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## Nest Morale

Nora Seilheimer  
*University of New Orleans, nseilheimer@gmail.com*

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Nest Morale

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Nonfiction

by

Nora Seilheimer

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for our nest, Joe  
now  
then  
always

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## Abstract

*Nest Morale* is a collection of personal essays that explores race through the lenses of education, marriage, homeownership, and parenthood.

Keywords: race, family, interracial marriage, gentrification, urban education

## Prologue: Back into Movement

I could say that I am here in my hometown for the first time in over ten years because I happened to be passing through. I could show you on my phone that the blue line Google Maps draws from our house in New Orleans to my final destination, a friend's house in Roscommon, Michigan, strikes through the white dot of Saint Clair, Michigan. Paying a visit is the least I could do.

This is a lie.

The truth is that I'm here to find myself. I dedicated my 20s to being a high school teacher, and while that came with undeniable rewards, those rewards partnered with a cost. The more I dove into my students' well-being, the less I cared about my own, and this independent, accomplished, creative woman I always aspired to becoming had vanished. So I quit.

The truth is I stumbled into my 30s lacking something so essential to who I am, something that feels dreadfully basic, I can't identify it in its absence. Sometimes I call it confidence. Swag. Other times I think it might be ambition, a sense of what my unique gift is and how to share it. Yes, I was raised to believe I had a unique gift and that I should share it. Secretly, I hang on to this. Even though it feels silly, I hang on to this.

The truth is being lost in your 20s is expected. It's necessary, almost required. But being lost in your 30s is risky. Hazardous. I have a husband, Joe, who loves me. We have a home to nest and a family to build. Now, I have too much to lose.

The truth is I am not entirely sure what I'm looking for. But I do know where to find it.

The rink.

I did the math once. At the height of my 12-year long figure skating career, I spent approximately 30 hours a week between two rinks: McMorran Ice Arena and Glacier Pointe. These hours consisted mostly of on-ice practice sessions, but there were also weight training sessions, ballet classes, Tae Bo, off-ice jump training, jumping rope in the lobby and sometimes roller blading laps in the parking lot. This didn't include three-day weekends spent in a major Midwestern city somewhere in the Tri-state area to compete against other girls like me. When school let out for summer, the hours increased to about 40 a week, enough to call it a full-time job, but I never did because it wasn't work.

It was my life.

After dinner at home with my parents, I drive two towns over to Glacier Pointe. The Saint Clair River slides by on my right most of the way, and I remember my recurring teenage daydream of the river slowing down enough to freeze so that I might skate from my house to the rink. I imagined a friend driving my shoes, music tapes, and skate guards over for me so nothing weighed me down and I could glide, and glide, and glide where no one could see, judge, or target. By the time I was a teenager, I'd learned to reconfigure myself so well it was hard to tell what was real and what was trained; on the river, in this dream, I could be the skater I wanted to be.

My dream's dream was that the river never ended, and I could skate on it forever.

My dream's secret was that I wanted my last breath to fill, hold, then let go on that river.

I grab my phone from the passenger seat and lock my eyes on the road ahead as my thumb opens my Spotify app and types "joni river" into the search bar. I realize I'm about to enter a self-created yet heavy moment and think a pre-moment moment with a soundtrack might

do me some good, really lube up those emotional channels so that the things I am still too scared to feel can wash over me.

I found Joni Mitchell in college when I was trying to understand who I was for the first time as anything but a figure skater. Among other things, Joni seemed to share my dream of having a river she could skate away on. The first time I heard *River* I Googled the lyrics to verify she indeed said “skate” and not “fade” or “stake” even though neither of those options made any lyrical sense. I couldn’t believe anyone else had that same wish. Mine felt so private and specific. I hadn’t shared it with anyone. So I cut my bedroom lights off, set my iTunes on repeat and choke-sobbed so hard that my roommate tapped on my door and asked if I just got dumped.

*In a way, I thought.*

Joni’s first few Christmas-carol infused notes saturate my car with nostalgia and I think about family. I think about my mom and the story she tells about how I became a figure skater—my origin story:

*When you were five, you tried gymnastics for about a month. But you wanted to get on the high beam, and they wouldn’t let you. You were too young, but you didn’t know that yet. So on the drive home from what would be your last session you told me, “Mom, I don’t want to go there anymore. They’re holding me back.” I wasn’t about to argue with you, so I said ok and we never spoke about gymnastics again.*

*Then you tried dance. You stuck with that long enough to perform in one recital. On our way home from the recital you told me, “Mom, I don’t want to do dance anymore. They make me do all the same moves as everyone else.” This was true, but also, that’s dance. I didn’t argue with you, even though I didn’t like that you were only five and had already quit two things. We never spoke about dance again.*

*Then one night you came into the living room holding The Times Herald. You stood in front of the TV and opened up to an ad from the Port Huron Figure Skating Club and announced, "I want to do this next." I told you we could try it but only if you promised to stick with it. You promised you would and we went and you loved it.*

*No one held you back. No one made you do the same moves as everyone else. You were free to do what you wanted.*

I was free.

I didn't need a river then.

I stop at a red light and look at the Saint Clair River chopping.

Gray.

Unsettled.

What happened?

Red clicks to green, a car horn blares.

I move forward.

Joni's words wrap around me as I pull into Glacier Pointe's parking lot: no tears drop, but my heart keeps punching my throat while my hands shake as my quadriceps tighten and I know, I know I will look out of place in my jeans instead of tights and holding a purse instead of wheeling my skating bag behind me and with my hair down instead of sealed back in a symmetrical bun and with a body that fills out beyond its intended line in some places instead of staying small and safe within its frame so I worry, I worry I will be a stranger in my own home and that someone might call me out as an intruder and I'll have to deal with the fact that I am no longer welcome to exist in grace, exist in elegance, exist in a body that can make movement into

sport into art into dharma and back into movement again and that I can no longer identify as a skater, that I can no longer call myself me and I'll have to start all over again without blades, without ice, without a river but maybe, maybe I could keep Joni.

I close my car door without looking at it, walk through the rink's entrance and find my footing in the lobby: It is too late for skating practice, so none of my coaches or teammates who grew up to be coaches are here.

Deep inhale

long exhale

It's not that I don't want to see them. I just need to see myself first; I want to find that free little girl who existed in grace and didn't need a river yet. She's young, but I sense she has the answers, that she knows why I fell out of love with the sport or why the sport fell out of love with me and why we haven't entirely forgotten one another yet. That little girl hasn't been with me since I quit, since I left, and I wanted her to come with me but she *stayed* in this rink. She's stubborn that way. But I need her now—I need her with me now so we can be whole again.

I need to convince her that she doesn't need the ice anymore because we are enough.

I am enough.

I step into the rink like it's a funeral and bow my head:

I take a slow, long, deep inhale.

Once I am full I hold it. For just a beat.

Then. I release.

The chilled breeze wipes the interior walls of my lungs clean. The noises inside of me hush to a whisper that is kind. My eyes close because this feels good, this feels familiar, I am safe.

So I take another deep breath in. And I let another deep breath out. My chest and shoulders fall slow like snow and settle into their resting place. My knees soften. My jaw loosens. My teeth part. Gravity surrenders just enough for my heels to hover.

I open my eyes.

She's here.

I am here.

We aren't together yet, and all the lights are off except for one hovering and buzzing above the corner of the ice where she's working on her axel. But I can see her. She's about ten years old with an overgrown bowl cut she's excited is finally long enough to sweep back into a half-ponytail. She's wearing her favorite practice dress, the one with the deep purple skirt, floral bodice, keyhole back and high neckline. It even has  $\frac{3}{4}$  length sleeves. She exaggerates perfect posture whenever she wears it, even if she's wearing it under her street clothes at school like Super Man but less secretive, because shorter sleeves are a big deal; *only skaters who know what to do with their arms may graduate out of long sleeves*, her coaches tell her.

The dress is her favorite, but it's always three or four degrees colder at Glacier Pointe than it is at McMorran, so she layers with a white turtleneck and her club jacket. The jacket is mostly turquoise, her second favorite color, with one thick purple stripe wrapping around the chest. The stripe does not match her skirt perfectly, she knows this, but she figures the more purple the better because someone once told her it's the color of royalty, something she thinks she needs in order to protect her throne at the top of the podium. She also loves this jacket because she can wear it to school and stand out from her classmates. Whenever she makes a new friend and they ask her what she likes to do, she spins around on her heels and points to the back

of her jacket with both thumbs. *Port Huron Figure Skating Club*, she says. She turns back around and presses her palm on her heart. *I am a figure skater.*

I sit on an aluminum bench on the opposite side of the tall glass that wraps around the ice like a palisade. The metal shocks the back of my thighs with a familiar cold-damp sensation I know from a history of jumping and falling and jumping and falling and jumping and falling. Unforgiving. She gathers speed around one of the dark corners and looks at me. She wants to make sure I am watching because if she lands this, she's going to need a witness. I give her a nod. She hurls herself in the air, attempting this jump for what is probably the hundredth time today. Her kick-through is strong, but she doesn't swing her arms (she is only in  $\frac{3}{4}$  length sleeves, after all) and neglects to grant herself the height she needs. She only completes  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the  $\frac{1}{2}$  rotations necessary for the axel to count. She senses this and releases her arms and legs, surrendering her body instead of cheating the landing so as not to form the uncomely habit of hopping on her toe picks for the last  $\frac{1}{4}$  rotation. She lands on her butt instead of her right foot and her body slides across the ice and out of the light. She releases the breath she's been holding this entire time, the same breath I've been holding this entire time. She picks herself up, brushes the clumps of snow and shards of ice from her hamstrings, hips and hands and tries again. Unstoppable.

I know she hasn't landed her axel before because she's missing the scar we have under our chin. She has no idea how much things are going to change once she does land it, the axel, the first "big-girl jump," the gateway to doubles and triples and sleeveless dresses and gold medals and, eventually, a pilgrimage back to the singles for answers as a grown woman. I think about tapping on the glass to get her attention and beckoning her to join me in the bleachers so I

can warn her about it all. But that's pointless. She won't listen. She won't listen to an intruder on the other side of the glass. I am not enough for her yet.

So I stay. I left, but I am back now, and I am going to stay.

I'm stubborn that way.

## Trust

When people first meet Glenn, they describe him as charming. Talented. Quick to connect. These adjectives aren't inaccurate, but they were way over my head as a kid. Glenn coached me for about five years, but it wasn't until I was in my late 20s that my parents finally revealed another list of adjectives they'd been using to describe him: sneaky, sleazy, the used car salesman of the figure skating world. They didn't give in to his tricks the way I had. To Glenn, trust was essential and immediate; this is one way to see trust, to understand it: make it step one on a journey, the first brick in a foundation.

When people first meet Dominique Peaches, they describe her as stubborn. Sassy. Slow to open up. These adjectives aren't inaccurate, but, as her Senior English teacher, I learned that they merely scratch the surface of all that is Peaches. When she first walked into my classroom I read the same energy others did, and I committed the same mistake educators across space and time have made, likening my first impression of her to the final impression I held of myself at her age. It would take time, but she'd show me that our connection was much more complex than that. To Dominique, trust was essential, earned; this is another way to see trust, to respect it: make it the goal of a journey, the finished product.

