where that thinking stopped.

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When asked what his thinking was while working on the poem, my colleague said this poem is for white people. Did he mean it was for white people to see themselves and their thinking? He did not say that. He said it was for white people.

What I heard was, I don't need to explain myself to you, black girl. And though the last time I looked in the mirror I looked like my black mother, and not how she looked when she was a child, I was transporting the language of the poem, black girl, to refer to myself, and getting even angrier. And though I realized this was me thinking as him, and not in fact him speaking, when offense is being taken offense is heard everywhere, even in the imagination.

And because I could taste the vomit of Reconstruction and slavery in the back of my throat, I wasn't saying much, but he was starting to shout at me so in his imagination somebody else must have been speaking. Needless to say,

before our conversation started it was over. I can still see myself back then confused at the rate of escalation, given that I was so used to everyone reassuring everyone that everyone accepted everyone and race didn't matter. Who let America in the room? How did things get out of hand so quickly? I sometimes wonder if one of us had had the presence of mind to say, easy slave girl, slow down grand Wizard, could anyone have laughed.

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As I walk across the parking lot I wonder why he didn't just say his poem is for white people because it is calculated to make them feel uncomfortable in the grey areas. No one was calling for a lynching in this poem, which we all know as criminal, racist behavior, but this other thing, this lack of support for the American tennis player, this identifying by skin color with anyone else across the Atlantic simply because the one right in front of you has black skin and claims all the same rights, was that not too racism? I imagine there were a trillion ways to worry my question, which is to say, he might have treated me like a friendly colleague asking a real question since the book was in the bookstore without a Whites Only sticker.

I was black people and I, as his colleague, had taken the time to read his book as an act of collegial support and respect. Instantaneously, my collegial assumption, the visibility I was claiming, the shared space, seemed like his moment of what? What! In short, his answer sounded like fighting words. And they were. And they weren't.

As I turn his answer around and around like an object I am trying to find a place to store, I see it burns at both ends. Perhaps by invoking the "whites only" language of Reconstruction, he was suggesting his poem, as a language act, lived in that place. But even with this positioning, it's not clear he wasn't also directing the historically exclusionary signifier at me—he was after all speaking to me—but I really can't speak for him.

Not long ago I was in a room where someone asked the philosopher Judith Butler what made language hurtful. I could feel everyone lean forward. Our very being exposes

us to the address of another, she said. We suffer from the condition of being addressable, by which she meant, I believe, there is no avoiding the word-filled sticks and stones of others. Our emotional openness, she added, is borne, in both its meanings, by our addressability. Language navigates this.

For so long I thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase me as a person, but after considering Butler's remarks I begin to understand myself as rendered hyper-visible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that I am present. My alertness, my openness, my desire to engage my colleague's poem, my colleague's words, actually demands my presence, my looking back at him. So here I am looking back, talking back and, as insane as it is, saying, please.

Dear Claudia,

Thank you for inviting me to respond to your AWP report on the subject of race in my poem "The Change."

To start off, let me say that I thought, back when we were colleagues, and I still think, that, to me, you are naive when it comes to the subject of American racism, naive not to believe that it permeates the psychic collective consciousness and unconsciousness of most Americans in ways that are mostly ugly.

The elements of that confusion are, as we all know, guilt, fear, resentment, and wariness. Its sources are historical and economic and institutionalized. We drank racism with our mother's milk, and we re-learn it every day, as we weave our way through our landscapes of endless inequality.

That is one reason why it seems foolish and costly to think that the topic of race belongs only to brown-skinned Americans and not white-skinned Americans. But many poets and readers think that.

This is especially true in contemporary poetry where a poem is often presumed to be in the voice of the author. I am not trying to sidestep—of course I am racist; and sexist, a homophobe, a classist, a liberal, a middle-class

American, a college graduate, a drop-out, an egotist, Diet Pepsi drinker, a Unitarian, a fool, a Triple A member, a citizen of Texas, a lover of women, a teacher, a terrible driver, and a single mother. Purity is not my claim, my game, nor a thing remotely within my grasp. I'm an American; this tarnished software will not be rectified by good intentions, or even good behavior.

The poet plays with the devil; that is, she or he traffics in repressed energies. The poet's job is elasticity, mobility of perspective, trouble-making, clowning and truth-telling. Nothing kills the elastic, life-giving spirit of humor more quickly—have you noticed?—than political correctness, with its agendas of rightness, perfection, enforcement, and moral superiority.

Just as you find the posture of "angry black person" simplistic, I find the posture of "apologetic liberal white person" not just boring, but useless.

I don't believe in explaining my poems to other poets; they are part of my tribe, and I expect them to be resilient readers.

I want some of my poems to alarm people with their subjects and attitudes. I think poems can be too careful. A poem is not a teddy bear.

When it comes to the subject of American race, it is a set of conditions we all suffer, whether in our avoidance or confrontation. We will need to be rousted for another fifty, or a hundred years. I would rather get dirty trying to dig it out of the ground, than make nice. I am easy in my conscience.

Finally let me say that I think my poem "The Change" is not "racist" but "racially complex."

Sincerely,

Tony Hoagland

My son is vaccinated, but there is one immunization on the standard schedule he did not receive. This was meant to be his very first shot, the hepatitis B vaccine administered to most infants immediately after birth. I was aware, before I became pregnant, of some fears around vaccination. But I was not prepared for the labyrinthine network of anxieties I would discover during my pregnancy, the proliferation

of hypotheses, the minutiae of additives, the diversity of ideologies. Vaccines contain preservatives, adjuvants, and residues from their manufacture. They were developed from aborted fetuses, were tested in Nazi concentration camps, and are not vegan. And vaccines are metaphors, if popular literature on vaccination is to be read as literature, for capitalist corruption, cultural decadence, and environmental pollution. The reach of this subject had exceeded the limits of my late-night research by the time my baby was due, so I visited the pediatrician I had chosen to be my son's doctor. I already knew that some people would consider a medical professional a dubious source of intelligence on vaccination.

The money pharmaceutical companies are pouring into research, they would say, has made the information available to doctors dirty. But not all doctors are informed by research, as I would discover, and there is more than one route to unclean thinking. When I asked the pediatrician what the purpose of the hep B vaccine was, he answered, "That's a very good question," in a tone I understood to mean this was a question he relished answering. Hep B was a vaccine for the inner city, he told me—it was designed to protect the babies of drug addicts and prostitutes. It was not something, he assured me, that people like me needed to worry about.

All that this doctor knew of me then was what he could see. He assumed, correctly, that I did not live in the inner city. It did not occur to me to clarify that although I live in the outer city of Chicago, my neighborhood looks a lot like what some people mean when they use the euphemism "inner city." In retrospect, I am ashamed by how little of his racial code I registered. Relieved to be told that this vaccine was not for people like me, I failed to consider what exactly that meant.

The belief that public-health measures are not intended for people like us is widely held by people like me. Public health, we assume, is for people with less—less education, less healthy habits, less access to quality health care, less time and money. I've heard mothers of my class suggest, for instance, that the standard childhood vaccination schedule groups together multiple

shots because poor mothers can't visit the doctor frequently enough to get the twenty-six recommended shots separately. (No matter that many mothers, myself included, might find so many visits daunting.) That, we seem to be saying of the standard schedule, is for people like them.

When the last nationwide smallpox epidemic began in 1898, some people believed that whites were not susceptible to the disease. It was called "nigger itch" or, where it was associated with immigrants, "Italian itch" or "Mexican bump." When smallpox broke out in New York City, police officers were sent to help enforce the vaccination of Italian and Irish immigrants in the tenements. And when smallpox arrived in Middlesboro, Kentucky, everyone in the black section of town who resisted immunization was vaccinated at gunpoint. These campaigns did limit the spread of the disease, but most of the risk of vaccination, which at that time could lead to infection with other diseases, was absorbed by the most vulnerable. The poor were forced into the service of the privileged.

Debates over vaccination, then as now, were often cast as debates over the integrity of science, though they could just as easily be understood as conversations about power. The working-class people who resisted England's 1853 provision of free, mandatory vaccination were concerned, in part, for their own liberty. Faced with fines, imprisonment, and the seizure of their property if they did not vaccinate their infants, they sometimes compared their predicament to slavery. In her history of that anti-vaccination movement, Nadja Durbach returns often to the idea that the resisters saw their bodies "not as potentially contagious and thus dangerous to the social body, but as highly vulnerable to contamination and violation." Their bodies were, of course, both vulnerable and contagious. But in a time and place where the bodies of the poor were seen as a source of disease, as dangerous to others, it fell to the poor to articulate that they were also vulnerable.

If it was meaningful then for the poor to assert that they were not purely dangerous, I suspect it might be just as meaningful now for

the rest of us to accept that we are not purely vulnerable. The middle class may be "threatened," but we are still, just by virtue of having bodies, dangerous. Even the little bodies of children, which nearly all the thinking common to our time encourages us to imagine as absolutely vulnerable, are dangerous in their ability to spread disease. Think of the unvaccinated boy in San Diego, for instance, who returned from a trip to Switzerland with a case of measles that infected his two siblings, five schoolmates, and four children in his doctor's waiting room. Three of these children were infants too young to be vaccinated, and one of them had to be hospitalized.

Unvaccinated children, according to a 2004 analysis of CDC data, are more likely than undervaccinated children to be white and to live in households with an income of

\$75,000 or more—like my child. Their mothers are more likely to be, like me, married and college-educated. Undervaccinated children, meaning children who have received some but not all of their recommended immunizations, are more likely to be black, to have younger, unmarried mothers, and to live in poverty.

"Vaccination works," my father, a doctor, tells me, "by enlisting a majority in the protection of a minority." He means the minority of the population that is particularly vulnerable to a disease. The elderly, in the case of influenza. Newborns, in the case of pertussis. Pregnant women, in the case of rubella. When relatively wealthy white women choose to vaccinate our children, we may also be participating in the protection of poor black children whose single mothers have not, as a result of circumstance rather than choice, fully vaccinated them. This is a radical inversion of the historical approach to vaccination, which was once just another form of bodily servitude extracted from the poor for the benefit of the privileged. There is some truth now to the idea that public health is not strictly for people like me, but it is through us—literally through our bodies—that public health is maintained.

Vaccination is sometimes implicated in all the crimes of modern medicine. But vaccination

was a precursor to modern medicine, not the product of it. Its roots are in folk medicine, and its first practitioners were farmers. Milkmaids in eighteenth-century England had faces unblemished by smallpox, as anyone could see. Common wisdom held that if a milkmaid milked a cow blistered with cowpox and developed some blisters on her hands, she would not contract smallpox even while nursing victims of an epidemic.

During an outbreak in 1774, a farmer who had himself already been infected with cowpox used a darning needle to force pus from a cow's udder into the arms of his wife and two toddler boys. The farmer's neighbors were horrified. His wife's arm became red and swollen, and she fell ill before recovering from the infection, but the boys had mild reactions. They were exposed to smallpox many times over the course of their long lives, occasionally for the purpose of demonstrating their immunity, without ever contracting the disease.

Twenty years later, the country doctor Edward Jenner scraped pus from a blister on the hand of a milkmaid into an incision on the arm of an eight-year-old boy. The boy did not contract smallpox, and Jenner continued his experiment on dozens of other people, including his own infant son. Jenner had the evidence to suggest that vaccination worked, but he did not know why it worked. His innovation was based entirely on observation, not on theory. This was a century before the first virus would be identified, a century before germ theory would be validated, more than a century before penicillin would be extracted from a fungus, and long before the cause of smallpox would be understood.

The essential mechanism underlying vaccination was not new even in Jenner's time. At that point variolation, the practice of deliberately infecting a person with a minor strain of smallpox in order to prevent infection with a more deadly strain, was still somewhat novel in England but had been practiced in China and India for hundreds of years. (In China, it was said to have been "bestowed by a Taoist immortal.") Variolation would later be brought to America

from Africa by a slave. It was then introduced to England by an ambassador's wife, her own face scarred by smallpox, who inoculated her children after observing the practice in Turkey. Voltaire, himself a survivor of a serious case of smallpox, implored the French to adopt variolation from the English.

When Voltaire wrote his letter "On Inoculation" in 1735, the primary meaning of the English word "inoculate" was still "to set a bud or scion," as apple trees are cultivated by grafting a stem from one tree onto the roots of another. There were many methods of inoculation, including the snuffing of powdered scabs and the sewing of an infected thread through the webbing between the thumb and forefinger, but in England it was often accomplished by making a slit or flap in the skin into which infectious material was placed, like the slit in the bark of a tree that receives the young stem grafted onto it. When "inoculate" was first used to describe variolation, it was a metaphor for grafting a disease, which would bear its own fruit, onto the rootstock of the body.

From somewhere deep in my childhood I can remember my father explaining with enthusiasm the principle behind the Doppler effect as an ambulance sped past our car. My father marveled at the world far more often than he talked about the body, but blood types were a subject on which he spoke with some passion. People with the blood type O negative, he explained, can receive in transfusion only blood that is O negative, but people with O-negative blood can give blood to people with any other type. That's why a person with type O negative is known as a "universal donor." My father then revealed that his blood type was O negative, that he himself was a universal donor. He gave blood, he told me, as often as he could because his type was always in demand. I suspect my father knew that my blood, too, is type O negative. I understood the idea of the universal donor more as an ethic than as a medical concept long before I knew my own blood type. But I did not yet think of that ethic as an ingenious filtering of my father's Catholic background through his medical training. I was not raised in the Church and I

never took communion, so I was not reminded of Jesus offering of his blood that we all might live. But I believed, even then, that we owe each other our bodies.

The very first decision I made for my son, a decision enacted within moments of his body coming free of mine, was the donation of his umbilical-cord blood to a public bank. I myself had donated blood only once, and I wanted my son to start his life with a credit to the bank, not a debt. And this was before I, the universal donor, would become the recipient of two pints of blood in a transfusion shortly after my son's birth. Blood of the most precious type, drawn from a public bank.