I'd stepped into Glenn's trap.

Dominique would call me out.

I am 12 years old. It's summer. My friends from school are all together at someone's house playing pool basketball, watching re-runs of *Saved by the Bell*, and calling boys whose parents

don't have Caller ID yet. I've been at the rink since before sunrise working on my double loop, and the only guy I've talked to all summer is Glenn, my new coach.

My tights are soaked on my right side from hip to ankle, residue from each failed attempt at my double loop absorbed by the tan nylon, spreading down my leg like shame. I'm standing at the boards facing Glenn but looking at the place where the cuffs of his broken-in Levis meet the lace hooks of his black skates.

*You have to trust me,* Glenn says.

Glenn moved to Michigan from Indianapolis to join us at Port Huron Figure Skating Club. Unlike my other coaches, he has three National gold medals in a protective case at home. He's only been my coach for a few weeks, so I'm not sure about him yet. I withhold eye contact as a reminder that I'm the one in charge, that my parents hired him, that I can have him fired whenever I want.

Last week he saw me in a practice dress for the first time, no turtleneck or bulky sweatshirt layered on top. He did a double-take and said, *This whole time I thought you were fat.* I'm still mulling this over, still dissecting my body, still trying to understand how I, from clavicle to hipbones, communicate one body, while my neck, face, thighs and calves tell the story of another.

*This won't work if you don't trust me.*

I look up but not in his eyes. Instead I stare at his pierced left ear and wonder how much longer until that slice of his slicked-back hair liberates itself from the mold and hooks around his left brow bone, how much longer until he removes his leather gloves to comb it back into place with his fingertips, how much longer until he looks over at the bleachers to see whose mom is watching him with her head tilted, mouth open.

*Well, do you?*

I weigh 84 pounds, average for my age. I counted my ribs in the locker room mirror before practice without sucking in and felt proud and sad and powerful and empty, average for my sport.

*Well?*

Dominique Peaches sits in the front row of my 12<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom with one minute left in the passing period. It's the first day of the school year, so her peers have chosen to spend these last sixty seconds of freedom in the hallway catching up on who hooked up with whom over the summer. For a moment it is just her, arms crossed in front of her petite frame, her dark hair pulled back into a ballerina bun wound on top of her head, and me, shuffling worksheets and lesson plans around my desk, armpits damp, before I blurt out *GOOD MORNING* too loudly to be cool, or hip, or tight, or whatever the slang is these days.

I have no clue.

Dominique leans back in her chair, crosses one leg over the other, looks me up and down once, twice, and says *I like your shoes*. Her voice rasps like she's been smoking for all of her 17 years, but she'll swear to me later in the semester that she's never touched a cigarette. *I got enough to worry about*, she'll say. *I don't need to worry about quitting something, too*.

I look down at my turquoise flats and smile. I thought long and hard about what I should wear on the first day of school, or first day of work, I'm still not sure what to call it, so her compliment carries more weight than it is probably meant to. By the time I look up to thank her and tell her I got them from Marshalls at a wicked (is that the slang?) low price, she's already

pulled out her compact and started touching up her makeup, paying extra close attention to the dash of freckles sprinkled on her cheekbones.

*Like you ain't light-skinned enough, girl,* someone shouts from the gossip ring forming in the hallway. Dominique shoots up to her feet and slams her compact against the table. *Yeah, you better run!* she yells into the ether.

She sits back down, opens her compact again, and resumes touching up her makeup but with her back turned to the door. Powder from her compact dusts her school-issued burgundy polo, a size extra-small she is swimming in.

*I got them from Marshalls,* I kick one foot in the air and wiggle it from side to side.

Dominique pauses, glares at me above her compact's rim and raises an eyebrow. I put my foot back down. She returns to her reflection.

*Marshalls,* she moves her head left to right and sucks in her cheeks. *Marshalls is aight.*

*If you don't trust me, you'll never trust your outside edge,* Glenn says, leaning against the boards, arms crossed. *And the loop is all about your outside edge.*

He isn't wrong. The loop is the only jump that requires a skater to take off their backwards outside edge. There's no toe-pick catapulting them into the air, or a leg swinging through, creating momentum. It's just the skater and the blade, moving backwards, facing forward. It's a trust fall. It's a mind game.

Try it.

Stand up with your feet hip-distance apart. Step your left foot out in front of the right and keep a soft bend in both knees. You should feel most of your weight in your right foot.

Without moving your feet, extend your left arm out in front of you and your right arm behind you. This will rotate your chest open.

Now

imagine you are gliding backwards across the ice at a decent speed

To take off, shift your weight to the outside edge of your right foot, bend your right knee even more, swing your left arm behind you and press off of your right foot until your toes lift off the ground and

pull your arms in

tight, cross your legs

tight, keep your weight centered and your body perpendicular to the ice, don't close your eyes

don't forget to breath and

pause

see?

you're flying

but don't feel this freedom for too long because what goes up must come

down, and when your right toe pick stabs the ice, lift

your left knee up and extend your left leg your arms your chin your gaze and be

grateful

that your body pulled through for you even though you

might not always pull through for

it

and smile

breathe

but smile

breathe—

The bell rings, and the rest of our students file into the room. They comment on how shiny the wood floor is and how clean the cream walls look—it's the first year at one of Chicago's "Turnaround Schools," and a facelift for the building is one of the top tasks on board's fast-paced agenda, second only to firing all of the school's current staff. While there is still no data to prove the turnaround model can actually turn a school around, the board continues to approve more and more "failing" schools for such undertaking. Or overtaking. Everyone's eyes are on us; we have more support from the alumni association and surrounding community than any other turnaround school to date. We're slated to be the school that provides the numbers we all agree are important like improved attendance rate, climbing graduation rate, increased test scores, the numbers schools in every major American city are waiting for so that they might turn their underperforming (and under-resourced) schools around, too.

Students take their seats at one of the tables I've pushed together to make a horseshoe shape in hopes it might foster more discussion and collaboration than rows. I also read

somewhere that for students dealing with trauma, having someone sit directly behind them can be unsettling. So the horseshoe is good for students, good for learning, a rare win-win.

I write “Classroom Culture” at the top of a blank piece of poster board I taped to the warped chalkboard that did not come with chalk but does have a small sign that promises “white board coming soon.” A gigantic fern my mom, who is also a teacher, insisted we needed and transported all the way from Michigan hangs from the ceiling in front of one of the windows that were power washed yesterday. The sun is out. There are no clouds.

I turn to face my students expecting to see wide eyes and straight spines; instead I find a sea of pinched foreheads, Dominique’s being the most pronounced, and bodies crumpled into backrests.

*Classroom culture, I say. What do you think that means?*

A few students sit up straight, read the two words in question to themselves, think for a moment, then slump back into their seats.

*Let’s just start with culture.* I take a casual-calculated-cool seat on the top of my desk.  
*What is culture?*

*You mean like traditions and people’s clothes and stuff?* a student at the top of the horseshoe asks.

*You’re on the right track, I say. Culture is a way of life, the way a group of people do things together.*

I look for nodding heads, an agreement.

Nothing.

Dominique holds her face in her hands and peers at me between her fingers as if I just hopped out of a plane.

*So classroom culture is the way we will do things in here, I say, connecting my own dots. Let's make a list of how we will do things in this class together.*

*You mean rules, Dominique says, crossing her arms over her chest.*

*Not exactly.*

*She motions at the poster with her right hand, palm turned up. But everything you about to put on that paper are things we got to do, right?*

*Pause.*

*Yes.*

*Then why you getting all fancy with it? Just call them rules, she leans back in her seat.*

*We know what those are.*

*Heads nod.*

*Dominique is right; also, I'm doing what I was taught is right.*

*I don't realize it yet, but this moment is one of several when I will be caught in a purgatorial game of pickle, sprinting furiously back and forth between what students say they need and what experts say works, between what students say they need and the components of my performance evaluation, between what students say they need and what other, whiter, wealthier, PhDs and MBAs say will get them into college. Because everyone needs to go to college.*

*I don't realize it yet, but doing what I was taught is, ironically, the opposite of what we're told we should teach. We're supposed to teach our students to be free-thinkers, to be innovative, to challenge the status-quo, to share their unique ideas and support them with evidence and passion. We're told that rote memorization is taboo. We're told that students simply spewing what we suggest is right or wrong or creative or inspiring is not enough. Regurgitation is not*

mastery. Regurgitation does not increase test scores or college acceptance rates or enrollment or morale.

I don't realize it yet, but here I am, regurgitating. I'm all but following a script word-for-word on how to build "Classroom Culture" (which, yes, Dominique is absolutely right, is just a fancy way of saying "rules") because I'm told building these ideas with our students will increase their buy-in, will make students more likely to follow these rules masquerading as cultural values—and what do white people like me really know about culture other than how to steal it from others? I'm told activities like these will keep students in the classroom and out of the hallway, the suspension room, the street, out of danger, and we will be the school that cracked the code on urban education reform.

We, your young, white, or inexperienced teachers have no clue.

Dominique deserves someone with a clue. All of our students deserve someone with a clue.

I have to say something:

*How about we just call it Classroom Culture and secretly we'll just know they're rules?*

Because we hear you, Dominique, and we agree with you, but we have to cover our asses if we want to keep our jobs and work to learn what you need.

You deserve someone who knows what you need. Especially during your Senior year.

We have no clue.

*Come here,* Glenn says, skating out to center ice. *Lie down.*

*Excuse me?*

*Lie down,* he says, pointing at the ice. *Flat on your back, arms and legs straight.*

*Why am I doing this?*

*Just do it*, he says before skating away.

I do as I'm told. Not because I trust him—compliance is not an expression of trust.

*All right*, he shouts from the other end of the ice.

Not because I want to trust him.

*You ready?*

Because I want him to want me to trust him.

*Are you?*

And I want him to prove it.

I lift my head and find Glenn crouched in a sprinter's stance, grinning.

*Here I come!*

I rest my head on the ice. I fold my hands over my empty stomach.

And wait.

*This your classroom*, Dominique says. *What kind of culture do you want?*

Dominique is the first and only person to ask me this question. Between my summer-long training with Chicago Teaching Fellows and my three-week professional development with the Office of School Turnarounds, I've only absorbed other people's ideas on how my classroom should look and feel. I'm not in the business of creating. I'm in the business of complying, of doing exactly what I'm told so my principal can check a list of boxes that say I do what I'm told so she can prove to her boss that she is doing what she is told.

I have no clue, but I have an idea.

*Trust*, I say and write next to “1.” on the poster board. *We won’t get anywhere without trust.*

This somehow gets the ball rolling. Students offer up other ideas about listening while someone else is speaking, respecting other people’s personal space, and coming to class prepared with supplies. One student half-jokingly says we should always have snacks. I don’t disagree with this, *snacks bring people together*, I say, which scores me a laugh.

*Wait a minute*, Dominique says. *I got a problem with number one.*

*All those other things on the list, those just things you do. You just bring a pencil to class. You just shut up when other people talking. But trust*, she shakes her head. *You got to build that.*

Other students nod or stare or both.

*And that takes time*, Ms. Seilheimer.