If we imagine the action of a vaccine not just in terms of how it affects a single body but also in terms of how it affects the collective body of a community, it is fair to think of vaccination as a kind of banking of immunity. Contributions to this bank are donations to those who cannot or will not be protected by their own immunity. This is the principle of "herd immunity," and it is through herd immunity that mass vaccination becomes far more effective than individual vaccination.

Any given vaccine can fail to produce immunity in an individual, and some vaccines, like the influenza vaccine, often fail to produce immunity. But when enough people are given even a relatively ineffective vaccine, viruses have trouble moving from host to host and cease to spread, sparing both the unvaccinated and those in whom vaccination has not produced immunity. This is why the chances of contracting measles can be higher for a vaccinated person living in a largely unvaccinated community than for an unvaccinated person living in a largely vaccinated community. The boundaries between our bodies begin to dissolve here. Blood and organs move between us, exiting one body and entering another, and so, too, with immunity, which is a common trust as much as it is a private account. Those of us who draw on collective immunity owe our health to our neighbors.

My father has a scar on his left arm from his smallpox vaccination half a century ago. That vaccine was responsible for the worldwide

eradication of smallpox in 1980, but it remains far more dangerous than any vaccine currently on our childhood immunization schedule. The risk of death after vaccination for smallpox is, according to one estimate, about one in a million. The risk of hospitalization is about one in a hundred thousand, and the risk of serious complications is about one in a thousand.

Thirty years after routine vaccination for smallpox ended in this country, the federal government asked researchers at the University of Iowa to test the remaining stores of the vaccine for efficacy. This was in the long moment after 9/11 when every potential terrorist attack was anticipated, including the use of smallpox as a biological weapon. The smallpox vaccine proved effective even after having been stored for decades and diluted to increase the supply. But the results of the vaccine trial, says Patricia Winokur, director of the school's Vaccine Research and Education Unit, were "unacceptable by today's standards." A third of the people who received the vaccine suffered fevers or rashes and were sick, in some cases, for several days. Everyone recovered, even those who developed serious inflammations of the heart, but it was clear that the degree of risk was not what we have come to expect from immunization. The smallpox vaccine contains far more immunizing proteins—more of the active ingredient, so to speak—than any of the vaccines we use today. In that sense, the vaccine our parents received presented a greater challenge to the immune system in one dose than do the twenty-six immunizations for fourteen diseases we now give our children over the course of two years. Still, the proliferation of childhood vaccines has become, for some of us, symbolic of American excess. Too much, too soon, one of the slogans of vaccine activism, could easily be a critique of just about any aspect of our modern lives.

When asked by his colleagues to address the question of whether too many vaccines are given too early in life, the University of Pennsylvania pediatrics professor Paul Offit set out to quantify the capabilities of the infant immune system, which was already known to be

quite impressive. Infants, after all, are exposed to an onslaught of bacteria the moment they leave the womb, even before they exit the birth canal. Any infant who does not live in a bubble is likely to find the everyday work of fighting off infections more taxing than processing weakened antigens from multiple immunizations.

Offit is the director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and head of its Division of Infectious Diseases. He is also, if you believe the Internet, a "Devil's servant" known as "Dr. Proffitt." He earned this distinction by co-inventing a vaccine that made him several million dollars. The idea that the success of his vaccine, which took twenty-five years to develop, should invalidate his expertise in immunology is somewhat baffling to Offit. But he understands the other source of his infamy. In response to the question of how many vaccines is too many, Offit determined that a child could theoretically handle a total of 100,000 vaccines or up to 10,000 vaccinations at once. He came to regret this number, though he does not believe it to be inaccurate. "The 100,000 number makes me sound like a madman," he told *Wired*. "Because that's the image: 100,000 shots sticking out of you. It's an awful image."

In a 2009 article for *Mothering* magazine, Jennifer Margulis expresses outrage that newborn infants are routinely vaccinated for hep B and wonders why she was encouraged to vaccinate her daughter "against a sexually transmitted disease she had no chance of catching." Hep B is transmitted through bodily fluids, so the most common way that newborns contract hep B is from their mothers. Babies born to women who are infected with hep B—and mothers can carry the virus without knowing it—will very likely be infected if they are not vaccinated within twelve hours of birth. Like human papillomavirus and a number of other viruses, hep B is a carcinogen. Newborns infected with it are at a high risk of developing long-term problems like liver cancer, but people of all ages can carry the disease without symptoms. Before the vaccine for hep B was introduced, the disease

infected 200,000 people a year, and about a million Americans were chronically infected.

One of the mysteries of hep B immunization is that vaccinating only "high-risk" groups, which was the original public-health strategy, did not bring down rates of infection. When the vaccine was introduced in 1981, it was recommended for prisoners, health-care workers, gay men, and IV-drug users. But rates of hep B infection remained unchanged until 1991, when the vaccine was recommended for all newborns. Only mass vaccination brought down the rates of infection, and since 1991 vaccination has virtually eliminated the disease in children. Risk, in the case of hep B, turns out to be a rather complicated assessment. There is risk in having sex with just one partner, getting a tattoo, or traveling to Asia. In many cases, the source of infection is never known. I decided before my son's birth that I did not want him vaccinated for hep B, but it did not occur to me until months later that although I did not belong to any risk groups at the moment he was born, by the time I put him to my breast I had received a blood transfusion and my status had changed. "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick," Susan Sontag wrote in her introduction to *Illness as Metaphor*. "Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place." Sontag wrote these words while being treated for cancer. She wrote, as she later explained, to "calm the imagination." Those of us who have lived most of our lives in the kingdom of the well may find our imaginations already placid. Not all of us think of health as a transient state from which we may be exiled without warning. Some prefer to assume health as an identity. I am healthy, we say, meaning that we eat certain foods and avoid others, that we exercise and do not smoke. Health, it is implied, is the reward for living the way we live, and lifestyle is its own variety of immunity.

In 1881 handbill entitled *The Vaccination Vampire* warns of the "universal pollution" delivered by the vaccinator to the "pure babe."

The macabre sexuality of the vampire dramatized the fear that there was something sexual in the act of vaccination, an anxiety that was only reinforced when sexually transmitted diseases were spread through arm-to-arm vaccination. Until the advent of the hollow needle, vaccination often left a wound that would scar—"the mark of the beast," some feared. In one 1882 sermon, vaccination was akin to an injection of sin, an "abominable mixture of corruption, the lees of human vice, and dregs of venial appetites, that in after life may foam upon the spirit, and develop hell within, and overwhelm the soul."

While vaccination now rarely leaves a mark, our fears that we will be permanently marked have remained. We fear that vaccination will invite autism or any one of the diseases of immune dysfunction now plaguing industrialized countries—diabetes, asthma, allergies. We fear that the hep B vaccine will cause multiple sclerosis, or that the diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus vaccine will cause sudden infant death syndrome. We fear that the formaldehyde in some vaccines will cause cancer, or that the aluminum in others will damage our brains.

It was the "poison of adders, the blood, entrails and excretions of rats, bats, toads and sucking whelps," that were imagined into the vaccines of the nineteenth century. This was the kind of organic matter, the filth, believed to be responsible for most disease at that time. Vaccination was dangerous then. Not because it would cause a child to grow the horns of a cow, but because it could spread diseases like syphilis when pus from one person was used to vaccinate another. Even when vaccination no longer involved an exchange of bodily fluids, bacterial infection remained a problem. In 1901, a contaminated batch of smallpox vaccine caused a tetanus outbreak that killed nine children in Camden, New Jersey. And in 1916, a typhoid vaccine carrying staph bacteria killed four children in Columbia, South Carolina.

Now our vaccines are, if all is well, sterile. Some contain preservatives to prevent the growth of bacteria. So now it is, in the anti-vaccine activist Jenny McCarthy's words, "the



dangerous therapies like bleeding. The purpose of heroic medicine was not so much to heal the patient as to produce some measurable—and, ideally, dramatic—effect for which the patient could be billed. Rush, for one, was accused at the time of killing more patients than he cured.

As doctors began to replace midwives in the nineteenth century, childbirth moved into hospitals, and the maternal death rate rose. We now know that childbed fever, as puerperal sepsis was called, was spread by doctors who did not wash their hands between exams. But it was blamed on tight petticoats, fretting, and bad morals. In the twentieth century, poorly understood illnesses like schizophrenia would be blamed on bad mothers, as would marginalized behaviors such as homosexuality. Autism, according to a prevailing theory in the 1950s, was caused by insensitive “refrigerator mothers.”

Even a moderately informed woman squinting at the rough outlines of a terribly compressed history of medicine can discern that quite a bit of what has passed for science in the past two hundred years, particularly where women are concerned, has not been the result of scientific inquiry so much as it has been the refuse of science repurposed to support existing ideologies. In this tradition, Andrew Wakefield’s now retracted 1998 *Lancet* study of twelve children with both developmental disorders and intestinal problems advanced a hypothesis that was already in the air—the children were referred to Wakefield by antivaccine activists, and the study was funded by a lawyer preparing a lawsuit built around many of the same children. Wakefield speculated, on the basis of evidence later revealed to be falsified, that the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine might be linked to a behavioral syndrome. While the publicity around Wakefield’s paper precipitated a dramatic drop in vaccination against measles, the paper itself concluded, “We did not prove an association between measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine and the syndrome described,” and the primary finding of the study was that more research was needed. Those who went on to use Wakefield’s inconclusive work to support the notion that vaccines cause autism are guilty not of ignorance

or science denial but of using weak science as it has always been used—to lend credibility to an idea that we want to believe for other reasons.

Believing that vaccination causes devastating diseases allows us to tell ourselves a story we already know—what heals may harm, and the sum of science is not always progress. “Women know very well that knowledge from the natural sciences has been used in the interests of our domination and not our liberation,” the science historian Donna Haraway writes. And this understanding, she observes, can render us less vulnerable to the seductive claims of absolute truth that are sometimes made in the name of science. But it can also invite us to undervalue the place and importance of scientific knowledge. We need science, Haraway warns. And where it is not built on social domination, science can be liberating.

It is difficult to read any historical account of smallpox without encountering the word “filth.” In the nineteenth century, smallpox was widely considered a disease of “filth,” which meant that it was understood to be a disease of the poor. According to filth theory, any number of contagious diseases were caused by bad air that had been made foul by excrement or rot. The sanitary conditions of the urban poor threatened the middle classes, who shuttered their windows against the air blowing off the slums at night. Filth, it was thought, was responsible not just for disease but also for immorality.

Filth theory would eventually be replaced by germ theory as an understanding of the nature of contagion, but it wasn’t entirely wrong or useless. Raw sewage running in the streets can certainly spread diseases—though smallpox isn’t one of them—and the sanitation efforts inspired by filth theory greatly improved public health. The reversal of the Chicago River, for instance, so that sewage was not delivered directly to Lake Michigan, the city’s drinking-water supply, had some obvious benefits for the citizens of Chicago. Now, the mothers I meet on the beaches of Lake Michigan do not worry much over filth. Some of us are familiar with the hygiene hypothesis, the notion that a child’s immune system needs to encounter germs to

develop properly, and most of us believe that dirt is good for our kids. But the idea that toxins, rather than filth or germs, are the root cause of most maladies is a popular theory of disease among people like me. The toxins that distress us range from pesticide residue to high-fructose corn syrup. Particularly suspect substances include the bisphenol A lining our tin cans, the phthalates in our shampoos, and the chlorinated Tris in our couches and pillows.

The definition of “toxin” can be somewhat surprising if you have grown accustomed to hearing it in the context of flame retardants and parabens. Though “toxin” is now often used to refer to manmade chemicals, the more precise meaning of the term is reserved for biologically produced poisons. The pertussis toxin, for example, is responsible for damage to the lungs that can cause whooping cough to linger for months after the bacteria that produced it have been killed by antibiotics. The diphtheria toxin is potent enough to cause massive organ failure, and tetanus bacteria produce a deadly neurotoxin. All of which we now protect against with vaccination. Though “toxoid” is the term for a toxin that has been rendered no longer toxic, the existence of a class of vaccines called toxoids probably does not help quell widespread concerns that vaccination is a source of toxicity. The consumer advocate Barbara Loe Fisher routinely stokes these fears, referring to vaccines as “biological agents of unknown toxicity” and calling for the development of “nontoxic” preservatives and for more studies on the “toxicity of all other vaccine additives” and their potential “cumulative toxic effects.”

In this context, fear of toxicity strikes me as an old anxiety with a new name. Where the word “filth” once suggested, with its moralistic air, the evils of the flesh, the word “toxic” now condemns the chemical evils of our industrial world. This is not to say that concerns over environmental pollution are unjustified—like filth theory, toxicity theory is anchored in legitimate dangers.

The way we now think about toxicity bears some resemblance to the way we once thought about filth. Both theories imagine urban environments as inherently unhealthy. And both

allow their subscribers to maintain a sense of control over their own health by pursuing personal purity. For the filth theorist, this meant a retreat into the home, where heavy curtains and shutters might seal out the smell of the poor and their problems. Our version of this shuttering is now achieved through the purchase of purified water, air purifiers, and food marketed with the promise of purity. Purity is the seemingly innocent concept behind a number of the most sinister social actions of the past century. A passion for bodily purity drove the eugenics movement and led to the sterilization of women and men who were deaf, blind, disabled, or just poor. Concerns for bodily purity were behind miscegenation laws that persisted more than a century after the abolition of slavery, and behind the sodomy laws that were only recently declared unconstitutional. Quite a bit of human solidarity, it seems, has been sacrificed to preserve some kind of imagined purity.

If we do not yet know exactly what the presence of a vast range of chemicals in umbilical-cord blood and breast milk might mean for the future of our children's health, we do at least know that we are no cleaner, even at birth, than our environment at large. We have more microorganisms in our guts than we have cells in our bodies—we are crawling with bacteria and we are full of chemicals. We are, in other words, continuous with everything here on earth. Including—and especially—each other.