Glenn’s blades draw deep, long grooves into the ice as he builds up speed around the far corner. This grinding grows louder with each of his strokes as I lie there, waiting.

Growing impatient and worrisome, I look to the left to see how close he is. My body stiffens. He is skating at me. Right at me. He is moving at full speed, backwards, preparing for a double loop. The backs of his blades aim for my ribs like two silver darts. I can’t see his eyes.

I can’t move. I shouldn’t move. If I roll toward him, he could run into me blades first. If I move away from him, he could land on me toe-picks first. If I move down he could decapitate me. If I move up, he could slice into my leg.

These are my options.

Glenn bends his knees, his left foot in front of the right, and leans into his backwards outside edge. He swings his left arm behind him while carving a perfect treble clef shape into the

ice. His toe-picks lift from the cold surface inches away from my left shoulder. He pulls his arms and legs in tight, rotates two times around, keeping his body perpendicular to the ice.

He flies over me.

The toe-picks on his right boot stab the ice about a foot away from my right shoulder. He opens up both arms like wings and extends his left leg behind him. A textbook landing. A three-time National Champion landing.

When he's done, Glenn skates to me where I am still in corpse pose. He offers me his leather-gloved hand.

*See?*

*See what?* I say, standing up on my own.

*Trust*, he says pointing to where I was lying. *That was trust.*

“1. Trust” looks like a threat. It looks like a prerequisite for every rule that follows—it isn't. A student can bring a pencil to class and not trust their teacher or classmates. A student can respect their peers' personal space while quietly building a taller and stronger wall around themselves, one that emerges especially for the teacher. A student can eat the snacks their teacher buys them and still think they're phony, still refuse to take anything they say seriously. A student can get their “A” and still have an uneasy feeling when they think back on the teacher who entered that grade into their report card.

Black students complying in a white teacher's classroom to get by is a tired song that keeps echoing. I don't realize this yet, I don't have a clue, but I'm belting every note while hearing it for the first time myself, thinking it sounds different from my lips.

It doesn't.

I still have to say something:

*Let's put a star by it, I say. And the star will mean trust isn't here yet, but that it's the goal.*

All eyes are on Dominique who is tapping her foot.

She looks at our Classroom Culture. She looks at my shoes. She looks at me.

*Aight, she says. We'll see.*

## Bad Boys

I remember our student, a senior, who let a bullet live in his upper right arm. We stood in the windowless hallway just outside my classroom during a passing period. Inside I'd written *137 days until graduation!* on the white board with the only marker that hadn't dried out. In the hall hundreds of other students in matching khaki pants and maroon polos swarmed around us, each one boasting a gold M over their hearts. They all shouted, teased, and laughed as other teenagers across Chicago might have, but their voices were competing with the *Cops* theme song crackling through the PA system. The principal thought music would motivate students to get to class on time.

Our student pulled his sleeve up to his shoulder to show me the bullet, proud. It looked smaller than I expected, the size of a shoreline pebble passed over for bigger stones that skip across the water's surface. *You wanna move it around?* He pinched his brown skin that wrapped around the bullet's smooth shape. He watched me as he demonstrated, sliding it half an inch toward his shoulder and then back toward his elbow like a sound booth technician working the knobs, trying to find the perfect level of bass.

*No, thank you. Looks like it hurts.* He shook his head and tucked his Chemistry textbook under his arm. *Nah, it only hurt going in.*

*Why don't you have it taken out? It must bother you.* He stood up a little taller, using all of his six feet and four inches to break eye contact and look beyond me. The *Cops* theme song filled a short silence. *It's my battle wound,* he explained. *They weren't aiming for me.*

His battle wound was a stray bullet with someone else's name on it. Coach had let them out of practice later than usual that night. They'd been running sprints for missed free throws at

the game the night before, something about accountability. Our student was the captain, so he didn't complain and kept running until someone told him to stop. His quadriceps and hamstrings have since released lactic acid, recovered. His sweat, evaporated. The bullet remains.

Our student looked back at me, smiled with one side of his mouth, and offered a quick shrug. Lyrics asked bad boys *whatcha gonna do when they come for you*—but our student wasn't a bad boy. None of our students are bad boys.

The warning bell rang. One minute left. The hallway buzz grew louder. *Gotta go, Ms. Seilheimer.* He curled one hand around my shoulder and leaned toward me, speaking softly.

*And don't worry. I'm gonna be alright.*

Nathan's Chakras

take a deep breath in

hold for a beat

exhale, let it all go

again

deep breath in

and hold it

then let it all go

great

this time, let's do it for real

please

take a deep breath in

hold for a beat

exhale, allow yourself to release

good

deep breath in

and

let it

all

go

it's ok. Breathing like this can feel weird. Nathan, another student of ours, thought it felt weird, too. He refused to try it or any of the yoga poses I started teaching in my sophomore English classes when we returned from winter break. He opted to lightly, steadily drum closed fists against a meditation cushion instead. *He's doing a different kind of yoga*, I explained to my principal after he popped in to our classroom unannounced.

Nathan came around eventually. I'm not sure when. One day I scanned our classroom, lights dimmed, shades pulled, and there he was, breathing along with his peers in matching purple polos each with a gold CA embroidered over their hearts. Our other students sat still and silent. Nathan scratched his chest and cleared his throat and pinched his eyebrows together and shook his head as he breathed and searched. For something.

He always kept his socks on

go ahead

try another deep breath on your own

if this still feels weird, that's ok

you just need more time

Nathan had seven chakras, or energy centers running parallel to his spine. You have them, too. Each chakra holds information about our desires, habits, and emotions as they change throughout our lives. Our posture can signal if a chakra is overburdened with emotional or physical distress and communicate our openness to the outside world. For example, someone who is open to receiving love might walk with their chest forward and shoulders rolled back, exposing their heart chakra to other people and experiences. Someone who is healing and desires protection and safety might walk with shoulders curved forward, creating a barrier between their heart and others. Yoga postures help us interpret what information our chakras hold, offering us insight on what is happening within.

I never talked to Nathan about his chakras. I regret that. But my principal didn't hire me to teach yoga; he hired me to improve our students' writing skills and increase reading comprehension scores that were well below the national average, to somehow prepare students, some with severe learning disabilities, for a four-year college of their choice, to push our entire student population, which was mostly black, above the poverty line and toward a very white idea of success. So I taught Nathan how to use evidence to support his claim, how to summarize a scholarly article, how to make inferences while reading, how to articulate the main idea in his own words. I snuck in yoga where I could.

I suppose I could have given Nathan a scholarly article on chakras. I could have assigned him a writing prompt about how different yoga poses triggered different responses in his body, in his mind. I could have posted affirmations on our classroom's walls that he could have repeated in his head while he was breathing, mantras to fill the spaces between inhales and exhales, words for when his breath would hold. Stop.

I don't know if that would have changed anything

## root

your root chakra lives at the base of your spine. When you sit in sukasana, a basic meditation posture that you might recognize from your childhood as crisscross-applesauce, your root chakra hovers above the earth. It is associated with your sense of security, safety and protection. If your basic needs like food, water, and shelter are not met, then your root chakra loses balance, causing the other chakras that depend on your root like walls rely on their foundation to tumble out of alignment. Traumatic events like physical or emotional abuse or witnessing a violent act can also cause similar internal destruction, making simple things like smiling or laughing or receiving someone's smile or laughter feel forced or painful. You might walk through life fearfully, anxiously, frozen between your fight and flight reflexes. This mindset makes relationships difficult, it makes learning new things difficult, it makes everything difficult.

By March Nathan had become an excellent breather. Technically, we're born good breathers, but Nathan had become exceptional, especially when he took sukasana and slid into what he called "the zone." I knew he'd made it into said zone when his eyes closed but didn't pinch, lids smooth like the tops of timpanis, when his hands cupped either shin with just enough effort to elongate his posture, when his inhale lifted his chin, just a bit, and his exhale melted his shoulders toward the ground. Sometimes he'd rock back and forth. Sometimes he'd sway from side to side.

When he was deep in the zone, he'd make small, slow circles with his upper body. If he tipped back too far, teetering on his sit bones, he never opened his eyes or released his grip on his shins to reach for the ground behind him. To steady himself. Instead he found the edge, raised his eyebrows, suspended, and rolled back to center.

When he was reading, though, Nathan had a more difficult time staying grounded. If he stumbled over a word for more than a few seconds, and a deep breath didn't calm him down as quickly as he would have liked, he would smack the book closed and shove it across his desk, he would cross his arms and press back in his chair and tell me *I ain't doing this*. He would refuse to make eye contact.

When we were first getting to know each other, Nathan told me that his second grade teacher repeatedly stated that he wasn't smart enough to get a job at McDonald's. This is an undeniably hurtful thing to say to a child, one of those moments that stamps to your psyche, but what strikes me most about it is the teacher's timing. In the education field it's thought that third grade is when students stop learning to read and start reading to learn. So if one of our second graders hasn't nailed their sight words or sorted out letter blends or the sounds vowels make depending on surrounding consonants, without additional (and oftentimes expensive) tutoring, they're left to figure it out on their own as a third grader and beyond.

Sometimes the word *stupid* triggered Nathan. If he perceived someone had implied he was stupid or that he wasn't capable of reading something on his own, he'd turn into someone else. He'd yell, curse, storm out of the classroom. One time he shot staples out of my stapler like it was a gun. He appeared dangerous, out of line. But really he was shaken to his core. He didn't know how to respond, so he built a wall with his words, his body, whatever he could get his hands on. He was trying to protect himself from failure.

These weren't his only defenses though. On days Nathan felt more grounded, when the deep breathing worked, he'd pause when he got to a word he didn't know and look at it for a moment. Then he'd frame the word with his thumbs, placing his left thumb in front of the first letter and his right thumb after the last. He'd shrink the frame until only the letters that made up

the first syllable were visible, and he'd sound it out. He'd repeat the sound until it felt right. Then he'd slide the frame to the next syllable and repeat the process until he'd sounded out each syllable individually. Then he'd pull his thumbs apart to frame the whole word again and put each of the sounds he created together. With every attempt the space between each syllable melted until one fluid word poured from his mouth. He only looked up at me when he thought he had it right and sought confirmation.

Imagine being present with one word for that long. Imagine how much more you'd understand about that word because you sat with each piece of it for a few breaths, recognizing its middle, beginning, and end.

He had so much respect for words. He wanted that same respect in return

root chakra affirmation:

I am safe, protected, and secure

all is as it should be

sacral

your sacral chakra lives between your root chakra and navel, radiating outward to your hips and genitalia. It is associated with your emotional body, sensuality, and creativity. Because of its physical location, its relationship to our sexual desires and pleasures can be over emphasized, casting a shadow over its relationship to our other deep need to create. With your root chakra in place, exploring your sacral chakra can reveal how you wish to connect with the outside world and what about it brings you joy. When your sacral chakra is out of balance you might feel disconnected from others, your emotional responses may be more severe than is warranted, and your inspiration might run low or not at all. But when it's settled into its place

above your root chakra, anchored, you might experience a stream of creative energy and joy. I like to think about it as the place where all of our ideas are born, the place we must explore to retrieve them.