---from Eula Biss, "Sentimental Medicine"

.....  
When making your butch-buddy film, *By Hook or By Crook*, you and your co-writer, Silas Howard, decided that the butch characters would call each other "he" and "him," but in the outer world of grocery stores and authority figures, people would call them "she" and "her." The point wasn't that if the outer world were schooled appropriately re: the characters' preferred pronouns, everything would be right as rain. Because if the outsiders called the characters "he," it would be a different kind of he. Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. The answer isn't just to introduce new

words (*boi, cis gendered, androfag*) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*. Like when I say *husband*.

Soon after we got together, we attended a dinner party at which a (presumably straight, or at least straight-married) woman who'd known Harry for some time turned to me and said, "So, have you been with other women, before Harry?" I was taken aback. Undeterred, she went on: "Straight ladies have always been hot for Harry." Was Harry a woman? Was I a straight lady? What did past relationships I'd had with "other women" have in common with this one? Why did I have to think about other "straight ladies" who were hot for my Harry? Was his sexual power, which I already felt to be immense, a kind of spell I'd fallen under, from which I would emerge abandoned, as he moved on to seduce others? Why was this woman, whom I barely knew, talking to me like this? When would Harry come back from the bathroom?

There are people out there who get annoyed at the story that Djuna Barnes, rather than identify as a lesbian, preferred to say that she "just loved Thelma." Gertrude Stein reputedly made similar claims, albeit not in those exact terms, about Alice. I get why it's politically maddening, but I've also always thought it a little romantic—the romance of letting an individual experience of desire take precedence over a categorical one. The story brings to mind art historian T. J. Clark's defense of his interest in the eighteenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin from imaginary interlocutors: "Calling an interest in Poussin nostalgic or elitist is like calling the interest one has, say, in the person one cares for most deeply 'hetero- (or homo-) sexist,' or 'exclusive' or 'proprietary.'" Yes, that may be right: those may be roughly the parameters, and regrettable; but the interest itself may still be more complete and human—still carry more of human possibility and compassion—than interests uncontaminated by any such affect or

compulsion." Here, as elsewhere, contamination *makes deep* rather than disqualifies.

Besides, everyone knows that Barnes and Stein had relationships with women besides Thelma and Alice. Alice knew, too: she was apparently so jealous upon finding out that Stein's early novel *Q.E.D.* told the coded story of a love triangle involving Stein and a certain May Bookstaver that Alice—who was also Stein's editor and typist—found all sorts of weaselly ways to omit every appearance of the word *May* or *may* when she re typed Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, henceforth an unwitting collaboration.

By February I was driving around the city looking at apartment after apartment, trying to find one big enough for us and your son, whom I hadn't yet met. Eventually we found a house on a hill with gleaming dark wood floors and a view of a mountain and a too-high rent. The day we got the keys, we slept together in a fit of giddiness on a thin blanket spread out over the wood floor of what would become our first bedroom.

That view. It may have been a pile of rough scrub with a stagnant pond at *it.stop*, but for two years, it was our mountain.

And then, just like that, I was folding your son's laundry. He had just turned three. Such little socks! Such little underwear! I marveled at them, made him lukewarm cocoa each morning with as much powder as can fit in the rim of a fingernail, played *Fallen Soldier* with him for hours on end. In *Fallen Soldier* he would collapse with all his gear on—sequined chain mail hat, sword, sheath, a limb wounded from battle, tied up in a scarf. I was the good Blue Witch who had to sprinkle healing dust all over him to bring him back to life. I had a twin who was evil; the evil twin had felled him with her poisonous blue powder. But now I was here to heal him. He lay there motionless, eyes closed, the faintest smile on his face, while I recited my monologue: *But where could this soldier have come from? How did he get so far from home? Is he badly wounded? Will he be kind or fierce when he awakens? Will he know I am good, or will he mistake me for my evil twin? What can I say that will bring him back to life?*

Throughout that fall, yellow YES ON PROP 8 signs were sprouting up everywhere, most notably jabbed into an otherwise bald and beautiful mountain I passed each day on my way to work. The sign depicted four stick figures raising their hands to the sky, in a paroxysm of joy, I suppose, of heteronormativity, here indicated by the fact that one of the stick figures sported a triangle skirt. (*What is that triangle, anyway? My twat?*) PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN! the stick figures cheered.

Each time I passed the sign stuck into the blameless mountain, I thought about Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting* from 1993, in which Opie photographed her back with a drawing of a house and two stick-figure women holding hands (two triangle skirts!) carved into it, along with a sun, a cloud, and two birds. She took the photo while the drawing was still dripping with blood. "Opie, who had recently broken up with her partner, was longing at the time to start a family, and the image radiates all the painful contradictions inherent in that wish," *Art in America* explains.

I don't get it, I said to Harry. Who wants a version of the Prop 8 poster, but with two triangle skirts?

Maybe Cathy does, Harry shrugged.

Once I wrote a book about domesticity in the poetry of certain gay men (Ashbery, Schuyler) and some women (Mayer, Notley). I wrote this book when I was living in New York City in a teeny, too-hot attic apartment on a Brooklyn thoroughfare underlined by the F train. I had an unusable stove filled with petrified mouse droppings, an empty fridge save for a couple of beers and yogurt peanut honey Balance bars, a futon on a piece of plywood unevenly balanced on milk crates for a bed, and a floor through which I could hear *Stand clear the closing doors* morning, noon, and night. I spent approximately seven hours a day lying in bed in this apartment, if that. Mostly I slept elsewhere. I wrote most everything I wrote and read most everything I read in public, just as I am writing this in public now.

I was so happy renting in New York City for so long because renting-or at least the way I

rented, which involved never lifting a finger to better my surroundings-allows you to let things literally fall apart all around you. Then, when it gets to be too much, you *just* move on.

Many feminists have argued for *the decline of the domestic as a separate, inherently female sphere and the vindication of domesticity as an ethic, an affect, an aesthetic, and a public*. I'm not sure what this vindication would mean, exactly, though I think in my book I was angling for something of the same. Bue even then I suspected that I was doing so because I didn't have a domestic, and I liked it that way.

I liked Fallen Soldier because it gave me time to learn about your son's face in mute repose: big almond eyes, skin just starting to freckle. And clearly he found some novel, relaxing pleasure in just lying there, protected by imaginary armor, while a near stranger who was quickly becoming family picked up each limb and turned it over, trying to find the wound.

Not long ago, a friend came over to our house and pulled down a mug for coffee, a mug that was a gift from my mother. It's one of those mugs you can purchase online from Snapfish, with the photo of your choice emblazoned on it. I was horrified when I received it, but it's the biggest mug we own, so we keep it around, in case someone's in the mood for a trough of warm milk or something.

Wow, my friend said, filling it up. *I've never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life.*

The photo on the mug depicts my family and me, all dressed up to go to the *Nutcracker* at Christmastime—a ritual that was important to my mother when I was a little girl, and that we have revived with her now that there are children in my life. In the photo I'm seven months pregnant with what will become Iggy, wearing a high ponytail and leopard print dress; Harry and his son are wearing matching dark suits, looking dashing. We're standing in front of the mantel at my mother's house, which has monogrammed stockings hanging from it. We look happy.

But what about it *is* the essence of heteronormativity? That my mother made a mug on a boogie service like Snapfish? That we're clearly participating, or acquiescing into

participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicate that she recognizes and accepts my tribe as family? What about my pregnancy—is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth? As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? Will you *miss* it?

Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one's "normal" state, and occasions a radical intimacy with—and radical alienation from one's body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)? What about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female? *I'm a special-a two for one*, his character Valentine explains in *By Hook or By Crook*.

When or how do *new kinship systems mime older nuclear family arrangements* and when or how do they *radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship*? How can you tell; or, rather, who's to tell? *Tell your girlfriend to find a different kid to play house with*, your ex would say, after we first moved in.

To align oneself with the real while intimating that others are at play, approximate, or in imitation can feel good. But any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity also has a finger in psychosis. *If a man who thinks he is a king is mad*, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so.

Perhaps this is why psychologist D. W. Winnicott's notion of "feeling real" is so moving to me. One can aspire to feel real, one can help others to feel real, and one can oneself feel real—a feeling Winnicott describes as the collected, primary sensation of aliveness, "the aliveness of

the body tissues and working of body-functions, including the heart's action and breathing," which makes spontaneous gesture possible. For Winnicott, feeling real is not reactive to external stimuli, nor is it an identity. It is a sensation-a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live.

Some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity, as in *You make me feel like a natural woman-made* famous by Aretha Franklin and, later, by Judith Butler, who focused on the instability wrought by the simile. But there can also be a horror in doing so, not to mention an impossibility. *It's not possible to live twentyfour hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex. Gendered self-consciousness has, mercifully, a flickering nature.*

*A friend says he thinks of gender as a color. Gender does share with color a certain ontological indeterminacy: it isn't quite right to say that an object is a color, nor that the object has a color. Context also changes it: all cats are gray, etc. Nor is color voluntary, precisely. But none of these formulations means that the object in question is colorless.*

The bad reading [of Gender Trouble] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism. . . . When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way-that gender is not to be chosen and that "performativity" is not radical choice and it's not voluntarism. . . . Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.

*You should order a mug in response, my friend mused while drinking her coffee. Like, how*

*about one that features Iggy's head crowning, in all its bloody glory?* (I had told her earlier that day that I was vaguely hurt that my mother hadn't wanted to look at my birth photos; Harry then reminded me that few people ever want to look at anyone's birth photos, at least not the graphic ones. And I was forced to admit that my past feelings about other people's birth photos bore out the truth of this statement. But in my postpartum haze, I felt as though giving birth to Iggy was such an achievement, and doesn't my mother like to be proud of my achievements? She laminated the page in the *New York Times* that listed me as a Guggenheim recipient, for God's sake. Unable to throw the Guggenheim placemat away (ingratitude), but not knowing what else to do with it, I've since placed it below Iggy's high chair, to catch the food that flows downward. Given that the fellowship essentially paid for his conception, each time I sponge tidbits of shredded wheat or broccoli florets off of it, I feel a loose sense of justice.)

During our first forays out as a couple, I blushed a lot, felt dizzy with my luck, unable to contain the nearly exploding fact that I've so obviously gotten everything I'd ever wanted, everything there was to get. *Handsome, brilliant, quick-witted, articulate, forceful, you.* We spent hours and hours on the red couch, giggling, *the happiness police are going to come and arrest us if we go on this way. Arrest us for our luck.*

*What if where I am is what I need?* Before you, I had always thought of this mantra as a means of making peace with a bummer or even catastrophic situation. I never imagined it might apply to joy, too.

In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde rails against the imperative to optimism and happiness that she found in the medical discourse surrounding breast cancer. "Was I really fighting the spread of radiation, racism, woman-slaughter, chemical invasion of our food, pollution of our environment, the abuse and psychic destruction of our young, merely to avoid dealing with my first and greatest responsibility-to be happy?" Lorde writes. "Let us seek 'joy' rather than real food and clean air and a saner future on a

liveable earth! As if happiness alone can protect us from the results of profit-madness."

Happiness is no protection, and certainly it is not a responsibility. *The freedom to be happy restricts human freedom if you are not free to be not happy.* But one can make of either freedom a habit, and only you know which you've chosen.

The wedding story of Mary and George Oppen is one of the only straight-people stories I know in which the marriage is made more romantic by virtue of its being a sham. Here is their story: One night in 1926, Mary went out on a date with George, whom she knew just a little from a college poetry class. As Mary remembers it: "He came for me in his roommate's Model T Ford, and we drove out to the country, sat and talked, made love, and talked until morning. . . . We talked as we had never talked before, an outpouring." Upon returning to their dorms in the morning, Mary found herself expelled; George was suspended. They then took off together, hitchhiking on the open road.

Before meeting George, Mary had decided firmly against marriage, considering it to be a "disastrous trap." But she also knew that traveling together without being married put her and George at risk with the law, via the Mann Act-one of the many laws in U.S. history ostensibly passed to prosecute unequivocally bad things like sexual slavery, but which in actuality has been used to harass anyone whose relationships the state deems "immoral."

Inside there was an epic line at the marriage counter, mostly fags and dykes of all ages, along with a slew of young straight couples, mostly Latino, who seemed bewildered by the nature of the day's crowd. The older men in front of us told us they got married a few months ago, but when their marriage certificate arrived in the mail, they noticed the signatures had been botched by their officiant. They were now desperately hoping for a re-do, so that they could stay officially married no matter what happened at the polls.

Contrary to what the Internet had promised, the chapel was all booked up, so all the couples in line were going to have to go elsewhere to get an official ceremony of some kind after finishing

their paperwork. We struggled to understand how a contract with the so-called secular state could mandate some kind of spiritual ritual. People who already had officiants lined up to marry them later that day offered to make their ceremonies communal, to accommodate everyone who wanted to get married before midnight. The guys in front of us invited us to join their beach wedding in Malibu. We thanked them, but instead called 411 and asked for the name of a wedding chapel in West Hollywood—isn't that where the queers are? *I have a Hollywood Chapel on Santa Monica Boulevard*, the voice said.

The Hollywood Chapel turned out to be a hole in the wall at the end of the block where I lived for the loneliest three years of my life. Tacky maroon velvet curtains divided the waiting room from the chapel room; both spaces were decorated with cheap gothic candelabras, fake flowers, and a peach faux finish. A drag queen at the door did triple duty as a greeter, bouncer, and witness.

Reader, we married there, with the assistance of Reverend Lorelei Starbuck. Reverend Starbuck suggested we discuss the vows with her beforehand; we said they didn't really matter. She insisted. We let them stay standard, albeit stripped of pronouns. The ceremony was rushed, but as we said our vows, we were undone. We wept, besotted with our luck, then gratefully accepted two heart-shaped lollipops with THE HOLLYWOOD CHAPEL embossed on their wrappers, rushed to pick up the little guy at daycare before closing, came home and ate chocolate pudding all together in sleeping bags on the porch, looking out over our mountain.