Nathan wanted to be a car mechanic. He never wavered on this, never changed his mind or shrugged his shoulders like our other students when asked about post graduation plans. After working on some of the cars in his neighborhood, he discovered he had a real talent for taking broken things apart and putting them back together, fixed, improved. He learned everything he knew about cars by doing, not reading, but he suspected he could learn more from manuals and articles online if he could sound the words out. *I need to know the names of the parts*, he said. *I know what they are but I don't know what to call them*. So we made a deal. If I promised to teach him car vocabulary, he promised not to yell, curse, or shoot my staples across the room.

In November, before we started any breathing exercises or yoga poses, Nathan wrote down some of his goals on light blue slips of paper: *I want to know the names of cars and brands*, and *I want to read a mechanic's manual*. He folded each slip until you couldn't read the text through the other side and put them inside a glass mason jar. For three more class periods, he cut out pictures of Ferraris, Mustangs, assorted tools, and one full-body shot of his favorite rapper, Chief Keef, and modpodged them to the outside of the jar until it was completely covered in motivation. When he finished, he stood on his tiptoes to place it on the top of our bookshelf to dry, safe.

Nathan's hands would have been perfect mechanic hands, fingers longer than his palms, nails cut down to the quick, fingertips round and rough. In triangle pose he'd spread his fingers wide, engage every muscle in his arms without me needing to cue it, gazing upwards. In downward facing dog, his fingertips would grip the ground, leaving ten temporary divots in his

mat when he returned to mountain pose, hands in prayer. In tree pose he'd hold his hands above his head and make different shapes, a triangle, a circle, a heart

sacral chakra affirmation

I am beautiful and creative

I am unique

solar plexus

your solar plexus chakra lives in your abdomen, between your navel and your breastbone. It's described as the source of personal power and is associated with self-esteem, sense of purpose, and motivation. It's considered the most radiant of the chakras and, I would argue, the most energetic. Its strong association with the element of fire, the element of transformation, allows us to explore our own ability to make change internally and in our surroundings. This is the first of the chakras to branch out into the intellectual body and examine how we take our ideas and grow them into plans. Just as fire transforms chemical energy into thermal energy, our solar plexus chakra helps us to gather the pieces and create something burning with purpose. If your solar plexus chakra is blocked or out of balance you might feel lost, aimless, unproductive. But if it is clear and aligned to a strong root and sacral chakra, you might notice others are receptive to your assertiveness, that things go as planned. Your personal power is on fire.

Nathan and his older brother, C'Velle, who is also our student, had the same fire, light brown skin-tone, scowl, and smile, but they were built differently. Nathan was about 5'4, maybe 5'5 when he wore his Timberlands, slim-framed, and he kept his hair as short as possible without showing scalp. C'Velle is at least 6 feet tall, broad-shouldered, and sports several hairstyles ranging from as short as Nathan's, to locks a few inches long, to a picked-out fro he proudly

maintained between class periods. In short, and he'd probably smack his lips at me for saying this, Nathan looked like a boy while his brother looked like a man. To be fair, though, Nathan might not have been done growing yet.

Nathan and C'Velle seldom interacted at school. They outwardly defended the other's actions and would puff their chests at anyone who spoke ill of their brother, but I don't have a memory of them walking in the halls together, no image of them arriving or leaving the school at the same time. Still, no one ever questioned their bond.

That C'Velle was gang-affiliated was common knowledge among students and staff. According to their mother, Nathan was "the good son," the one who wouldn't bring his family trouble or heartache, and C'Velle, he was grown, she thought. He made his own choices, and nothing could be done to stop him. As a freshman Nathan had spoken out against gangs, saying he'd never get *involved in something like that*. Nathan rarely spoke about gangs in the beginning of his sophomore year, and we had no reason to think he'd change his mind.

I taught C'Velle the year before I taught Nathan. I hadn't completed my yoga teacher training yet, so I was only doing small breathing exercises with students one-on-one in the hallway when their emotions became difficult for them to contain. C'Velle was immediately receptive to these exercises and often did them at his desk, eyes closed, thumbs pressed into index fingers, sometimes even humming on the exhale. If his peers made fun of him, he'd hum louder and louder until they stopped. *No one can stop me from my zen.*

Nathan's fire was just as powerful as his brother's. It also was more subtle. The first time we did plank pose and lowered down to chaturanga, everyone else dropped to their bellies with a flop and a grunt and a nervous look to the left, to the right. Not Nathan. He locked his elbows in

at 90 degrees, hovered his chest, stomach, thighs, knees above the ground, stared at the candle lit at the head of his mat, and took a deep breath. And another deep breath. Another breath.

Another. Another. Another. Another...

solar plexus chakra affirmation

I have power

I am strong

heart

your heart chakra lives beneath your sternum and includes the heart, lungs, thymus gland, and lymphatic system. It controls your sense of social identity, your ability to love and connect with the outside world, your compassion, and your sense of hope. In short, it's the center of self-love and love for others.

The heart chakra's Sanskrit name is Anahata, which translates to unstruck or unhurt. I like the implications of this; it suggests that beneath our emotional wounds and scars there rests a pure, peaceful pocket where no pain exists, a place that is inherently protected by and functioning only in love. This name suggests that love at its purest is without condition, without reason, that at our core we carry an unconditional, unreasonable love for ourselves, that at our best we offer unconditional, unreasonable love to others.

After hearing his best friend, Prentiss, read about the bond between the Greasers in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Nathan leaned into his copy of the book. The next paragraph was his. He read Hinton's description of Johnny, the youngest, smallest, and the most innocent of the Greasers. As he read, Nathan adjusted himself in his seat, flattened his copy of the book on his desk, and read more slowly, more intentionally, trying to give every word the respect he knew it

deserved. Nathan was also the smallest in his peer group, but no one ever questioned his toughness. I sensed he saw a bit of himself in what he was reading:

*He had a nervous, suspicious look in his eyes, and that beating he got from the Socs didn't help matters. He was the gang's pet, everyone's kid brother.*

Nathan paused, furrowed his brow, and leaned back in his seat as he read the passage over again to himself, trailing each word with the tip of his index finger, mouthing the words. When he got to a word that required more attention, like *suspicious*, he put his book back on his desk, used his thumb-frame to break it down, and took slow, deep breaths. Prentiss waited silently.

*Suspicious!*

*There you go!* Prentiss said.

*Yes, suspicious look,* I said. *What do you think that's about?*

*He got jumped,* Nathan said. *Once you get jumped, you won't never be the same. You're always looking behind you because everyone your enemy.*

Prentiss read the next paragraph out loud:

*His father was always beating him up, and his mother ignored him except when she was hacked off at something, and then you could hear her yelling at him clear down at our house. I think he hated that worse than getting whipped. He would have run away a million times if we hadn't been there. If it hadn't been for the gang, Johnny would never have known what love and affection are.*

*That last line is interesting,* I said. *What do you think about it?*

Prentiss and Nathan looked up from their books and at each other, cracking up at the silent joke they shared.

*Those his homies, Ms. Seilheimer!* Prentiss explained, offering Nathan a choreographed and well-rehearsed handshake, one commonly passed between our students in the hallways who identified as GD, or Gangster Disciple.

Nathan left Prentiss hanging for a moment. *You know she don't like it when we do it in class.* He turned to me. *But it ain't like that, Ms. Seilheimer. Like Prentiss said, those his homies, they got your back no matter what. You got their back too. Like family supposed to.*

He completed the handshake. *We gonna keep reading?*

heart chakra affirmation

I deserve to be loved fully

and unreasonably

throat chakra

your throat chakra surrounds your voice box and governs your thyroid, jaw, neck, mouth, tongue, and larynx. It is associated with self-expression, communication, and integrity. When your throat chakra is open and aligned, you are able to speak and listen with a higher purpose. You operate from a place of truthfulness—not just the absence of lies, but your personal truth. You are able to clearly articulate your needs, desires, opinions, and ideas. You listen to others and the world around you with compassion and acceptance. If your throat chakra is closed or out of balance, you might experience difficulty in expressing your feelings and ideas, you might find yourself mired in indecision, you might even find that you have a sore throat or a stiff neck.

All of our chakras are connected, of course, but I'm especially intrigued by the relationship between the heart and throat chakras. They need one another in order to fulfill their highest function. We find our truth and love in our heart chakra, and we use our throat chakra to

share it with the world. Surely you can speak without knowing your truth, you can say you love something or someone, but without an open heart these words are lip service at best. And you can certainly hold your truth and love, be sharply aware of them, but what good are they bottled up inside? Your love is meant to be shared.

One morning when Nathan and his peers were doing sun salutations in our classroom, our principal announced a Code Black over the PA system and instructed all teachers to lock their doors. Eyeja, another one of our students, offered to keep leading the sun salutations while I checked my email and phone to find out what the Code Black was all about—we'd never run this drill before. I locked the doors and later found out via text from one of our security officers that C'Velle had attempted to come into our building with a gun, supposedly with the intention of shooting another one of our students. Once he made it to the metal detector though, he'd panicked and dropped the gun into the purse of a quiet, unsuspecting sophomore who was then pulled for questioning by one of the police permanently stationed at our school. C'Velle had fled and not returned to school grounds.

By the time Eyeja finished guiding our class through savasana and closed the practice with an enthusiastic *Namaste, y'all!* Nathan was also pulled for questioning. A week later they pulled him again, assuming he'd heard from his brother by then. Nathan revealed nothing, answering *no* to every one of their inquiries, and asked to return to class. *That's my brother*, he kept saying. They never pulled him again.

throat chakra affirmation

my choices have merit

my story should be shared with others

## third eye

your third eye chakra lives behind the space between your eyebrows. It is considered your center of intuition. Anytime you get a gut feeling or a hunch about something or someone, your third eye chakra is activated, it's trying to communicate something important to you. It holds a special type of knowledge that is called Ajna in Sanskrit, or beyond wisdom, and is therefore not carried in your mind, but in your being. When your third eye chakra is open or balanced you might have a vibrant imagination, sharp and colorful visualizations, you may experience moments of clairvoyance or even telepathy. If it's closed or out of balance you might feel unmoored, lacking in self-guidance, unable to concentrate, make questionable decisions, or display poor judgment of people and situations.

By late spring Nathan had practiced a lot of yoga poses. He seemed to enjoy Warrior Two, a posture of strength and balance, but he maintained that his favorite pose was savasana, or corpse pose, a translation I continue to struggle with while teaching. The objective of savasana is to keep your body still and silent while you lie down on your back, like a corpse, at the end of a yoga practice. The purpose of this is to allow all of the shifts in your muscles, joints, heart, and perspective to settle into your being, to become a part of the next version of you. This is a very active process. But the translation implies that you just lie there, lifeless, your inhales and exhales slowing to the point just before breathlessness. The other side of this translation, though, is that after you exit savasana, you're born again. You start over. You enter the next chapter as this new version of you. You get to try again.

I'm not sure I have any business exploring Nathan's third eye chakra with an audience. It doesn't feel right to expose his intuition, or to act like I know what his, or anyone else's, intuition does or does not communicate. Wondering about his gut feeling as he walked down

Arthington Street on Mother's Day afternoon has not been healing. Imagining his hunch as he sensed that black car approach him from behind, when he heard the passenger side door open, has not brought peace. The number of breaths he took before he held it forever is not a fact that has clarified anything. The position of his body on the sidewalk is not an image I want to see clearly. I'm not sure there's anything to gain from wondering if anything could have changed anything.

third eye chakra affirmation

my intuition is strong

it is worth following

crown

some believe that your crown chakra lives at the top of your skull. Others maintain that it is the empty space that hovers two to four inches overhead. Either way, it's thought to be where your individual consciousness meets the divine power, where your personal self meets the spiritual world at large, where you meet god. Your crown chakra is difficult to explain because it can take on so many forms; it depends on the individual. You could also say it's the most challenging to access; it depends on the other six chakras below it being cleared, open, and aligned. At the same time, exploring your crown chakra can reveal who you are spiritually, how far you have to go before you are your highest self. It can show you where you're headed.

C'Velle wore a pale yellow surgical mask outside the funeral home while his brother's body rested inside. As Eyeja and I approached the crowd of Nathan's family and friends, we watched C'Velle pace the length of a car parked beside the sidewalk, back and forth, back and forth, ticking his head from left to right. The car's back door on the passenger side was open, the

engine was running, and a young man about C’Velle’s age sat in the driver’s seat with both hands on the wheel. This was the first time many of C’Velle’s teachers and friends had seen him since he fled school grounds, but he only stopped his feet for a few seconds at a time to greet each person as they expressed their condolences. When he hugged me, he picked me up, turned me around, and placed me back on the ground so my back was to the open car door. He held me close, pointed his face toward mine to say how happy he was we all came, but his eyes darted from left to right above the brim of his mask as he spoke. I asked him what the mask was for. *It’s a disguise*, he said. *Thank you so much for being here.*

The line to see Nathan’s body curled around the outside edge of the funeral home. His mother, who had stepped outside for a breath of fresh air, recognized me from parent-teacher conferences and ushered Eyeja and me to the front of the line. Nathan’s mom stood beside me and we looked at his body together, exchanging our favorite things about him. *He always on my last nerve*, she said. *But that’s my baby. I love him so much. He with God, now. I know he is.*

crown chakra affirmation

I am connected

honorable

and good

Nathan’s mom thanked us for coming and left the room to greet more family members who had just arrived, but I wasn’t ready to leave just yet. *Take a deep breath, Ms. Seilheimer*, Eyeja said, taking my hand in hers

*just take a deep breath in*

*look at him*

*he good now*

*look at his face, see how peaceful he is?*

*now, exhale, let it go*

*he good now*

## Just Joe

A black teacher's impact on student success is both crucial and overlooked. On a philosophical level we seem to understand that representation matters for all of our students of color. We are quick to agree that they should be exposed to as many positive adult figures who look like them as possible. But as white teachers and white administrators who make up over 80% of the teacher workforce in America, we most loudly express this understanding by prioritizing novels with black protagonists, introducing students to black authors, scientists, historians, mathematicians, activists and politicians via PowerPoint presentations, and we spend our limited funding on after-school programming (that many of our black, low-income students have a difficult time attending) like Black Girls Rock and Becoming a Man. These are all great efforts. However, we aren't implementing what might be the most obvious and effective practice to close the ever-expanding achievement gap: hire *and support* more black educators.

Fortunately we now have the data to back up our belief that representation matters. A 2018 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that black students who had just one black teacher in elementary school were 13% more likely to enroll in college. Those who'd had two black teachers in elementary school were 32% more likely. A current Johns Hopkins University study shows that having one black teacher in elementary school reduced a black student's probability of dropping out of school by 29%. For black, low-income students in particular, having one black teacher in elementary school decreased their chances of dropping out by 39%.

While these numbers show that the power of one black educator is, in a word, unmatched, that only 7% of America's teachers are black (2% being black and male) suggests we don't

realize, value, or are even equipped to integrate such fact into our hiring practices and teacher training models.

It's important to understand that the solution isn't as simple as replacing white educators with black educators. Without proper support and coaching, this switcheroo approach creates, as Dr. Christopher Emdin of Columbia University describes it, a black version of the same broken model. Similar to how black students need black educators, black educators need black leaders. Just like black students need a curriculum that reflects their culture and values, black teachers need coaching built on the understanding that they have what it takes. They all deserve someone with a clue.

Joe Lee Robinson III started teaching in Chicago Public Schools in 2014. As a young black educator, he joined the teaching force near the tail end of a swift decline in the number of black educators in CPS, dropping from 40% in 2000 to 23% in 2015 according to Chalkbeat and the Illinois Report Card. After completing a year-long intensive teacher training program with the Academy of Urban School Leadership, a non-profit known nationwide for adopting "failing" schools and implementing its severe turnaround model, Joe was placed at one of AUSL's all-black elementary schools. He was the 6<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher. He was one of seven black teachers on staff. He was one of two black male teachers.

One of the first things people notice about Joe is his sense of fashion. He opts for bow ties (never a clip-on) over neckties, colorful, patterned socks over neutral tones, and he always, always, matches his belt to his shoes. His eyebrows appear manicured even though they're not, and he's in excellent shape; on more than a few occasions, people have assumed he's a gym

teacher when he tells them what he does for a living. It's unclear if this assumption has more to do with the color of his skin or his physique.

His mother, while beaming with pride in her son, cannot fathom why Joe returned to the very part of Chicago she and his father had worked their entire adult lives to escape. Both she and Joe Jr. grew up on the west side of Chicago, and moved farther and farther away while raising Joe and his sister, Jennifer, until they finally landed in Plainfield, Illinois, about 40 miles southwest of Chicago. They wanted the best education they could get for their children. As CPS graduates, they felt it was in the suburbs.

*Do they call you names, Joey? Why you want to teach them badass kids?* she often asks him during their weekly phone conversations. Joe, who silently asks himself the same questions as he looks at a long list of phone calls he needs to make to his students' parents, some of which likely pertain to their child calling him a "faggot-ass" or "bitch," remains tied to his personal mission. *Because they deserve a good teacher like I had, Mama,* he says. *And I want to be that good teacher.*

When Joe graduated from Plainfield South High School, he'd never envisioned himself as a teacher. He walked across the commencement stage with his tall, slim frame swimming in his blue gown, with his matching cap perfectly centered over his fresh fade, and without a clear idea of what he wanted to become. He was one of the few black members of the Class of 2007 and the first man in his family to go to college. While he was growing up, all of his teachers had been white, most of them female.

It's difficult to envision something you've never witnessed.

When Joe graduated from the University of Iowa in 2011 with a degree in Political Science and a minor in English, he'd started to envision himself as a teacher. His professor who taught African American Literature was black; the rest of his professors were white. Joe still holds this course as his favorite, a game changer. *I don't know why I liked it so much*, he told me once. *I guess it was the books we read*. Nella Larson's *Passing* and James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* still rank as his two favorite books of all-time, though he has yet to reread either of them. *They're filled with feelings and thoughts I have but ignore*, he told me. *How am I supposed to re-harness them and stay positive?*

It's difficult to explain the impact of seeing yourself reflected.

When Joe completed his teaching certification in May of 2014 with AUSL, he was one of two black members of his cohort. He trained at a school with a majority Hispanic student population. Seventeen percent of that student population was black, similar to his own high school. His instructional coach was a white man, his mentor teacher was a white man, his cohort partner was a white woman, and all of his graduate course professors, again, were white. He'd spent half the year on a remediation plan because he hadn't met his coach's expectations when it came to behavior management, it seems, since day one.

Before Joe entered the classroom on his first day as the lead teacher, his coach and mentor teacher reviewed the school's consequence system with him in the hallway. They reminded him that if he redirected a student and they continued the misbehavior, like talking while he's giving instruction or playing on their cell phone, that he needed to issue a verbal warning. If the behavior persisted, he needed to ask the student to step into the hallway for a one-on-one conversation that would hopefully function as a reset. If the student refused to step into

the hallway, then he needed to press the button next to the light switch that alerted security to remove a student from the classroom for the remainder of the period. They ended the conversation by getting specific, warning him that if Dameon, the only black student in the class, did not respond positively to his redirection, Joe must press the button.

Joe, whose bow tie grew tighter the closer he got to go-time, nodded along. While he understood that Dameon often misbehaved, it seemed many teachers had built a culture around Dameon that expected him to *only* misbehave. This conversation and others like it framed Dameon as a disruption to the learning environment of others rather than as a member of the learning environment who needed a different kind of support. Joe sensed that his coaches were building a similar culture around him.

*It felt like a set up, like if I pressed the button, I would pass some test, but if I didn't press the button, I'd fail,* Joe explained. *It felt like they were waiting for me to fail.*

Zoom out, and you might see that hallway pep talk this way: two white men making one black man's success contingent upon another black man's failure all in the name of not disrupting the learning of other non-black students.

Joe began his first lesson as the lead teacher, instructing students to answer a short writing prompt independently and silently. As expected, Dameon did not start his work and opted to drum up a conversation with his peers instead. Joe redirected him verbally. *I got you, Mr. Robinson,* Dameon said. But Dameon continued talking and neglecting the assignment. Joe walked over to Dameon and quietly asked him to step into the hallway. Dameon refused. Joe asked him again, explaining it was just a conversation and that he wasn't in trouble. Dameon still refused. Joe looked up at his coach and mentor standing at the back of the room, watching, waiting.

Joe did not press the button.

*I just knew that's not what he needed, Joe told me. Something else was going on for him and putting him out would have made it worse. I'd seen it make it worse.*

Later Joe's coach asked him why he didn't press the button. Joe said it just didn't feel right. For his coach, this answer did not justify Joe's blatant refusal to adhere to the school's policy. This answer would later be used to prove Joe did not know what was best for his students.

It's difficult to defend your intuition.

When I first met Joe, he was one of three black teachers at another AUSL teacher's birthday gathering at a bar on the west side of Chicago. The rest of us were white. Our group could have been extracted from the crowd as an accurate sampling of the bar's patronage overall, hinting at the changes developing in the neighborhood the bar aimed to serve.

I like to think that I would have noticed Joe regardless of how many other black men were at the bar, regardless of whether we were connected to the same party or not, that some invisible force of the universe brought us together that night, but I can't say any of that for sure. Something I can say with certainty: he looked damn good in that slim fit, black V-neck T-shirt, clavicle exposed, pectorals raging.

I chugged the rest of my beer and asked Brian, a common colleague of ours, to introduce us.

*Joe, this is Nora, Brian said. She's a rock star at classroom management, and I know that's something you've been struggling with. You should talk to her about it.*

Joe's glare dagged at Brian and made it clear he was not on board with the terms of our introduction. Brian looked at me, shrugged, and walked away. Joe motioned at the empty stool next to him, inviting me to take a seat.

*I'll talk about literally anything but teaching,* he said before downing the rest of his beer. *Today was not a good day. No day has been a good day.*

It's difficult to process your experience when you're the only one having it.