That evening, Reverend Starbuck—who listed her denomination as "Metaphysical" on our forms—rush-delivered our paperwork, along with that of hundreds of others, to whatever authorities had been authorized to deem our speech act felicitous. By the end of the day, 52 percent of California voters had voted to pass Prop 8, thus halting "same-sex" marriages across the state, reversing the conditions of our felicity.

The Hollywood Chapel disappeared as quickly as it had sprung up, waiting, perhaps, to emerge another day.

One of the most annoying things about hearing the refrain "same-sex marriage" over and over again is that I don't know many—if any—queers who think of their desire's main feature as being "same-sex." It's true that a lot of lesbian sex writing from the '70s was about being turned on, and even politically transformed, by an encounter with sameness. This encounter was, is, can be, important, as it has to do with seeing reflected that which has been reviled, with exchanging alienation or internalized revulsion for desire and care. To devote yourself to someone else's pussy can be a means of devoting yourself to your own. But whatever sameness I've noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy.

My stepson is too old for Fallen Soldier or Bear Family now. As I write, he's listening to Funky Cold Medina on his iPod—eyes closed, in his gigantic body, lying on the red couch. Nine years old.

There's something truly strange about living in a historical moment in which the conservative anxiety and despair about queers bringing down civilization and its institutions (marriage, most notably) is met by the anxiety and despair so many queers feel about the failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down civilization and its institutions, and their frustration with the assimilationist, unthinkingly neoliberal bent of the mainstream GLBTQ+ movement, which has spent fine coin begging entrance into two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military. 'I'm not the kind of faggot who wants to put a rainbow sticker on a machine gun,' declares poet CAConrad. If there's one thing homonormativity reveals, it's the troubling fact that *you can be victimized and in no way be radical; it happens very often among homosexuals as with every other oppressed minority.*

This is not a devaluation of queerness. It is a reminder: if we want to do more than claw our

way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us.

At the 2012 Pride intervention in Oakland, some antiassimilationist activists unfurled a banner that read: CAPITALISM IS FUCKING THE QUEER OUT OF us. A distributed pamphlet read:

What is destructive to straight society—we know can never be commodified and purged of rebellion. So we maintain our stance—as fierce fags, queers, dykes and trans girls and bois and gender queers and all the combination and in between and those that negate it all at the same time. We bid[e] our time, striking here and there and fantasize of a world where all of the exploited of the world can come together and attack. We want to find you, comrade, if this too is what you want.

For the total destruction of Capital, bad bitches who will fuck your shit up.

I was glad for their intervention: there is some evil shit in this world that needs fucking up, and the time for blithely asserting that sleeping with whomever you want however you want is going to jam its machinery is long past. But I've never been able to answer to *comrade*, nor share in this fantasy of attack. In fact I have come to understand revolutionary language as a sort of fetish—in which case, one response to the above might be, *Our diagnosis is similar, but our perversities are not compatible. Perhaps it's the word radical that needs rethinking. But what could we angle ourselves toward instead, or in addition? Openness? Is that good enough, strong enough? You're the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you're opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You're the only one who knows. And the thing is, even you don't always know.*

--from Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

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I think of this as a great difference between us. You have some acquaintance with the old rules, but they are not as essential to you as they were to me. I am sure that you have had to deal

with the occasional roughneck on the subway or in the park, but when I was about your age, each day, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not-all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body. I do not long for those days. I have no desire to make you "tough" or "street," perhaps because any "toughness" I garnered came reluctantly. I think I was always, somehow, aware of the price. I think I somehow knew that that third of my brain should have been concerned with more beautiful things. I think I felt that something out there, some force, nameless and vast, had robbed me of ... what? Time? Experience? I think you know something of what that third could have done, and I think that is why you may feel the need for escape even more than I did. You have seen all the wonderful life up above the tree-line, yet you understand that there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me. You have seen so much more of all that is lost when they destroy your body.

The streets were not my only problem. If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more. There was nothing sanctified about the laws of the streets-the laws were amoral and practical. You rolled with a posse to the party as sure as you wore boots in the snow, or raised an umbrella in the rain. These were rules aimed at something obvious-the great danger that haunted every visit to Shake & Bake, every bus ride down town. But the laws of the schools were aimed at something distant and vague. What did it mean to, as our elders told us, "grow up and be somebody"? And what precisely did this have to do with an education rendered as rote discipline? To be educated in my Baltimore mostly meant always packing an extra

number 2 pencil and working quietly. Educated children walked in single file on the right side of the hallway, raised their hands to use the lavatory, and carried the lavatory pass when en route. Educated children never offered excuses-certainly not childhood itself (The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? Algebra, Biology, and English were not subjects so much as opportunities to better discipline the body, to practice writing between the lines, copying the directions legibly, memorizing theorems extracted from the world they were created to represent. All of it felt so distant to me. I remember sitting in my seventh-grade French class and not having any idea why I was there. I did not know any French people, and nothing around me suggested I ever would. France was a rock rotating in another galaxy, around another sun, in another sky that I would never cross. Why, precisely, was I sitting in this classroom?

The question was never answered. I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance. I loved a few of my teachers. But I cannot say that I truly believed any of them. Some years after I'd left school, after I'd dropped out of college, I heard a few lines from Nas that struck me:

Ecstasy, coke, you say it's love, it is poison

Schools where I learn they should be burned, it is poison

That was exactly how I felt back then. I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so that we did not ask: Why-for us and only us-is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies? This is not a hyperbolic concern. When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing.

Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does not, and while I couldn't crunch the numbers or plumb the history back then, I sensed that the fear that

marked West Baltimore could not be explained by the schools. Schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them. Perhaps they must be burned away so that the heart of this thing might be known.

Unfit for the schools, and in good measure wanting to be unfit for them, and lacking the savvy I needed to master the streets, I felt there could be no escape for me or, honestly, anyone else. The fearless boys and girls who would knuckle up, call on cousins and crews, and, if it came to it, pull guns seemed to have mastered the streets. But their knowledge peaked at seventeen, when they ventured out of their parents' homes and discovered that America had guns and cousins, too. I saw their futures in the tired faces of mothers dragging themselves onto the 28 bus, swatting and cursing at three-year-olds; I saw their futures in the men out on the corner yelling obscenely at some young girl because she would not smile. Some of them stood outside liquor stores waiting on a few dollars for a bottle. We would hand them a twenty and tell them to keep the change. They would dash inside and return with Red Bull, Mad Dog, or Cisco. Then we would walk to the house of someone whose mother worked nights, play "Fuck tha Police," and drink to our youth. We could not get out. The ground we walked was trip-wired. The air we breathed was toxic. The water stunted our growth. We could not get out.

A year after I watched the boy with the small eyes pull out a gun, my father beat me for letting another boy steal from me. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my ninth-grade teacher. Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me my body. We could not get out. I was a capable boy, intelligent, well liked, but powerfully afraid. And I felt vaguely, wordlessly, that for a child to be marked off for such a life, to be forced to live in fear was a great injustice. And what was the source of this fear? What was hiding behind the smoke screen of streets and schools? And what did it mean that number 2 pencils, conjugations without context, Pythagorean theorems, handshakes, and head nods were the difference

between life and death, were the curtains drawing down between the world and me?

I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. And so I had no sense that any just God was on my side. "The meek shall inherit the earth" meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box.

That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.

But how? Religion could not tell me. The schools could not tell me. The streets could not help me see beyond the scramble of each day. And I was such a curious boy. I was raised that way. Your grandmother taught me to read when I was only four. She also taught me to write, by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation. When I was in trouble at school (which was quite often) she would make me write about it. The writing had to answer a series of questions: Why did I feel the need to talk at the same time as my teacher? Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect? How would I want someone to behave while I was talking? What would I do the next time I felt the urge to talk to my friends during a lesson? I have given you these same assignments. I gave them to you not because I thought they would curb your behavior—they certainly did not curb mine—but because these were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into

consciousness. Your grandmother was not teaching me how to behave in class. She was teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the assemblies for a ritual review of the Civil Rights Movement. Our teachers urged us toward the example of freedom marchers, Freedom Riders, and Freedom Summers, and it seemed that the month could not pass without a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera. The black people in these films seemed to love the worst things in life—love the dogs that rent their children apart, the tear gas that clawed at their lungs, the fire hoses that tore off their clothes and tumbled them into the streets. They seemed to love the men who raped them, the women who cursed them, love the children who spat on them, the terrorists that bombed them. Why are they showing this to us? Why were only our heroes nonviolent? I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that blacks are in especial need of this morality. Back then all I could do was measure these freedom-lovers by what I knew. Which is to say, I measured them against children pulling out in the 7-Eleven parking lot, against parents wielding extension cords, and "Yeah, nigger, what's up now?" I judged them against the country I knew, which had acquired the land through murder and tamed it under slavery, against the country whose armies fanned out across the world to extend their dominion. The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means. How could the schools valorize men and women whose values society actively scorned? How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?

I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed its implicit sanction. But fear and violence were the weaponry of both. Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body. Fail in the schools and you would be suspended and sent back to those same streets, where they would take your body. And I began to see these two arms in relation those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the

streets. The society could say, "He should have stayed in school," and then wash its hands of him.

It does not matter that the "intentions" of individual educators were noble. Forget about intentions. What any institution, or its agents, "intend" for you is secondary. Our world is physical. Learn to play defense—ignore the head and keep your eyes on the body. Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream. No one directly proclaimed that schools were designed to sanctify failure and destruction. But a great number of educators spoke of "personal responsibility" in a country authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility. The point of this language of "intention" and "personal responsibility" is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. "Good intention" is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream.

—from Ta-Nehisi Coats, *Between the World and Me*

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## MICHAEL BROWN

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How can we survive genocide? We can only address this question by studying how we have survived genocide. In the interest of imagining what exists, there is an image of Michael Brown we must refuse in favor of another image we don't have. One is a lie, the other unavailable. If we refuse to show the image of a lonely body, of the outline of the space that body simultaneously took and left, we do so in order to imagine jurisgenerative black social life walking down the middle of the street—for a minute, but only for a minute, unpoliced, another city gathers, dancing. We know it's there, and here, and real; we know what we can't have happens all the time. Imagining what exists requires and allows analysis.

1

When my brother fell

I picked up his weapons.  
I didn't question  
whether I could aim  
or be as precise as he.  
A needle and thread  
were not among  
his things  
I found.  
—Essex Hemphill, "When My Brother Fell"

When we walk down the street  
We don't care who we see or who we meet  
Don't need to run, don't need to hide  
'cause we got something burning inside  
we've got love power

it's the greatest power of them all  
we've got love power  
and together we can't fall.  
—Luther Vandross, "Power of Love/Love  
Power"

At times, this land will shake your understanding  
of the world  
and confusion will eat away at your sense  
of humanity  
but at least you will feel normal.  
—Vernon Ah Kee, from *Whitefellanormal3*

These passages bear an analytic of the lost and found, of fallenness and ascension, that comes burning to mind in and as the name of Michael Brown. First, that there is a social erotics of the lost and found in fallenness's refusal of standing. We fall so we can fall again, which is what ascension really means to us. To fall is to lose one's place, to lose the place that makes one, to relinquish the locus of being, which is to say of being single. This radical homelessness—its kinetic indigeneity, its irreducible queerness—is the essence of blackness. This refusal to take place is given in what it is to occur. Michael Brown is the latest name of the ongoing event of resistance to, and resistance before, socioecological disaster. Modernity's constitution in the transatlantic slave trade, settler colonialism and capital's emergence in and with the state, is The Socioecological Disaster. Michael Brown

gives us occasion once again to consider what it is to endure the disaster, to survive (in) genocide, to navigate unmappable differences as a range of localities that, in the end—either all the way to the end or as our ongoing refusal of beginnings and ends—will always refuse to have been taken.

The fall is anacatastrophic refusal of the case and, therefore, of the world, which is the earth's capture insofar as it was always a picture frozen and extracted from imaginal movement. At stake is the power of love, which is given, in walking down the street, as defiance to the (racial capitalist, settler colonial) state and its seizures, especially its seizure of the capacity to make (and break) law. Against the grain of the state's monopolization of ceremony, ceremonies are small and profligate; if they weren't everywhere and all the time we'd be dead. The ruins, which are small rituals, aren't absent but surreptitious, a range of songful scarring, when people give a sign, shake a hand. But what if together we can fall, because we're fallen, because we need to fall again, to continue in our common fallenness, remembering that falling is in apposition to rising, their combination given in lingering, as the giving of pause, recess, vestibular remain, custodial remand, hold, holding in the interest of rub, dap's reflex and reflection of maternal touch, a maternal ecology of laid hands, of being handled, handed, handed down, nurture's natural dispersion, its endless refusal of standing. Hemphill emphatically announces the sociality that Luther shelters. Fallen, risen, mo(u)rnful survival. When black men die, it's usually because we love each other, whether we run, or fight, or surrender. Consider Michael Brown's generative occurrence and recurrence as refusal of the case, as refusal of standing. You can do this but only if you wish to insert yourself, and now I must abuse a phrase of Ah Kee's, into black worldlessness. Our homelessness. Our selflessness. None of which are or can be ours.