On our fifth date Joe told me his 6<sup>th</sup> graders were "on lockdown," a phrase people likely associate with the presence of a gunman or prison. But this was middle school, and 6<sup>th</sup> graders had not been transitioning from one class period to the next quietly. Teachers from other grade levels whose classes were in session during the 6<sup>th</sup> graders' transitions had complained to the principal about the disruption. She responded by directing the teachers to transition instead of the students, leaving every 6<sup>th</sup> grader in one room all day and forcing Joe and his team to teach and be evaluated in classrooms that were not theirs.

*Maybe if we didn't treat them like first graders, they wouldn't act like first graders,* Joe told me over wine and sushi in his small, clean Uptown apartment. I listened and waited for him to look back at his plate so I could snatch another piece of sushi with my fingers—chopsticks are hard.

For weeks Joe had been trying to get his 6<sup>th</sup> graders to stand in two parallel lines, one line for girls, one line for boys, and walk forward with one student on a floor tile at a time. He came home hoarse from repeating phrases like "stay in your square!" and "voice level zero!" *It's embarrassing,* he told me as he grabbed a piece of the salmon roll with his chopsticks and placed

it on my plate. *It looks like I don't have any control, but I know that they're acting out because sixth graders still walking in silent lines is ridiculous. I never had to do that.*

Joe's sixth graders were on lockdown for a few days before he approached his principal, a black woman in her first year as a school administrator. He'd spoken with his teammates, two black women who were considered veteran teachers, and they all agreed that the lockdown wasn't working. They needed to train students on how to transition on their own properly. Keeping them cooped up in one room all day long was increasing negative behaviors, decreasing student focus, and making it difficult for teachers to teach to the best of their ability. Putting the sixth graders on lockdown might have kept the hallways more peaceful, but it was getting in the way of learning for sixth grade students and teachers alike.

*We all walked into her office together, but I was the only one who spoke, Joe said as he replenished our wine. I told her, you say you want us to be effective teachers, but you aren't setting us up to be effective when we aren't teaching in our own classrooms. How is this helping us get students "to and through college?" He half-chuckled. She really didn't like that, me using AUSL's language against her.*

Joe's principal asked what he proposed they do in lieu of the lockdown. He suggested something more positive, a rewards system of some kind, but that he and his team would need some time to plan it out and get back to her. He didn't mention anything about the potential psychological impact the term "lockdown" might have on students, what naming a procedure "lockdown" might communicate to their students about their role in their community, what it might suggest about the type of future they are being prepared for. There wasn't time to get that deep with it.

Joe looks back on this meeting as a tipping point. *From there on out, my principal's support changed. She avoided taking meetings with me, she wouldn't respond to my emails, and she allowed my coach to take over my classroom rather than helping me get better. My teammates would listen to me vent, and agreed that this was all bullshit, but that was it. My coach from AUSL stopped coming in. I was drowning, and I didn't know what to do.*

It's difficult to improve when no one else is invested in your success.

When we moved from Chicago to New Orleans together in the summer of 2016, Joe took a job as the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher at one of the city's historically black high schools in the Uptown neighborhood. His principal was a white man, his instructional coach was a white man, his department head was a white man. Joe was the only black male teacher on staff.

At the start of his second year with the New Orleans school, we were engaged to be married, and Joe seemed to understand more about his role as a black teacher with black students. He sensed a familiar lack of support from his new community, so Joe sent his coach an article by Christopher Emdin published by *The New York Times* entitled "Why Black Men Quit Teaching." He'd hoped it would spark a productive conversation between him and his coach that would help them both define the personalized ways in which he could support Joe as the only black male teacher in the building for the second year in a row.

Emdin speaks to Joe's gut reaction on his first day of lead teaching back in Chicago and every day thereafter:

*Black male teachers are not just expected to teach and be role models; they are also tasked with the work of disciplinarians. The stereotype is that they are best at dispensing "tough love" to difficult students. Black male educators I work with have described their primary job as*

*keeping black students passive and quiet, and suspending them when they commit infractions. In this model, they are robbed of the opportunity to teach, while black male students are robbed of opportunities to learn.*

AUSL didn't use the term "tough love." Instead, they reformed the rhyme into an alliteration: "no-nonsense nurturer." One way to express your no-nonsense nurturing was through consistency: delivering consequences in the same tone that you might deliver instruction, never hesitating to address a student's behavior using the school's prescribed hierarchy of consequences, holding students to the highest of expectations academically and behaviorally.

You could do all of these things most successfully after having developed a strong relationship with your students. If your relationship was strong, then it could withstand the blows of a consequence and, in some cases, grow stronger because the issuing of consequences then functions as accountability, not punishment. But without a strong relationship, you're just another adult making things harder for them. You're just another teacher pressing the button to have security escort them away from learning.

The thing is students' misbehaviors don't wait for a relationship to develop. They come out on day one, and you have to address it somehow. You either choose no-nonsense and battle building trust all year long or you choose to nurture and potentially battle your coach, mentor, or principal. Edmin suggests that black male teachers like Joe are positioned by their peers, coaches, and bosses to choose no-nonsense, even when it goes against their gut. Joe hoped his coach might read Edmin's article and see the ways in which his approach to coaching might perpetuate a system that makes black men quit teaching before Joe might quit teaching.

*It didn't have the impact I thought it was going to have, Joe said. He didn't understand where I was coming from or why I would send him an article like this. To be honest, I didn't even know what my concerns were, I didn't know how to articulate them. I was just really frustrated and thought I might quit teaching altogether.*

In other words, Joe was throwing his coach a lifeline in hopes he'd catch it and toss it back to him. His coach didn't even see that Joe was drowning. His coach didn't even know he himself was drowning. So Joe continues to figure it out on his own.

It's difficult to repeatedly ask for support.

Next year Joe will restart the same job at a new school in New Orleans. He doesn't know how many other black teachers will be on staff, or how many of them will be black men like him, but he does know that over 98% of his students will be black and that his principal will be white and male. After he signed his contract for the 2018-2019 school year as the incoming freshman English teacher, Joe met with his future principal informally at St. Roch Market in New Orleans' ever-changing St. Roch neighborhood. In his interview, Joe had stressed how important a positive coaching experience and leadership opportunities are to him at this point in his teaching career. He wants support, and he wants the chance to grow. He wanted to meet again to reiterate this point and get more specific about how coaching and leadership opportunities might look for him. At the end of their meeting, his principal-to-be assured Joe that he has a clue.

*I'm not going to be here forever, he said. I understand the importance of black leadership in schools with populations like ours.*

*All right, then, Joe thought. We'll see.*

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## Nest Morale

A house finch built a nest in the heart of our fern. Joe, ever the pragmatist, wants to remove it. *It might kill the fern*, he says. *Look how it's crushing the stems already*. I don't want to believe him, so I climb our stepladder for an aerial view, one of the only instances my 5'4 is taller than Joe's 6'3. I'm still too short to see the nest, so I hover my iPhone above the plant and snap a pic.

He isn't wrong. The nest is the size of two adult, cradled hands and pushes the fern's leaves down and out, blocking their bases from the sun.

*These weren't cheap*, he chirps from below, hands on hips.

I remain perched, erase the price tag from the equation, and focus instead on how important these ferns are to him.

To us.

The moment we hung them on the first porch we'll ever own together was heavy with our commitment to stay in New Orleans. We'd hugged our families goodbye under the promise of three years, maybe four, depending on how long I'd take to complete my graduate degree. This promise made the memory of our U-Haul shrinking toward the sunrise on I-55 South more palatable. For all of us. But, by way of beignets, daiquiris, or Po-Boys, we aren't sure, New Orleans nourished a part of us we didn't know was there, the part that wanted to go away together, stay away together, and see what could happen. Buying a house a thousand miles away from our roots in the Midwest was a big choice, the size of which our mothers will continue to marvel at until we make a different choice, I suppose.

As I study the picture of the nest, I recall the day we hung the ferns on hooks reaching out from our porch's trim like helping hands. We already knew five of our neighbors' names and had spent that morning practicing them over coffee by motioning our mugs at their homes and whispering *Terri, Frank, Mike, April, and Harold* into the humidity. Buzzing on caffeine or excitement, I prepared each fern in its own plant hanger made of hemp and red clay beads while Joe stood on the stepladder and drilled two holes for each of the hooks. I'm sure one of us said something about how teamwork makes the dream work, a mantra we'd adopted while moving from one home project to the next. When he finished drilling I lifted each fern to him, one at a time, and reminded him his hands are my favorite hands.

*Yeah? Why's that?*

Like I hadn't explained the reason countless times before.

I told him exactly why, but I won't recreate it here; in addition to pragmatism Joe practices more privacy than I do. He's asked that I let some things remain sacred between us. He doesn't ask much. I continue to work on this.

After contemplating the story I'd attached to his large, smooth knuckles, Joe studied his hands, palms up, palms down, and shook his head and smiled like he always does. Joe's brand of kindness, unconditional and constant, makes it easy for others to overlook him at times. He doesn't always believe that someone would read him as closely as I do.

*Ok, babe.*

After Joe hung both plants, we speedwalked to the middle of Congress Street to get a better view of our ferns, porch, home. We stood shoulder-to-shoulder like American Gothic but grinning and holding hands. His left. My right.

If our neighbors, most of whom are retired, empty-nesting, or both were watching from their front porches, they might have shaken their heads and whispered to their partner sitting next to them, balancing a drink on their knee, condensation cascading their cup's edge.

*What do you think they're smiling so hard for?*

Or they may have scooped past the divide of their swinging, metal loveseat and cooed, the breath behind their whisper hotter than the breeze gliding over their weathered hands.

*Do you remember our first home, dear?*

We could mean many things to our neighbors, some we might not realize without inquiring, but *what do we symbolize for you?* doesn't quite roll off the tongue after *how ya doin'* or *all right, all right*. A neighborly greeting means everything. So does the absence of one.

Still perched, I ascend to my tip toes even though I'm too short to see the nest and wonder what the gravid house finch noticed about our ferns, porch, home before she started gathering twigs, string, hair. I wonder what made her choose.

*Don't laugh, I say. But maybe this is a privilege. An honor, really. Of all the houses on the block she picked ours, you know?*

*I knew you were going to say something like that!*

I step down from the ladder, shorter than Joe once again. He laughs and tilts his head to the right, a response that means he agrees but he won't admit it for another few days, so I grab his hands, my favorite hands, the way I did at the altar when, for once, he was the one crying and I was the one holding steady, a moment of reversal that bothers him still.

*We have a responsibility, Joe.*

He raises an eyebrow and side-eyes the nest.

*Fine, he says. They can stay.*

Like the best journeys, that of the house finch is a mix of verified fact and hearsay. They started out as native to the Southwest, primarily southern California, until a handful of entrepreneurs capitalized on rich New Yorkers' preoccupation with the glitter of Hollywood and exotic pets. House finches, then marketed to the wealthy as Hollywood finches, could bedazzle an audience like any good film through both aesthetic and sound, especially the male with his ruby head and breast and his rapid, joyful warble.

I imagine house finch sales peaked during the golden age of Hollywood in the late 1930s because New York's elite was desperate to reestablish their reputation in the aftermath of The Depression. What better way to prove your wealth and connection to nature, to our universal root, than with one of her specimens locked behind golden bars in your parlor? Yet, with the cross-country shipping and selling of house finches being in direct violation of the Migratory Bird Act, no one was keeping records.