2  
The state can't live with us and it can't live without us. Its violence is a reaction to that condition. The state is nothing other than a war

against its own condition. The state is at war against its own (re)sources, in violent reaction to its own condition of im/possibility, which is life itself, which is the earth itself, which blackness doesn't so much stand in for as name, as a name among others that is not just another name among others. That we survive is beauty and testament; it is neither to be dismissed nor overlooked nor devalued by or within whatever ascription of value; that we survive is invaluable. It is, at the same time, insufficient. We have to recognize that a state—the racial capitalist/settler colonial state—of war has long existed. Its brutalities and militarizations, its regulative mundanities, are continually updated and revised, but they are not new. If anything, we need to think more strategically about our own innovations, recognizing that the state of war is a reactive state, a machine for regulating and capitalizing upon our innovations in/for survival. This is why what's most disturbing about Michael Brown (aka Eric Garner, aka Renisha McBride, aka Trayvon Martin, aka Eleanor Bumpurs, aka Emmitt Till, aka an endless stream of names and absent names) is our reaction to him, our misunderstanding of him, and the sources of that misunderstanding that manifest and reify a desire for standing, for stasis, within the state war machine which, contrary to popular belief, doesn't confer citizenship upon its subjects at birth but, rather, at death, which is the proper name for entrance into its properly political confines. The prosecution of Michael Brown, which is the proper technical name for the grand jury investigation of Darren Wilson, the drone, is what our day in court looks like and always has. The prone, exposed, unburied body—the body that is given, in death, its status as body precisely through and by way of the withholding of fleshly ceremony—is what political standing looks like. That's the form it takes and keeps. This is a Sophoclean formulation. The law of the state is what Ida B. Wells rightly calls lynch law. And we extend it in our appeals to it. We need to stop worrying so much about how it kills, regulates, and accumulates us, and worry more about how we kill, deregulate, and disperse it. We have to love and revere our survival, which is (in) our

resistance. We have to love our refusal of what has been refused. But insofar as this refusal has begun to stand, insofar as it has begun to seek standing, it stands in need of renewal, now, even as the sources and conditions of that renewal become more and more obscure, more and more entangled with the regulatory apparatuses that are deployed in order to suppress them. At moments like this we have to tell the truth with a kind of viciousness and, even, a kind of cruelty. Black lives don't matter, which is an empirical statement not only about black lives in this state of war but also about lives. This is to say that lives don't matter; nor should they. It's the metaphysics of the individual life in all its immateriality that's got us in this situation in the first place. Michael Brown lived and moved within a deep and evolving understanding of this: if i leave this earth today at least you'll know i care about others more than i cared about my damn self. . . .

But we have to consider how, and what it means that, his testament is transformed into an expression of mourning and outrage such as this upon the nonoccasion of the nonindictment:

Go on call me "demon" but I WILL love my damn self. I suffer with but also through this expression of our suffering. For this expression of our disavowal of the demonic—however brutally the police and/or the polis, in their soullessness, ascribe it to or inscribe it upon us—is erstwhile respectability's voluntary laying down of arms, its elective demobilization of jurisgenerative force. Meanwhile, Michael Brown is like another fall and rise through man—come and gone, as irruption and rupture, to remind us not that black lives matter but that black life matters; that the absolute and undeniable blackness of life matters. The innovation of our survival is given in embrace of this daimonic, richly internally differentiated choreography, its lumpen improvisation of contact, which is obscured when class struggle in black studies threatens to suppress black study as class struggle.

How much has black studies, as a bourgeois institutionalization of black study, determined the way we understand and fight the state of war

within which we try to live? How has it determined how we understand the complex nonsingularity that we know now as Michael Brown? It would be wrong to say that Michael Brown has become, in death, more than himself. He already was that, as he said himself, in echo of so much more than himself. He was already more than that in being less than that, in being the least of these. To reduce Michael Brown to a cypher for our unfulfilled desire to be more than that, for our serially unachieved and constitutionally unachievable citizenship, is to do a kind of counterrevolutionary violence; it is to partake in the ghoulish, vampiric consumption of his body, of the body that became his, though it did not become him, in death, in the reductive stasis to which his flesh was subjected. Michael Brown's flesh is our flesh; he is flesh of our flesh of flames.

On August 9, like every day, like any other day, black life, in its irreducible sociality, having consented not to be single, got caught walking—with jurisgenerative fecundity—down the middle of the street. Michael Brown and his boys: black life breaking and making law, against and underneath the state, surrounding it. They had foregone the melancholic appeal, to which we now reduce them, for citizenship, and subjectivity, and humanness. That they had done so is the source of Darren Wilson's genocidal instrumentalization in the state's defense. They were in a state of war and they knew it. Moreover, they were warriors in insurgent, if imperfect, beauty.

What's left for us to consider is the difference between the way of Michael Brown's dance, his fall and rise—the way they refuse to take place when he takes to the streets, the way Ferguson takes to the streets—and the way we seek to take, but don't seem to take to, the streets: in protest, as mere petitioners, fruitlessly seeking energy in the pitiful, minimal, temporary shutdown of this or that freeway, as if mere occupation were something other than retrenchment (in reverse) of the demand for recognition that actually constitutes business as usual. Rather than dissipate our preoccupation

with how we live and breathe, we need to defend our ways in our persistent practice of them. It's not about taking the streets; it's about how, and about what, we should take to the streets. What would it be and what would it mean for us jurisgeneratively to take to the streets, to live in the streets, to gather together another city right here, right now?

3

Meanwhile, against the dead citizenship that was imposed upon him, the body the state tried to make him be, and in lieu of the images we refuse and can't have, here is an image of our imagination.

This is Michael Brown, his descent, his ascension, his ceremony,

his flesh, his animation in and of the maternal ecology—Michael Brown's

innovation, as contact, in improvisation. Contact improvisation is how we survive genocide.

we didn't get here by ourselves. black takes like black took. we were already beside our selves, evidently. eventually, we were upside ourselves in this wombed scar, this womblike scarring open scream tuned open, sister, can you move my form? took, had, give. because he wasn't by himself he's gone in us. how we got over that we didn't get here is wanting more than that in the way we carry ourselves, how we carry over our selves into we're gone in the remainder. here, not here, bought, unbought, we brought ourselves with us so we could give ourselves away, which is more than they can take away, even when its more than we can take --Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

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## THE SOULS OF WHITE FOLK

High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea, I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that intrigue me more than the Souls of White Folk.

Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come,

for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious. They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped,—ugly, human.

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing,—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction. The Middle Age regarded skin color with mild curiosity; and even up into the eighteenth century we were hammering our national manikins into one, great, Universal Man, with fine frenzy which ignored color and race even more than birth. Today we have changed all that, and the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by that token, wonderful!

This assumption that of all the hues of God whiteness alone is inherently and obviously better than brownness or tan leads to curious acts; even the sweeter souls of the dominant world as they discourse with me on weather, weal, and woe are continually playing above their actual words an obligato of tune and tone, saying:

"My poor, un-white thing! Weep not nor rage. I know, too well, that the curse of God lies heavy on you. Why? That is not for me to say, but be brave! Do your work in your lowly sphere, praying the good Lord that into heaven above, where all is love, you may, one day, be born—white!"

I do not laugh. I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly:

"But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?" Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!

Now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time. Its first effects are funny: the strut of the Southerner, the arrogance of the Englishman amuck, the whoop of the hoodlum who vicariously leads your mob. Next it appears dampening generous enthusiasm in what we once counted glorious; to free the slave is discovered to be tolerable only in so far as it freed his master! Do we sense somnolent writhings in black Africa or angry groans in India or triumphant banzais in Japan? "To your tents, O Israel!" These nations are not white!

After the more comic manifestations and the chilling of generous enthusiasm come subtler, darker deeds. Everything considered, the title to the universe claimed by White Folk is faulty. It ought, at least, to look plausible. How easy, then, by emphasis and omission to make children believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man's soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man's thought; that every great deed the white ever did was a white man's deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man's dream. In fine, that if from the world were dropped everything that could not fairly be attributed to White Folk, the world would, if anything, be even greater, truer, better than now. And if all this be a lie, is it not a lie in a great cause?

Here it is that the comedy verges to tragedy. The first minor note is struck, all unconsciously, by those worthy souls in whom consciousness of high descent brings burning desire to spread the gift abroad,—the obligation of nobility to the ignoble. Such sense of duty assumes two things: a real possession of the heritage and its frank appreciation by the humble-born. So long, then, as humble black folk, voluble with thanks,

receive barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental peace and moral satisfaction. But when the black man begins to dispute the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training; and when his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human right to swagger and swear and waste,—then the spell is suddenly broken and the philanthropist is ready to believe that Negroes are impudent, that the South is right, and that Japan wants to fight America.

After this the descent to Hell is easy. On the pale, white faces which the great billows whirl upward to my tower I see again and again, often and still more often, a writing of human hatred, a deep and passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its expressions. Down through the green waters, on the bottom of the world, where men move to and fro, I have seen a man—an educated gentleman—grow livid with anger because a little, silent, black woman was sitting by herself in a Pullman car. He was a white man. I have seen a great, grown man curse a little child, who had wandered into the wrong waiting-room, searching for its mother: "Here, you damned black—" He was white. In Central Park I have seen the upper lip of a quiet, peaceful man curl back in a tigerish snarl of rage because black folk rode by in a motor car. He was a white man. We have seen, you and I, city after city drunk and furious with ungovernable lust of blood; mad with murder, destroying, killing, and cursing; torturing human victims because somebody accused of crime happened to be of the same color as the mob's innocent victims and because that color was not white! We have seen,—Merciful God! in these wild days and in the name of Civilization, Justice, and Motherhood,—what have we not seen, right here in America, of orgy, cruelty, barbarism, and murder done to men and women of Negro descent.

Up through the foam of green and weltering waters wells this great mass of hatred, in wilder, fiercer violence, until I look down and know that today to the millions of my people no misfortune could happen,—of death and pestilence, failure

and defeat—that would not make the hearts of millions of their fellows beat with fierce, vindictive joy! Do you doubt it? Ask your own soul what it would say if the next census were to report that half of black America was dead and the other half dying.

Unfortunate? Unfortunate. But where is the misfortune? Mine? Am I, in my blackness, the sole sufferer? I suffer. And yet, somehow, above the suffering, above the shackled anger that beats the bars, above the hurt that crazes there surges in me a vast pity,—pity for a people imprisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable for such a cause, for such a phantasy!

Conceive this nation, of all human peoples, engaged in a crusade to make the "World Safe for Democracy"! Can you imagine the United States protesting against Turkish atrocities in Armenia, while the Turks are silent about mobs in Chicago and St. Louis; what is Louvain compared with Memphis, Waco, Washington, Dyersburg, and Estill Springs? In short, what is the black man but America's Belgium, and how could America condemn in Germany that which she commits, just as brutally, within her own borders?

A true and worthy ideal frees and uplifts a people; a false ideal imprisons and lowers. Say to men, earnestly and repeatedly: "Honesty is best, knowledge is power; do unto others as you would be done by." Say this and act it and the nation must move toward it, if not to it. But say to a people: "The one virtue is to be white," and the people rush to the inevitable conclusion, "Kill the 'nigger!'"

...

In the awful cataclysm of World War, where from beating, slandering, and murdering us the white world turned temporarily aside to kill each other, we of the Darker Peoples looked on in mild amaze.

Among some of us, I doubt not, this sudden descent of Europe into hell brought unbounded surprise; to others, over wide area, it brought the *Schaden Freude* of the bitterly hurt; but most of us, I judge, looked on silently and sorrowfully, in sober thought, seeing sadly the prophecy of our own souls.

Here is a civilization that has boasted much. Neither Roman nor Arab, Greek nor Egyptian, Persian nor Mongol ever took himself and his own perfectness with such disconcerting seriousness as the modern white man. We whose shame, humiliation, and deep insult his aggrandizement so often involved were never deceived. We looked at him clearly, with world-old eyes, and saw simply a human thing, weak and pitiable and cruel, even as we are and were.

...

We may, however, grant without argument that religious ideals have always far outrun their very human devotees. Let us, then, turn to more mundane matters of honor and fairness. The world today is trade. The world has turned shopkeeper; history is economic history; living is earning a living. Is it necessary to ask how much of high enterprise and honorable conduct has been found here? Something, to be sure. The establishment of world credit systems is built on splendid and realizable faith in fellow-men. But it is, after all, so low and elementary a step that sometimes it looks merely like honor among thieves, for the revelations of highway robbery and low cheating in the business world and in all its great modern centers have raised in the hearts of all true men in our day an exceeding great cry for revolution in our basic methods and conceptions of industry and commerce.

We do not, for a moment, forget the robbery of other times and races when trade was a most uncertain gamble; but was there not a certain honesty and frankness in the evil that argued a saner morality? There are more merchants today, surer deliveries, and wider well-being, but are there not, also, bigger thieves, deeper injustice, and more calloused selfishness in well-being? Be that as it may,—certainly the nicer sense of honor that has risen ever and again in groups of forward-thinking men has been curiously and broadly blunted. Consider our chiefest industry,—fighting. Laboriously the Middle Ages built its rules of fairness—equal armament, equal notice, equal conditions. What do we see today? Machine-guns against assegais; conquest sugared with religion; mutilation and rape masquerading as culture,—all this, with vast

applause at the superiority of white over black soldiers!

War is horrible! This the dark world knows to its awful cost. But has it just become horrible, in these last days, when under essentially equal conditions, equal armament, and equal waste of wealth white men are fighting white men, with surgeons and nurses hovering near?

Think of the wars through which we have lived in the last decade: in German Africa, in British Nigeria, in French and Spanish Morocco, in China, in Persia, in the Balkans, in Tripoli, in Mexico, and in a dozen lesser places—were not these horrible, too? Mind you, there were for most of these wars no Red Cross funds.

Behold little Belgium and her pitiable plight, but has the world forgotten Congo? What Belgium now suffers is not half, not even a tenth, of what she has done to black Congo since Stanley's great dream of 1880. Down the dark forests of inmost Africa sailed this modern Sir Galahad, in the name of "the noble-minded men of several nations," to introduce commerce and civilization. What came of it? "Rubber and murder, slavery in its worst form," wrote Glave in 1895.

Harris declares that King Leopold's régime meant the death of twelve million natives, "but what we who were behind the scenes felt most keenly was the fact that the real catastrophe in the Congo was desolation and murder in the larger sense. The invasion of family life, the ruthless destruction of every social barrier, the shattering of every tribal law, the introduction of criminal practices which struck the chiefs of the people dumb with horror—in a word, a veritable avalanche of filth and immorality overwhelmed the Congo tribes."

Yet the fields of Belgium laughed, the cities were gay, art and science flourished; the groans that helped to nourish this civilization fell on deaf ears because the world round about was doing the same sort of thing elsewhere on its own account.

As we saw the dead dimly through rifts of battlesmoke and heard faintly the cursings and accusations of blood brothers, we darker men said: This is not Europe gone mad; this is not

aberration nor insanity; this *is* Europe; this seeming Terrible is the real soul of white culture—back of all culture,—stripped and visible today. This is where the world has arrived,—these dark and awful depths and not the shining and ineffable heights of which it boasted. Here is whither the might and energy of modern humanity has really gone.

But may not the world cry back at us and ask: "What better thing have you to show? What have you done or would do better than this if you had today the world rule? Paint with all riot of hateful colors the thin skin of European culture,—is it not better than any culture that arose in Africa or Asia?"

It is. Of this there is no doubt and never has been; but why is it better? Is it better because Europeans are better, nobler, greater, and more gifted than other folk? It is not. Europe has never produced and never will in our day bring forth a single human soul who cannot be matched and over-matched in every line of human endeavor by Asia and Africa. Run the gamut, if you will, and let us have the Europeans who in sober truth over-match Nefertari, Mohammed, Rameses and Askia, Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus Christ. If we could scan the calendar of thousands of lesser men, in like comparison, the result would be the same; but we cannot do this because of the deliberately educated ignorance of white schools by which they remember Napoleon and forget Sonni Ali.

The greatness of Europe has lain in the width of the stage on which she has played her part, the strength of the foundations on which she has builded, and a natural, human ability no whit greater (if as great) than that of other days and races. In other words, the deeper reasons for the triumph of European civilization lie quite outside and beyond Europe,—back in the universal struggles of all mankind.

Why, then, is Europe great? Because of the foundations which the mighty past have furnished her to build upon: the iron trade of ancient, black Africa, the religion and empire-building of yellow Asia, the art and science of the "dago" Mediterranean shore, east, south, and west, as well as north. And where she has builded

securely upon this great past and learned from it she has gone forward to greater and more splendid human triumph; but where she has ignored this past and forgotten and sneered at it, she has shown the cloven hoof of poor, crucified humanity,—she has played, like other empires gone, the world fool!

If, then, European triumphs in culture have been greater, so, too, may her failures have been greater. How great a failure and a failure in what does the World War betoken? Was it national jealousy of the sort of the seventeenth century? But Europe has done more to break down national barriers than any preceding culture. Was it fear of the balance of power in Europe? Hardly, save in the half-Asiatic problems of the Balkans. What, then, does Hauptmann mean when he says: "Our jealous enemies forged an iron ring about our breasts and we knew our breasts had to expand,—that we had to split asunder this ring or else we had to cease breathing. But Germany will not cease to breathe and so it came to pass that the iron ring was forced apart."

Whither is this expansion? What is that breath of life, thought to be so indispensable to a great European nation? Manifestly it is expansion overseas; it is colonial aggrandizement which explains, and alone adequately explains, the World War. How many of us today fully realize the current theory of colonial expansion, of the relation of Europe which is white, to the world which is black and brown and yellow? Bluntly put, that theory is this: It is the duty of white Europe to divide up the darker world and administer it for Europe's good.

...

Such degrading of men by men is as old as mankind and the invention of no one race or people. Ever have men striven to conceive of their victims as different from the victors, endlessly different, in soul and blood, strength and cunning, race and lineage. It has been left, however, to Europe and to modern days to discover the eternal world-wide mark of meanness,—color!

...

The scheme of Europe was no sudden invention, but a way out of long-pressing

difficulties. It is plain to modern white civilization that the subjection of the white working classes cannot much longer be maintained. Education, political power, and increased knowledge of the technique and meaning of the industrial process are destined to make a more and more equitable distribution of wealth in the near future. The day of the very rich is drawing to a close, so far as individual white nations are concerned. But there is a loophole. There is a chance for exploitation on an immense scale for inordinate profit, not simply to the very rich, but to the middle class and to the laborers. This chance lies in the exploitation of darker peoples. It is here that the golden hand beckons. Here are no labor unions or votes or questioning onlookers or inconvenient consciences. These men may be used down to the very bone, and shot and maimed in "punitive" expeditions when they revolt. In these dark lands "industrial development" may repeat in exaggerated form every horror of the industrial history of Europe, from slavery and rape to disease and maiming, with only one test of success,—dividends!

....

There must come the necessary despisings and hatreds of these savage half-men, this unclean *canaille* of the world—these dogs of men. All through the world this gospel is preaching. It has its literature, it has its secret propaganda and above all—it pays!

There's the rub,—it pays. Rubber, ivory, and palm-oil; tea, coffee, and cocoa; bananas, oranges, and other fruit; cotton, gold, and copper—they, and a hundred other things which dark and sweating bodies hand up to the white world from pits of slime, pay and pay well, but of all that the world gets the black world gets only the pittance that the white world throws it disdainfully.

Small wonder, then, that in the practical world of things-that-be there is jealousy and strife for the possession of the labor of dark millions, for the right to bleed and exploit the colonies of the world where this golden stream may be had, not always for the asking, but surely for the whipping and shooting. It was this competition for the labor of yellow, brown, and

black folks that was the cause of the World War. Other causes have been glibly given and other contributing causes there doubtless were, but they were subsidiary and subordinate to this vast quest of the dark world's wealth and toil.

...

The fateful day came. It had to come. The cause of war is preparation for war; and of all that Europe has done in a century there is nothing that has equaled in energy, thought, and time her preparation for wholesale murder. The only adequate cause of this preparation was conquest and conquest, not in Europe, but primarily among the darker peoples of Asia and Africa; conquest, not for assimilation and uplift, but for commerce and degradation. For this, and this mainly, did Europe gird herself at frightful cost for war.

...

Even the broken reed on which we had rested high hopes of eternal peace,—the guild of the laborers—the front of that very important movement for human justice on which we had builded most, even this flew like a straw before the breath of king and kaiser. Indeed, the flying had been foreshadowed when in Germany and America "international" Socialists had all but read yellow and black men out of the kingdom of industrial justice. Subtly had they been bribed, but effectively: Were they not lordly whites and should they not share in the spoils of rape? High wages in the United States and England might be the skilfully manipulated result of slavery in Africa and of peonage in Asia.

With the dog-in-the-manger theory of trade, with the determination to reap inordinate profits and to exploit the weakest to the utmost there came a new imperialism,—the rage for one's own nation to own the earth or, at least, a large enough portion of it to insure as big profits as the next nation. Where sections could not be owned by one dominant nation there came a policy of "open door," but the "door" was open to "white people only." As to the darkest and weakest of peoples there was but one unanimity in Europe,—that which Hen Demberg of the German Colonial Office called the agreement with England to maintain white "prestige" in

Africa,—the doctrine of the divine right of white people to steal.

Thus the world market most wildly and desperately sought today is the market where labor is cheapest and most helpless and profit is most abundant. This labor is kept cheap and helpless because the white world despises "darkies." If one has the temerity to suggest that these workingmen may walk the way of white workingmen and climb by votes and self-assertion and education to the rank of men, he is howled out of court. They cannot do it and if they could, they shall not, for they are the enemies of the white race and the whites shall rule forever and forever and everywhere. Thus the hatred and despising of human beings from whom Europe wishes to extort her luxuries has led to such jealousy and bickering between European nations that they have fallen afoul of each other and have fought like crazed beasts. Such is the fruit of human hatred.

But what of the darker world that watches? Most men belong to this world. With Negro and Negroid, East Indian, Chinese, and Japanese they form two-thirds of the population of the world. A belief in humanity is a belief in colored men. If the uplift of mankind must be done by men, then the destinies of this world will rest ultimately in the hands of darker nations.

What, then, is this dark world thinking? It is thinking that as wild and awful as this shameful war was, *it is nothing to compare with that fight for freedom which black and brown and yellow men must and will make unless their oppression and humiliation and insult at the hands of the White World cease. The Dark World is going to submit to its present treatment just as long as it must and not one moment longer.*

Let me say this again and emphasize it and leave no room for mistaken meaning: The World War was primarily the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share in exploiting darker races. As such it is and must be but the prelude to the armed and indignant protest of these despised and raped peoples. Today Japan is hammering on the door of justice, China is raising her half-manacled hands to knock next, India is writhing for the freedom to knock, Egypt is

sullenly muttering, the Negroes of South and West Africa, of the West Indies, and of the United States are just awakening to their shameful slavery. Is, then, this war the end of wars? Can it be the end, so long as sits enthroned, even in the souls of those who cry peace, the despising and robbing of darker peoples? If Europe hugs this delusion, then this is not the end of world war,—it is but the beginning!

We see Europe's greatest sin precisely where we found Africa's and Asia's,—in human hatred, the despising of men; with this difference, however: Europe has the awful lesson of the past before her, has the splendid results of widened areas of tolerance, sympathy, and love among men, and she faces a greater, an infinitely greater, world of men than any preceding civilization ever faced.

It is curious to see America, the United States, looking on herself, first, as a sort of natural peacemaker, then as a moral protagonist in this terrible time. No nation is less fitted for this rôle. For two or more centuries America has marched proudly in the van of human hatred,—making bonfires of human flesh and laughing at them hideously, and making the insulting of millions more than a matter of dislike,—rather a great religion, a world war-cry: Up white, down black; to your tents, O white folk, and world war with black and parti-colored mongrel beasts!

Instead of standing as a great example of the success of democracy and the possibility of human brotherhood America has taken her place as an awful example of its pitfalls and failures, so far as black and brown and yellow peoples are concerned. And this, too, in spite of the fact that there has been no actual failure; the Indian is not dying out, the Japanese and Chinese have not menaced the land, and the experiment of Negro suffrage has resulted in the uplift of twelve million people at a rate probably unparalleled in history. But what of this? America, Land of Democracy, wanted to believe in the failure of democracy so far as darker peoples were concerned. Absolutely without excuse she established a caste system, rushed into preparation for war, and conquered tropical colonies. She stands today shoulder to shoulder

with Europe in Europe's worst sin against civilization. She aspires to sit among the great nations who arbitrate the fate of "lesser breeds without the law" and she is at times heartily ashamed even of the large number of "new" white people whom her democracy has admitted to place and power. Against this surging forward of Irish and German, of Russian Jew, Slav and "dago" her social bars have not availed, but against Negroes she can and does take her unflinching and immovable stand, backed by this new public policy of Europe. She trains her immigrants to this despising of "niggers" from the day of their landing, and they carry and send the news back to the submerged classes in the fatherlands.

All this I see and hear up in my tower, above the thunder of the seven seas. From my narrowed windows I stare into the night that looms beneath the cloud-swept stars. Eastward and westward storms are breaking,—great, ugly whirlwinds of hatred and blood and cruelty. I will not believe them inevitable. I will not believe that all that was must be, that all the shameful drama of the past must be done again today before the sunlight sweeps the silver seas.

If I cry amid this roar of elemental forces, must my cry be in vain, because it is but a cry,—a small and human cry amid Promethean gloom?

Back beyond the world and swept by these wild, white faces of the awful dead, why will this Soul of White Folk,—this modern Prometheus,—hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past? I hear his mighty cry reverberating through the world, "I am white!" Well and good, O Prometheus, divine thief! Is not the world wide enough for two colors, for many little shinnings of the sun? Why, then, devour your own vitals if I answer even as proudly, "I am black!"—W.E.B. DuBois

1750 / JAMES BALDWIN

### Going to Meet the Man

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, trying to laugh, "I guess I'm tired."

"You've been working too hard," she said. "I keep telling you."

"Well, goddammit, woman," he said, "it's not my fault!" He tried again; he wretchedly failed again. Then he just lay there, silent, angry, and helpless. Excitement filled him like a toothache, but it refused to enter his flesh. He stroked her breast. This was his wife. He could not ask her to do just a little thing for him, just to help him out, just for a little while, the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it. He lay there, and he sighed. The image of a black girl caused a distant excitement in him, like a far-away light; but, again, the excitement was more like pain; instead of forcing him to act, it made action impossible.

"Go to sleep," she said, gently, "you got a hard day tomorrow."

"Yeah," he said, and rolled over on his side, facing her, one hand still on one breast. "Goddamn the niggers. The black stinking coons.<sup>1</sup> You'd think they'd learn. Wouldn't you think they'd learn? I mean, *wouldn't* you?"

"They going to be out there tomorrow," she said, and took his hand away, "get some sleep."

He lay there, one hand between his legs, staring at the frail sanctuary of his wife. A faint light came from the shutters; the moon was full. Two dogs, far away, were barking at each other, back and forth, insistently, as though they were agreeing to make an appointment. He heard a car coming north on the road and he half sat up, his hand reaching for his holster, which was on a chair near the bed, on top of his pants. The lights hit the shutters and seemed to travel across the room and then went out. The sound of the car slipped away, he heard it hit gravel, then heard it no more. Some liver-lipped students, probably, heading back to that college—but coming from where? His watch said it was two in the morning. They could be coming from anywhere, from out of state most likely, and they would be at the court-house tomorrow. The niggers were getting ready. Well, they would be ready, too.

He moaned. He wanted to let whatever was in him out; but it wouldn't come out. Goddamn! he said aloud, and turned again, on his side, away from Grace, staring at the shutters. He was a big, healthy man and he had never had any trouble sleeping. And he wasn't old enough yet to have any trouble getting it up—he was only forty-two. And he was a good man, a God-fearing man, he had tried to do his duty all his life, and he had been a deputy sheriff for several years. Nothing had ever bothered him before, certainly not getting it up. Sometimes, sure, like any other man, he knew that he wanted a little more spice than Grace could give him and he would drive over yonder and pick up a black piece or arrest her, it came to the same thing, but he couldn't do that now, no more. There was no telling what might happen once your ass was in the air. And they were low enough to kill a man then, too, everyone of them, or the girl herself might do it, right while she was making believe you made her feel so good. The niggers. What had the good Lord Almighty had in mind when he made the niggers? Well. They were pretty good at that, all right. Damn. Damn. Goddamn.