In 1940 New York, pet shop owners caught word of the police tracking their fowl play, and released their flocks of evidence into The Big Apple sky, unsure of how the birds might react to a colder climate and, you know, snow. Contrary to what their histories of consistent sunshine might have prepared them for, the house finches survived and began to settle in New York suburbs. Almost seventy years later and here we are with house finches in nearly every state in the continental US year round.

Nowadays house finch sightings are so frequent that bird lovers sometimes dub them invasive. It seems some experts can't compose one article or blog post about house finches without mentioning that this particular bird is from out of town (despite calling the expert's city home for a decade or more) and pose a threat to the more preferred, more colorful purple finch.

Is it fair to call the house finch invasive? They didn't raise their wing in the air and tweet, *Pick me! Pick me!* when a human, looking to make a quick buck, approached their tree with birdseed and a net. My guess is house finches had no clue what was happening as potholes ping-ponged their bodies between cage walls on the bumpy journey from California to New York. At the risk of anthropomorphizing, house finches seemed to be law-abiding citizens, sticking to what they knew and where they knew it, until people got involved. House finches weren't exploring new land out of boredom or punishing purple finches for being prettier than them. They didn't decide to invade.

It's more complicated than that.

Joe and I had lived in New Orleans for a year and a half before we jumped in to its housing market in the fall of 2017. After sending the necessary documents to our loan officer, we decided to email our realtor, Leslie, about gentrification because while we knew it was happening in New Orleans, we lacked an in-depth understanding of how. I'd write it. Joe would look it over.

In the first few drafts I tried to compose the entire message without using the word "gentrification" or "race" because I wanted to be clear that our concerns were genuine, so genuine in fact, they didn't depend on buzzwords with definitions muddled by overuse. In hindsight I think this was my small town, Michigan upbringing reminding me that race is number one on the list of taboo conversation topics, right above religion, politics, and, quite honestly, anything else actually worth talking about. You can't say "race" or "black" or "white" outside of hushed tones; you have to waltz around them.

I'd found these dance moves don't translate outside the Midwest, but it was still a routine I had to move through to get anywhere. After an hour had flown by and only "Dear Leslie,"

beside a blinking cursor remained, I finally typed “Gentrification in New Orleans” in the subject line.

Assuring the very worried Michigander within that it would all be ok, I asked Leslie if Joe and I could gentrify since he’s black and I’m white. Joe and I had discussed this at length and never arrived at a conclusion because we didn’t know if our potential neighbors would perceive us as a household or individuals. We didn’t know if our races would communicate everything or nothing about the future of their (our?) neighborhood. We could have asked, but again, these are awkward questions to slip in after a *good mornin’!*, especially when you haven’t placed an offer on the house next door yet, when you aren’t even their neighbors yet.

Looking back on this email makes me wince; I signed it “Nora and Joe,” but it largely comes off as my own plea to be let off the hook for being white and looking at homes in St. Claude, a predominantly and historically black neighborhood in the Upper Ninth Ward. One might think that Leslie already gave us the pass, should such a pass exist, since it was her suggestion that narrowed our search to this area; of the few we could afford, it was closest to where Joe works and where I go to school. I also find it curious that, should such a pass exist, I thought Leslie, a white woman from across the river in Algiers, would have it. But that Michigander within and I were processing something, we were trying to determine how Joe and I would be sewn into the fabric of a neighborhood we’d seldom visited but understood carried a rich, complicated history. Plus, Leslie had proven an excellent guide through the many-forked road of housing in New Orleans thus far. She was quick to cut through bullshit. We both agreed she wouldn’t steer us wrong.

Everything Joe and I understood about gentrification prior to hitting send on that email was based on what we observed while renting in Chicago. I lived there for eight years before

moving to New Orleans, and Joe had lived in or around the city his entire life. To us, gentrifying was something white people did, a sweeping movement of the pale and privileged from one neighborhood to the next deemed complete with the grand opening of a Starbucks or a yoga studio. We recalled living demographic maps that illustrated this trend, white people spreading across Chicago, east to west, like a storm cloud or a contagion. This background knowledge left us wondering: was I a drop in the downpour of gentrifying transplants in New Orleans and Joe the beloved new neighbor? What would our home owning symbolize? Change? Displacement? Preservation? Nothing at all?

Joe recently informed me that he didn't make this email a truly collaborative effort because, deep down, he knew we weren't gentrifying. *You're in grad school and I'm a teacher, boo. How could we?* When I asked him why he didn't just say that at the time, he patted my knee and reminded me that he *kind of did* and quickly forgave me for not reading him as closely as I had vowed to because *I get it, this is something you need to figure out*. I vaguely recall Joe trying to explain this to me, but I must have waved him off. Deep down, from the same place Joe knew we weren't gentrifying, Chicago declared it would be different for me. I felt I'd represent something that Joe wouldn't.

Lucky for us, Leslie is both kind and direct.

*To be honest*, she wrote back. *Y'all don't make enough money to gentrify*.

Joe wasn't wrong.

Yet it seems I'm not the only one confounded by the way race and class intersect within the terrain of gentrification. As explained in publications like *The LA Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *CityLab*, this cultural shift, this displacement of one group of people in the interest of another, is

a class issue. Rent prices increase, property taxes rise, cost of living skyrockets. Homes become unaffordable.

Class is how we measure it.

At the same time, this cultural shift, this displacement of one group of people in the interest of another, seems to express itself through race. Communities of color are forced out. White communities move in. Traditions, murals, stories and roots are cut out. Cafés, art galleries, Pilates studios and veneers are pasted in. Home becomes unbearable.

Race is how we understand it.

Like most people, I want to control my narrative. I want to be in charge of the way people see me, how my story intersects with theirs. And, like most people, I want this intersection to be a positive one. This gets more complicated when I add Joe. I can't control his narrative, and I don't aim to, but often our stories are woven so tightly it's hard to discern his thread from mine. Simply put, this is marriage. Other times our narratives are two parallel arrows surging in the same direction but across different terrain. Simply put, this is interracial marriage.

I'd asked for a pass and got one. Leslie sent it, Joe stamped it, so I swallowed my concerns and focused on finding a house we could nest into a home without breaking the bank instead. This was much easier—not to mention quicker—than examining how the privilege attached to my skin color was interacting with my financial standing and what that might mean to a community of color I didn't know yet. The email thread had ended, but this examination was just getting started. Together, Joe and I moved forward.

We looked at two, maybe three, houses in St. Claude even though we fell in love with the first one because going for the only house you actually walk through seemed like a rookie's mistake, all those eggs in one basket, etc. But the two concrete lions flanking the path to the front

porch were all I needed. One lion for each of us. Lions we could decorate with beads for Mardi Gras and wreaths for Christmas and witch's hats for Halloween. The myriad of possibilities brought a welcomed distraction. The stars had aligned and landed in my eyes as I looked up at Joe and said *it's a sign*.

Joe doesn't subscribe to all of my omens, but he always believes in my belief in them, so we put in an offer. It was approved the same day. We closed on a Monday, flew to Michigan for our wedding on a Wednesday and said *I do* on a Saturday. We'd transformed from renting fiancés to home-owning newlyweds in less than a week. In a lot of ways, we'd made it.

But what we'd made wasn't clear.

It's June 24<sup>th</sup> and the pregnant house finch has laid her eggs. Four of them, blue so pale my iPhone camera barely picks up their hue. A sprinkle of brown specks scatter across the shells. I've "checked on" the eggs numerous times throughout the day by pulling a chair from our yellow bistro seat to the hanging basket, climbing aboard and using my camera as my eye. When Joe gets home from work I show him a series of nearly identical pictures of the brood-to-be. He matches his smile to mine as I swipe through my camera roll, but his furrowed brow tells me something worries him. I take note, but I don't pry and look up how long house finch eggs take to hatch.

*13-14 days. Two weeks. That's so long!*

*They'll be here before you know it, Joe says. Just don't bother them too much.*

*What do you mean by that?*

*Nothing, babe. Just let them do their thing.*

I click my tongue, purse my lips, and narrow my eyes, really letting him have it nonverbally for not trusting my instinct. After all, I'm the one who grew up with pets, not him. I'm the one who suggested we add a second cat and later, a dog to our growing family, not him. He almost didn't ask me out when I told him he had the same name as my cat. Who does this animal-averse guy think he is, telling me how to interact with eggs in my fern on my porch of my hou—

...our fern, our porch, our house.

He's not wrong.

With Joe's suggestion in mind, I decide to limit my check-ins to once a day, sometime in the morning, when the birds in our neighborhood are most active. What better way to wake up than with a reminder of new life, a beginning? What better way to set the tone for the following 24 hours than with a handful of transplants like myself incubating, forming, getting ready to find their way in a new place?

While we might not make enough money to single-handedly and irreversibly change our neighborhood, there is a larger system of gentrification taking shape *in* our neighborhood. Joe and I participate in it somehow, and before we can mindfully build our relationships with our neighbors, we need to identify our role.

Richard Campanella, author of "Gentrification and its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans" and geographer with the Tulane University School of Architecture, distills this larger system into a four-phase cycle. Each phase indicates the movement of a certain group of people, typically transplants, typically white, into low-income neighborhoods thus blazing a cultural trail by which the next phase, or group of people, takes over. Those groups of people are as follows:

1. *Gutter punks*, or “young transients with troubled backgrounds who bitterly reject societal norms and settle, squatter-like in the roughest neighborhoods bordering bohemian or tourist districts, where they busk or beg in tattered attire.”
2. *Hipsters* who are also “fixated upon dissing the mainstream” but are “better educated and obsessively self-aware” and “see these punk-infused neighborhoods as bastions of coolness.”
3. *Bourgeois bohemians*, a group of the “free-spirited but well-educated” who are “willing to strike a bargain with middle-class normalcy” and “buys old houses and lovingly restores them, engage tirelessly in civic affairs, and can reliably be found at the Saturday morning farmers’ market.”
4. And finally, the *bona fide gentry*, including “lawyers, doctors, moneyed retirees, and alpha-professionals from places like Manhattan or San Francisco.”

While Campanella doesn’t claim this list is all-inclusive (nor does he state it isn’t), I can’t help but wonder to what phase do Joe and I belong? We own a house and have jobs, so gutter punk is out, and I had to Google “what does bona fide really mean,” so there goes group four.

Campanella’s taxonomy leaves us somewhere between hipsters and bourgeois bohemians.

Campanella explains that hipsters (along with gutter punks) resent that their presence is the calm before the storm of phase three and four. They typically position themselves as “sharing the victimhood of their mostly black working-class renter neighbors.” As for the bourgeois bohemians (joined by the bona fide gentry), they “look askance at the hipsters and the gutter punks, but otherwise wax ambivalent about gentrification and its effect on deep-rooted mostly African American natives.”

When I shared these definitions with Joe, he agreed that we don't fit perfectly into either remaining category, not as individuals and not as a household. Out of curiosity, we made a verbal chart because sometimes our stories are woven so tightly it's hard to determine whose thread is whose. We sat on our couch under the glow of our floor lamp with the curtains drawn for the night, Campanella's pages fanned across the coffee table. Joe first.