1. Short for *raccoon*, used as a disparaging term for a black person.

This wasn't helping him to sleep. He turned again, toward Grace again, and moved close to her warm body. He felt something he had never felt before. He felt that he would like to hold her, hold her, hold her, and be buried in her like a child and never have to get up in the morning again and go downtown to face those faces, good Christ, they were ugly! and never have to enter that jail house again and smell that smell and hear that singing; never again feel that filthy, kinky, greasy hair under his hand, never again watch those black breasts leap against the leaping cattle prod, never hear those moans again or watch that blood run down or the fat lips split or the sealed eyes struggle open. They were animals, they were no better than animals, what could be done with people like that? Here they had been in a civilized country for years and they still lived like animals. Their houses were dark, with oil cloth or cardboard in the windows, the smell was enough to make you puke your guts out, and there they sat, a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every damn five minutes, and laughing and talking and playing music like they didn't have a care in the world, and he reckoned they didn't, neither, and coming to the door, into the sunlight, just standing there, just looking foolish, not thinking of anything but just getting back to what they were doing, saying, Yes suh, Mr. Jesse. I surely will, Mr. Jesse. Fine weather, Mr. Jesse. Why, I thank you, Mr. Jesse. He had worked for a mail-order house for a while and it had been his job to collect the payments for the stuff they bought. They were too dumb to know that they were being cheated blind, but that was no skin off his ass—he was just supposed to do his job. They would be late—they didn't have the sense to put money aside; but it was easy to scare them, and he never really had any trouble. Hell, they all liked him, the kids used to smile when he came to the door. He gave them candy, sometimes, or chewing gum, and rubbed their rough bullet heads—maybe the candy should have been poisoned. Those kids were grown now. He had had trouble with one of them today.

"There was this nigger today," he said; and stopped; his voice sounded peculiar. He touched Grace. "You awake?" he asked. She mumbled something, impatiently, she was probably telling him to go to sleep. It was all right. He knew that he was not alone.

"What a funny time," he said, "to be thinking about a thing like that—you listening?" She mumbled something again. He rolled over on his back. "This nigger's one of the ringleaders. We had trouble with him before. We must have had him out there at the work farm three or four times. Well, Big Jim C. and some of the boys really had to whip that nigger's ass today." He looked over at Grace; he could not tell whether she was listening or not; and he was afraid to ask again. "They had this line you know, to register"—he laughed, but she did not—"and they wouldn't stay where Big Jim C. wanted them, no, they had to start blocking traffic all around the court house so couldn't nothing or nobody get through, and Big Jim C. told them to disperse and they wouldn't move, they just kept up that singing, and Big Jim C. figured that the others would move if this nigger would move, him being the ring-leader, but he wouldn't move and he wouldn't let the others move, so they had to beat him and a couple of the others and they threw them in the wagon—but I didn't see this nigger till I got to the jail. They were still singing and I was supposed to make them stop. Well, I couldn't make them stop for me but I knew he could make them stop. He was lying on the ground jerking and moaning, they had threw him in a cell by himself, and blood was coming out

his ears from where Big Jim C. and his boys had whipped him. Wouldn't you think they'd learn? I put the prod to him and he jerked some more and he kind of screamed—but he didn't have much voice left. "You make them stop that singing," I said to him, "you hear me? You make them stop that singing." He acted like he didn't hear me and I put it to him again, under his arms, and he just rolled around on the floor and blood started coming from his mouth. He'd pissed his pants already." He paused. His mouth felt dry and his throat was as rough as sandpaper; as he talked, he began to hurt all over with that peculiar excitement which refused to be released. "You all are going to stop your singing, I said to him, and you are going to stop coming down to the court house and disrupting traffic and molesting the people and keeping us from our duties and keeping doctors from getting to sick white women and getting all them Northerners in this town to give our town a bad name—!" As he said this, he kept prodding the boy, sweat pouring from beneath the helmet he had not yet taken off. The boy rolled around in his own dirt and water and blood and tried to scream again as the prod hit his testicles, but the scream did not come out, only a kind of rattle and a moan. He stopped. He was not supposed to kill the nigger. The cell was filled with a terrible odor. The boy was still. "You hear me?" he called. "You had enough?" The singing went on. "You had enough?" His foot leapt out, he had not known it was going to, and caught the boy flush on the jaw. *Jesus*, he thought, *this ain't no nigger, this is a goddamn bull*, and he screamed again, "You had enough? You going to make them stop that singing now?"

But the boy was out. And now he was shaking worse than the boy had been shaking. He was glad no one could see him. At the same time, he felt very close to a very peculiar, particular joy; something deep in him and deep in his memory was stirred, but whatever was in his memory eluded him. He took off his helmet. He walked to the cell door.

"White man," said the boy, from the floor, behind him.

He stopped. For some reason, he grabbed his privates.

"You remember Old Julia?"

The boy said, from the floor, with his mouth full of blood, and one eye, barely open, glaring like the eye of a cat in the dark, "My grandmother's name was Mrs. Julia Blossom. Mrs. Julia Blossom. You going to call our women by their right names yet.—And those kids ain't going to stop singing. We going to keep on singing until every one of you miserable white mothers go stark raving out of your minds." Then he closed the one eye; he spat blood; his head fell back against the floor.

He looked down at the boy, whom he had been seeing, off and on, for more than a year, and suddenly remembered him: Old Julia had been one of his mail-order customers, a nice old woman. He had not seen her for years, he supposed that she must be dead.

He had walked into the yard, the boy had been sitting in a swing. He had smiled at the boy, and asked, "Old Julia home?"

The boy looked at him for a long time before he answered. "Don't no Old Julia live here."

"This is her house. I know her. She's lived her for years."

The boy shook his head. "You might know a Old Julia someplace else, white man. But don't nobody by that name live here."

He watched the boy; the boy watched him. The boy certainly wasn't more

than ten. *White man*. He didn't have time to be fooling around with some crazy kid. He yelled, "Hey! Old Julia!"

But only silence answered him. The expression on the boy's face did not change. The sun beat down on them both, still and silent; he had the feeling that he had been caught up in a nightmare, a nightmare dreamed by a child; perhaps one of the nightmares he himself had dreamed as a child. It had that feeling—everything familiar, without undergoing any other change, had been subtly and hideously displaced: the trees, the sun, the patches of grass in the yard, the leaning porch and the weary porch steps and the card-board in the windows and the black hole of the door which looked like the entrance to a cave, and the eyes of the pickaninny,<sup>2</sup> all, all, were charged with malevolence. *White man*. He looked at the boy. "She's gone out?"

The boy said nothing.

"Well," he said, "tell her I passed by and I'll pass by next week." He started to go; he stopped. "You want some chewing gum?"

The boy got down from the swing and started for the house. He said, "I don't want nothing you got, white man." He walked into the house and closed the door behind him.

Now the boy looked as though he were dead. Jesse wanted to go over to him and pick him up and pistol whip him until the boy's head burst open like a melon. He began to tremble with what he believed was rage, sweat, both cold and hot, raced down his body, the singing filled him as though it were a weird, uncontrollable, monstrous howling rumbling up from the depths of his own belly, he felt an icy fear rise in him and raise him up, and he shouted, he howled, "You lucky we *pump* some white blood into you every once in a while—your women! Here's what I got for all the black bitches in the world—!" Then he was, abruptly, almost too weak to stand; to his bewilderment, his horror, beneath his own fingers, he felt himself violently stiffen—with no warning at all; he dropped his hands and he stared at the boy and he left the cell.

"All that singing they do," he said. "All that singing." He could not remember the first time he had heard it; he had been hearing it all his life. It was the sound with which he was most familiar—though it was also the sound of which he had been least conscious—and it had always contained an obscure comfort. They were singing to God. They were singing for mercy and they hoped to go to heaven, and he had even sometimes felt, when looking into the eyes of some of the old women, a few of the very old men, that they were singing for mercy for his soul, too. Of course he had never thought of their heaven or of what God was, or could be, for them; God was the same for everyone, he supposed, and heaven was where good people went—he supposed. He had never thought much about what it meant to be a good person. He tried to be a good person and treat everybody right: it wasn't his fault if the niggers had taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible for everyone to read! Any preacher would tell you that. He was only doing his duty: Protecting white people from the niggers and the niggers from themselves. And there were still lots of good niggers around—he had to remember that; they weren't all like that boy this afternoon; and the good niggers must be mighty sad to

see what was happening to their people. They would thank him when this was over. In that way they had, the best of them, not quite looking him in the eye, in a low voice, with a little smile: We surely thank you, Mr. Jesse. From the bottom of our hearts, we thanks you. He smiled. They hadn't all gone crazy. This trouble would pass.—He knew that the young people had changed some of the words to the songs. He had scarcely listened to the words before and he did not listen to them now; but he knew that the words were different; he could hear that much. He did not know if the faces were different, he had never, before this trouble began, watched them as they sang, but he certainly did not like what he saw now. They hated him, and this hatred was blacker than their hearts, blacker than their skins, redder than their blood, and harder, by far, than his club. Each day, each night, he felt worn out, aching, with their smell in his nostrils and filling his lungs, as though he were drowning—drowning in niggers; and it was all to be done again when he awoke. It would never end. It would never end. Perhaps this was what the singing had meant all along. They had not been singing black folks into heaven, they had been singing white folks into hell.

Everyone felt this black suspicion in many ways, but no one knew how to express it. Men much older than he, who had been responsible for law and order much longer than he, were now much quieter than they had been, and the tone of their jokes, in a way that he could not quite put his finger on, had changed. These men were his models, they had been friends to his father, and they had taught him what it meant to be a man. He looked to them for courage now. It wasn't that he didn't know that what he was doing was right—he knew that, nobody had to tell him that; it was only that he missed the ease of former years. But they didn't have much time to hang out with each other these days. They tended to stay close to their families every free minute because nobody knew what might happen next. Explosions rocked the night of their tranquil town. Each time each man wondered silently if perhaps this time the dynamite had not fallen into the wrong hands. They thought that they knew where all the guns were; but they could not possibly know every move that was made in that secret place where the darkies lived. From time to time it was suggested that they form a posse and search the home of every nigger, but they hadn't done it yet. For one thing, this might have brought the bastards from the North down on their backs; for another, although the niggers were scattered throughout the town—down in the hollow near the railroad tracks, way west near the mills, up on the hill, the well-off ones, and some out near the college—nothing seemed to happen in one part of town without the niggers immediately knowing it in the other. This meant that they could not take them by surprise. They rarely mentioned it, but they *knew* that some of the niggers had guns. It stood to reason, as they said, since, after all, some of them had been in the Army. There were niggers in the Army right now and God knows they wouldn't have had any trouble stealing this half-assed government blind—the whole world was doing it, look at the European countries and all those countries in Africa. They made jokes about it—bitter jokes; and they cursed the government in Washington, which had betrayed them; but they had not yet formed a posse. Now, if their town had been laid out like some towns in the North, where all the niggers lived together in one locality, they could have gone down and set fire to the houses and brought about peace that way. If the niggers had

2. Child.

all lived in one place, they could have kept the fire in one place. But the way this town was laid out, the fire could hardly be controlled. It would spread all over town—and the niggers would probably be helping it to spread. Still, from time to time, they spoke of doing it, anyway; so that now there was a real fear among them that somebody might go crazy and light the match.

They rarely mentioned anything not directly related to the war that they were fighting, but this had failed to establish between them the unspoken communication of soldiers during a war. Each man, in the thrilling silence which sped outward from their exchanges, their laughter, and their anecdotes, seemed wrestling, in various degrees of darkness, with a secret which he could not articulate to himself, and which, however directly it related to the war, related yet more surely to his privacy and his past. They could no longer be sure, after all, that they had all done the same things. They had never dreamed that their privacy could contain any element of terror, could threaten, that is, to reveal itself, to the scrutiny of a judgment day, while remaining unreadable and inaccessible to themselves; nor had they dreamed that the past, while certainly refusing to be forgotten, could yet so stubbornly refuse to be remembered. They felt themselves mysteriously set at naught, as no longer entering into the real concerns of other people—while here they were, out-numbered, fighting to save the civilized world. They had thought that people would care—people didn't care; not enough, anyway, to help them. It would have been a help, really, or at least a relief, even to have been forced to surrender. Thus they had lost, probably forever, their old and easy connection with each other. They were forced to depend on each other more and, at the same time, to trust each other less. Who could tell when one of them might not betray them all, for money, or for the ease of confession? But no one dared imagine what there might be to confess. They were soldiers fighting a war, but their relationship to each other was that of accomplices in a crime. They all had to keep their mouths shut.

*I stepped in the river at Jordan.<sup>3</sup>*

Out of the darkness of the room, out of nowhere, the line came flying up at him, with the melody and the beat. He turned wordlessly toward his sleeping wife. *I stepped in the river at Jordan.* Where had he heard that song?

"Grace," he whispered. "You awake?"

She did not answer. If she was awake, she wanted him to sleep. Her breathing was slow and easy, her body slowly rose and fell.

*I stepped in the river at Jordan.*

*The water came to my knees.*

He began to sweat. He felt an overwhelming fear, which yet contained a curious and dreadful pleasure.

*I stepped in the river at Jordan.*

*The water came to my waist.*

It had been night, as it was now, he was in the car between his mother and his father, sleepy, his head in his mother's lap, sleepy, and yet full of excitement. The singing came from far away, across the dark fields. There were no lights anywhere. They had said good-bye to all the others and turned off on this dark dirt road. They were almost home.

*I stepped in the river at Jordan,  
The water came over my head,  
I looked way over to the other side,  
He was making up my dying bed!*

"I guess they singing for him," his father said, seeming very weary and subdued now. "Even when they're sad, they sound like they just about to go and tear off a piece." He yawned and leaned across the boy and slapped his wife lightly on the shoulder, allowing his hand to rest there for a moment. "Don't they?"

"Don't talk that way," she said.

"Well, that's what we going to do," he said, "you can make up your mind to that." He started whistling. "You see? When I begin to feel it, I gets kind of musical, too."

*Oh, Lord! Come on and ease my troubling mind!*

He had a black friend, his age, eight, who lived nearby. His name was Otis. They wrestled together in the dirt. Now the thought of Otis made him sick. He began to shiver. His mother put her arm around him.

"He's tired," she said.

"We'll be home soon," said his father. He began to whistle again.

"We didn't see Otis this morning," Jesse said. He did not know why he said this. His voice, in the darkness of the car, sounded small and accusing.

"You haven't seen Otis for a couple of mornings," his mother said.

That was true. But he was only concerned about *this* morning.

"No," said his father, "I reckon Otis's folks was afraid to let him show himself this morning."

"But Otis didn't do nothing!" Now his voice sounded questioning.

"Otis *can't* do nothing," said his father, "he's too little." The car lights picked up their wooden house, which now solemnly approached them, the lights falling around it like yellow dust. Their dog, chained to a tree, began to bark.

"We just want to make sure Otis *don't* do nothing," said his father, and stopped the car. He looked down at Jesse. "And you tell him what your Daddy said, you hear?"

"Yes sir," he said.

His father switched off the lights. The dog moaned and pranced, but they ignored him and went inside. He could not sleep. He lay awake, hearing the night sounds, the dog yawning and moaning outside, the sawing of the crickets, the cry of the owl, dogs barking far away, then no sounds at all, just the heavy, endless buzzing of the night. The darkness pressed on his eyelids like a scratchy blanket. He turned, he turned again. He wanted to call his mother, but he knew his father would not like this. He was terribly afraid. Then he heard his father's voice in the other room, low, with a joke in it; but this did not help him, it frightened him more, he knew what was going to happen. He put his head under the blanket, then pushed his head out again, for fear, staring at the dark window. He heard his mother's moan, his father's sigh; he gritted his teeth. Then their bed began to rock. His father's breathing seemed to fill the world.

That morning, before the sun had gathered all its strength, men and women, some flushed and some pale with excitement, came with news. Jesse's father seemed to know what the news was before the first jalopy

3. From a version of the Negro spiritual "Wade in the Water." The Jordan River marked the threshold to the Promised Land for the Israelites (see Joshua

3:1-17). For black slaves, the Jordan symbolized freedom.

stopped in the yard, and he ran out, crying, "They got him, then? They got him?"

The first jalopy held eight people, three men and two women and three children. The children were sitting on the laps of the grown-ups. Jesse knew two of them, the two boys; they shyly and uncomfortably greeted each other. He did not know the girl.

"Yes, they got him," said one of the women, the older one, who wore a wide hat and a fancy, faded blue dress. "They found him early this morning."

"How far had he got?" Jesse's father asked.

"He hadn't got no further than Harkness," one of the men said. "Look like he got lost up there in all them trees—or maybe he just go so scared he couldn't move." They all laughed.

"Yes, and you know it's near a graveyard, too," said the younger woman, and they laughed again.

"Is that where they got him now?" asked Jesse's father.

By this time there were three cars piled behind the first one, with everyone looking excited and shining, and Jesse noticed that they were carrying food. It was like a Fourth of July picnic.

"Yeah, that's where he is," said one of the men, "declare, Jesse, you going to keep us here all day long, answering your damn fool questions. Come on, we ain't got no time to waste."

"Don't bother putting up no food," cried a woman from one of the other cars, "we got enough. Just come on."

"Why, thank you," said Jesse's father, "we be right along, then."

"I better get a sweater for the boy," said his mother, "in case it turns cold."

Jesse watched his mother's thin legs cross the yard. He knew that she also wanted to comb her hair a little and maybe put on a better dress, the dress she wore to church. His father guessed this, too, for he yelled behind her, "Now don't you go trying to turn yourself into no movie star. You just come on." But he laughed as he said this, and winked at the men; his wife was younger and prettier than most of the other women. He clapped Jesse on the head and started pulling him toward the car. "You all go on," he said, "I'll be right behind you. Jesse, you go tie up that there dog while I get this car started."

The cars sputtered and coughed and shook; the caravan began to move; bright dust filled the air. As soon as he was tied up, the dog began to bark. Jesse's mother came out of the house, carrying a jacket for his father and a sweater for Jesse. She had put a ribbon in her hair and had an old shawl around her shoulders.

"Put these in the car, son," she said, and handed everything to him. She bent down and stroked the dog, looked to see if there was water in his bowl, then went back up the three porch steps and closed the door.

"Come on," said his father, "ain't nothing in there for nobody to steal." He was sitting in the car, which trembled and belched. The last car of the caravan had disappeared but the sound of singing floated behind them.

Jesse got into the car, sitting close to his father, loving the smell of the car, and the trembling, and the bright day, and the sense of going on a great and unexpected journey. His mother got in and closed the door and the car began to move. Not until then did he ask, "Where are we going? Are we going on a picnic?"

He had a feeling that he knew where they were going, but he was not sure. "That's right," his father said, "we're going on a picnic. You won't ever forget *this* picnic—!"

"Are we," he asked, after a moment, "going to see the bad nigger—the one that knocked down old Miss Standish?"

"Well, I reckon," said his mother, "that we *might* see him."

He started to ask, *Will a lot of niggers be there? Will Otis be there?*—but he did not ask his question, to which, in a strange and uncomfortable way, he already knew the answer. Their friends, in the other cars, stretched up the road as far as he could see; other cars had joined them; there were cars behind them. They were singing. The sun seemed suddenly very hot, and he was at once very happy and a little afraid. He did not quite understand what was happening, and he did not know what to ask—he had no one to ask. He had grown accustomed, for the solution of such mysteries, to go to Otis. He felt that Otis knew everything. But he could not ask Otis about this. Anyway he had not seen Otis for two days; he had not seen a black face anywhere for more than two days; and he now realized, as they began chugging up the long hill which eventually led to Harkness, that there were no black faces on the road this morning, no black people anywhere. From the houses in which they lived, all along the road, no smoke curled, no life stirred—maybe one or two chickens were to be seen, that was all. There was no one at the windows, no one in the yard, no one sitting on the porches, and the door were closed. He had come this road many a time and seen women washing in the yard (there were no clothes on the clotheslines) men working in the fields, children playing in the dust; black men passed them on the road other mornings, other days, on foot, or in wagons; sometimes in cars, tipping their hats, smiling, joking, their teeth a solid white against their skin, their eye as warm as the sun, the blackness of their skin like dull fire against the whiteness of the blue or the grey of their torn clothes. They passed the nigger church—dead-white, desolate, locked up; and the graveyard, where no one knelt or walked, and he saw no flowers. He wanted to ask, *Where are they? Where are they all?* But he did not dare. As the hill grew steeper, the sun grew colder. He looked at his mother and his father. They looked straight ahead, seeming to be listening to the singing which echoed and echoed in this graveyard silence. They were strangers to him now. They were looking at something he could not see. His father's lips had a strange, cruel curve, he wet his lip from time to time, and swallowed. He was terribly aware of his father's tongue, it was as though he had never seen it before. And his father's body suddenly seemed immense, bigger than a mountain. His eyes, which were grey-green, looked yellow in the sunlight; or at least there was a light in them which he had never seen before. His mother patted her hair and adjusted the ribbon, leaning forward to look into the car mirror. "You look all right," said his father, and laughed. "When that nigger looks at you, he's going to swear he threw his life away for nothing. Wouldn't be surprised if he don't come back to haunt you." And he laughed again.

The singing now slowly began to cease; and he realized that they were nearing their destination. They had reached a straight, narrow, pebbly road with trees on either side. The sunlight filtered down on them from a great height, as though they were under-water; and the branches of the trees scraped against the cars with a tearing sound. To the right of them, an

beneath them, invisible now, lay the town; and to the left, miles of trees which led to the high mountain range which his ancestors had crossed in order to settle in this valley. Now, all was silent, except for the bumping of the tires against the rocky road, the sputtering of motors, and the sound of a crying child. And they seemed to move more slowly. They were beginning to climb again. He watched the cars ahead as they toiled patiently upward, disappearing into the sunlight of the clearing. Presently, he felt their vehicle also rise, heard his father's changed breathing, the sunlight hit his face, the trees moved away from them, and they were there. As their car crossed the clearing, he looked around. There seemed to be millions, there were certainly hundreds of people in the clearing, staring toward something he could not see. There was a fire. He could not see the flames, but he smelled the smoke. Then they were on the other side of the clearing, among the trees again. His father drove off the road and parked the car behind a great many other cars. He looked down at Jesse.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yes sir," he said.

"Well, come on, then," his father said. "He reached over and opened the door on his mother's side. His mother stepped out first. They followed her into the clearing. At first he was aware only of confusion, of his mother and father greeting and being greeted, himself being handled, hugged, and patted, and told how much he had grown. The wind blew the smoke from the fire across the clearing into his eyes and nose. He could not see over the backs of the people in front of him. The sounds of laughing and cursing and wrath—and something else—rolled in waves from the front of the mob to the back. Those in front expressed their delight at what they saw, and this delight rolled backward, wave upon wave, across the clearing, more acrid than the smoke. His father reached down suddenly and sat Jesse on his shoulders.

Now he saw the fire—of twigs and boxes, piled high; flames made pale orange and yellow and thin as a veil under the steadier light of the sun; grey-blue smoke rolled upward and poured over their heads. Beyond the shifting curtain of fire and smoke, he made out first only a length of gleaming chain, attached to a great limb of the tree; then he saw that this chain bound two black hands together at the wrist, dirty yellow palm facing dirty yellow palm. The smoke poured up; the hands dropped out of sight; a cry went up from the crowd. Then the hands slowly came into view again, pulled upward by the chain. This time he saw the kinky, sweating, bloody head—he had never before seen a head with so much hair on it, hair so black and so tangled that it seemed like another jungle. The head was hanging. He saw the forehead, flat and high, with a kind of arrow of hair in the center, like he had, like his father had; they called it a widow's peak; and the mangled eye brows, the wide nose, the closed eyes, and the glinting eye lashes and the hanging lips, all streaming with blood and sweat. His hands were straight above his head. All his weight pulled downward from his hands; and he was a big man, a bigger man than his father, and black as an African jungle Cat, and naked. Jesse pulled upward; his father's hands held him firmly by the ankles. He wanted to say something, he did not know what, but nothing he said could have been heard, for now the crowd roared again as a man stepped forward and put more wood on the fire. The flames leapt up. He thought he heard

that his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever.

"I reckon," he said. "I reckon."

Jesse's father took him by the hand and, with his mother a little behind them, talking and laughing with the other women, they walked through the crowd, across the clearing. The black body was on the ground, the chain which had held it was being rolled up by one of his father's friends. Whatever the fire had left undone, the hands and the knives and the stones of the people had accomplished. The head was caved in, one eye was torn out, one ear was hanging. But one had to look carefully to realize this, for it was, now, merely, a black charred object on the black, charred ground. He lay spread-eagled with what had been a wound between what had been his legs.

"They going to leave him here, then?" Jesse whispered.

"Yeah," said his father, "they'll come and get him by and by. I reckon we better get over there and get some of that food before it's all gone."

"I reckon," he muttered now to himself, "I reckon." Grace stirred and touched him on the thigh: the moonlight covered her like glory. Something bubbled up in him, his nature again returned to him. He thought of the boy in the cell; he thought of the man in the fire; he thought of the knife and grabbed himself and stroked himself and a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl, came out of him and dragged his sleeping wife up on one elbow. She stared at him in a moonlight which had now grown cold as ice. He thought of the morning and grabbed her, laughing and crying, crying and laughing, and he whispered, as he stroked her, as he took her, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger." He thought of the morning as he labored and she moaned, thought of morning as he labored harder than he ever had before, and before his labors had ended, he heard the first cock crow and the dogs begin to bark, and the sound of tires on the gravel road.

classroom but an occasion to practice education without the various conceits, prerequisites, and instrumentalist and technocratic qualifications that beset institutions. Our approach to community education includes:

- A concern not with methods of teaching and learning wielded by expert teachers and educationalists in a formalized system, but with what we all do every day, how we read, write, speak, and relate; with what it is to teach and learn in any situation, whenever or wherever it may be; and how we might change these toward a more just world.
- An emphasis on relations within spaces we occupy, and communities we build and inhabit. A focus away from possessing knowledge toward how a community recognizes something as known. Activities of reading, studying, and working in each other's company allow the distinctions between doing, meaning-making, and knowing, and between various kinds of physical, mental, and emotional work to collapse.
- A belief that communities of education are not supposed to perfect the object of knowledge for the community, but educate the community about itself and about the relations of power and

inequality within it, making room for it to confront that knowledge. The fundamental premise of equality among learners in the educational space, with no qualifications or expertise placing one above the other, is what allows the inequalities within the wider community to become visible and able to be reflected upon. Hence, we are working not to instruct toward equality but to educate through equality, resisting institutionalizations of inequality and injustice, old or new.

• A hope that, in the Berkshires and wherever else, The Falsework School "pops up," this is an effort at collective study and self-reflection around social inequalities and injustices because it seeks to not replicate certain burdens of teaching and learning, presenting and spectating, evidence and ignorance, and their bearers, but to collectively own the task of building an ethos of equality and justice that works outward from the space of education.

As a project of the Hic Rosa Collective, the Falsework School is committed to be conducted like a facilitated community of study and practice. There will be educational experiences as collations of be a close study component, as well as concrete moments of study, thought, guided discussion, ending with the expression, and practice that dismantle the production of a work of art or writing. While the walls between teacher and student, artist hailing from various academic contexts, and audience, participant and observer, may maintain that community education is not theory and practice. A typical learning day an extension or dilution of the academic