*I want to say we are bourgeois bohemians because we "engage tirelessly in civic affairs." We are both educators and work directly with the community, mostly with kids.*

+1 Bourgeois Bohemians

*But we don't make enough money to 'lovingly restore our home' and we've never been to the farmers' market here.*

*Sure, but I know you'd make us go if we had the money for it. You love your local and organic produce.*

*Shit's expensive, though.*

*Right.*

*Also, yeah, we don't make enough money for lots of things, but that's by choice. I wanted to go to grad school full-time and you agreed to help make it work.*

+1 Bourgeois Bohemian

*True, but if you weren't in school you'd probably still be a teacher. Two teacher salaries in this city wouldn't get us that far. Trust me.*

*And we don't "wax ambivalent about gentrification," do we? I mean, here we are on a Friday night sitting at home trying to figure out what 'phase' we're in and how responsible we are for changing a neighborhood.*

*Sure. You're writing a whole essay on it. Isn't that being "obsessively self-aware" like a hipster, boo?*

+1 Hipster

*Yes, ok, I'll take that one, but I wouldn't claim "shared victimhood" with our neighbors. We all deal with there being no nearby grocery store, we all handled that shooting a couple months ago in some way, but my overall experience is different.*

*Hmm.*

*Hmm?*

*Well, I'd say I do share some of the same victimhood as our neighbors. Not completely, I don't know what it was like to survive Katrina and rebuild. But I do know what it's like to be black in New Orleans.*

Two parallel arrows surging in the same direction across different terrain.

Joe was walking our dog around 9:30 the night of the shooting I mentioned. I waited in bed with a bad feeling. Sirens wailed north of Galvez. Blue and red lights flickered across our bedroom ceiling. I tried not to do the math, tried not to count the minutes he was gone because no matter what number I'd get I'd use it to develop that feeling into panic. Joe finally came home, crawled into bed, told me what happened, and kissed me goodnight. Usually a sound sleeper, Joe left the bed at least three times that night. He was processing something. Each time he returned I kept my eyes closed but rolled over to my other side so I was facing him.

The news later described the boy who was killed as tall, young, black. He was also walking his dog. Joe heard the gunshot. He heard the boy's auntie run down Independence, the street behind ours, screaming. He heard sirens, squealing tires. He saw the boy's body on the

ground; he watched our neighbors gather in silence. Someone held Auntie as she continued to explain her nephew was a good boy.

A couple of days later Joe walked me to the corner where the boy had taken his last breath, and drew his hand across Auntie's path. He pointed to where the community gathered and where he stood across the way. Sometimes when I'm walking our dog I visit this spot and take a moment. Joe won't walk north of Galvez anymore.

*So where does that leave us?*

*Hipster bohemians?*

*Bohemian hipsters?*

*Just bougie?*

This conversation was starting to feel pretty bougie. Not many of our neighbors have the time or urge to sit down and discuss an article by an academic (a self-proclaimed phase-three, bourgeois bohemian academic, by the way) to figure out what role they play in our neighborhood's story. This is not to say that they couldn't, or that they wouldn't find it interesting. This is to say that a process like the one Joe and I were engaging in is unnecessary for them.

On average, our neighbors have been living on our block for the past seventeen years. Terri next door runs a side hustle of handheld pecan pies and pink frozen daiquiris out of her kitchen, both of which will knock you on your ass they're so good. Marvin across the street shares his favorite gospel music every Sunday morning, letting it spill out of his truck's open doors and onto our front steps, reminding us to be grateful and humble. Frank down the way spends every dawn and dusk on the sidewalk underneath the streetlamp, keeping an eye on all of

us, making his last round between 10 or 11 at night. April, Terri's sister who lives with brain aneurysms, monitors the wildflower patch I planted out front, and lets me know when I have a new bloom or when they might need an extra drink of water. Our neighbors don't fit into a scholar's prescribed phases. They don't play a role. They hold the draft in one hand, a pen in the other.

With all due respect to Campanella, I don't need to know how he'd categorize us.

How will our neighbors write us in?

It's July 6<sup>th</sup> and three of the eggs have hatched. The fourth remains uncracked. I switch my camera over to the video setting and keep recording for as long as my always-about-to-run-out storage space allows. These nestlings' bald bodies aren't the cutest, reminiscent of the raw chicken breasts marinating in our fridge. What look like blood blisters where their eyes should be don't exactly melt my heart. Something about them captures me, nonetheless. I think it's their awkward movement. Their struggle to lift their heads for more than a split second, or how the bones in their wings work like chopsticks, opening and closing, searching for balance. Or maybe it's how they tumble over each other and the egg, helpless to control their bodies but aware of, maybe grateful for, the others' presence, their warmth. I'll play this footage later for Joe and he'll do his best to find this as touching as I do.

One nestling supports itself by bracing one of its tissue-wings against the nest wall. He throws his head back, opens his beak, and offers a tweet so soft I question whether I heard it or not. I put my phone in my pocket and try to listen harder.

Rebecca Solnit, acclaimed writer and self-admitted New Orleansphiliac, does not distill New Orleans residents into categories. Instead, in *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas*, she suggests that we are all, in some form, transplants:

The territorialism of those who were born [in New Orleans] or have deep roots here is strong. Yet almost all of us are transplants—imported peoples by choice or force. Our past is troubled with slavery, the Indian Removal Act, the Civil War, and the rise of the oil and gas industry. We try to hold this past and understand where the city is, and what it can become—what we can be together.

I find more solace in Solnit's call to unite than in Campanella's phases, but I'm uncomfortable with its high risk for erasure. To Solnit's credit, she does acknowledge that many of those who wound up in New Orleans landed here by force or descend from those who landed here by force. But I feel she's skipped a step between roots tangling and buds blossoming in harmony, the one where we all *agree* to move forward together. I'm not sure that all of New Orleans' transplants, as defined by Solnit, are ready and willing to bloom side by side.

While all of New Orleans' transplants might share common ground, their best interests seldom align, making those divisions all the more obvious and painful to realize. As I write this, Ninth Ward transplants are going head to head with the local government transplants over the Florida Avenue Freeway Project, a plan to build a road that will simultaneously boost industrial traffic from St. Bernard Parish to I-10 and impose serious environmental and health hazards on nearby residents. Stand between these two groups of transplants and you'll notice that their differences in race, class, and how long their family has called New Orleans home are glaring and beg to be addressed with great care.

Saying “we’re all transplants” strikes me as something one of Campanella’s hipsters or bourgeois bohemians might say to make themselves feel better about acting as an essential cog in the gentrification machine. I can get down with the spirit behind what Solnit is saying, that the best way to connect with one’s neighbors or new friends is by standing side by side on common ground, but I would never walk up to Frank or Terri and say, *Well, at the end of the day, we’re all just transplants, when you really think about it.*

Solnit’s intention might put some of my gentrification anxiety at ease, it might calm the Michigander within whose wringing her hands so tightly over this her skin has grown raw, but it feels like an out, it feels like another pass, like an escape from facing some of the hard truths about how I do or do not fit into this community and why. It feels too easy.

It’s July 7<sup>th</sup> and only two nestlings remain. They’ve crossed their necks to make an X shape, breathing, barely moving. I search the porch floor and the front lawn for the other two nestlings, a tiny feather, a shard of eggshell, anything that can help piece together what happened to half the brood overnight. I find nothing. A swirl of questions spin around my mind: Do the mamas eat their young? Do the babes eat dead siblings? Do mamas remove lifeless bodies to keep up nest morale? So the living and struggling don’t get any ideas?

The ferns had grown so long they’d created a curtain in front of the back right-hand corner of our porch. Neighbors could no longer see this corner from the sidewalk. I pull one of the yellow chairs to this corner, sit down, and start to text Joe. I put my phone down and cry instead. Feeling sad for the birds and silly for my tears, I decide I’ll wait to tell Joe when he gets home when I’m more composed. He hates seeing me cry.

Maurice Carlos Ruffin, rising author and New Orleans native, writes that we fear endings most. “The end is where we visit a loved one’s bedside for the last time. After an ending, we accept a dimmer reality. Hope perishes...Still, after an ending there is life. Or so it is said.” He could be referring to dying nestlings in your fern, but he’s not. He’s talking about our neighborhood, or rather the road that bisects it: the St. Claude Avenue corridor.

Since Katrina, the area surrounding the St. Claude corridor has changed dramatically. Our house stands less than a mile north of the avenue. Ruffin takes special note of the New Orleans Healing Center, where I’ve taken several yoga classes, that has replaced the Universal Furniture store, a freshly painted bike path I’ve traveled countless times, and a St. Roch Market with doors sealed shut before it would be renovated into the St. Roch Market Joe and I treat ourselves to every now and then. He explains that before the storm, “I would not have brought my out-of-town friends to this neighborhood.” Now St. Claude lands in the top three streets my out-of-town friends want to visit along with Bourbon and Frenchmen.

Ruffin hits even closer to home. Our home: “I’ve traveled north of St. Claude after sunset, where there are more potholes and fewer trees, and many homes sit vacant. The poorer, predominantly African American population on this side of the avenue is being left out of the renaissance going on across the way. This is an old song. It will end with these residents driven out by increasing rents or something fairer.”

There. Right there. Joe and I, we’re the “something fairer,” I think.

Let’s look at some numbers. Our seller accepted our offer of \$130,000, roughly \$25,000 more than the average current value of our neighbors’ homes. Many of our neighbors would welcome our offer since it increases their property’s value—a fair transaction, expected even. At the same time, our presence invites even higher listing prices on our block. As I write this, the

“newly renovated” house across the street with the haint blue porch ceiling is listed for \$249,000 for only 600 more square feet than our house and a much smaller yard. That Joe and I are a lot younger than our neighbors might encourage more first-time buying millennials with heaps of student loan debt and less options available to consider our area. We might make it look hip, youthful, exciting. Meanwhile, my whiteness sends a signal to potential young, white buyers driving through the neighborhood to see if it’s a *good part of town*, which is white-people-code for *other white people already live there*, that they do, so, by their standard, it is safe.

The change Joe and I ignite on Congress Street seems fairer because it’s a slower, disjointed model of gentrification. Our neighbors will likely die before they’re displaced. But the fate of their children, should they choose to stay where they’ve landed, or return to where they were born, remains in draft mode. I hesitate to call this fair. I don’t know what to call it.

Embracing the ending of a St. Claude he grew up with, Ruffin turns to the neighborhood’s next beginning where Joe, our neighbors, and I wait. “Today, the corridor is a work-in-progress, and it’s clear that no single person or organization will dictate what happens next. The future of St. Claude Avenue will be both a tug of war and a collaboration between life-long residents and newcomers, nonprofits and city government, independent shopowners and multinational corporations.”

After our neighbors write us in, should they choose to do so, what will we all make of it?

And what do we do in the meantime?

It’s July 9<sup>th</sup> and one nestling remains. I search the lawn again and find no trace of the other nestling. I’ve learned that the parents remove shell pieces and dead bodies from the nest and its surrounding area immediately so as not to attract predators. Nest morale, indeed. Mom and Dad

drop off food regularly and keep watch, the dad from a power line that hammocks overhead and the mom from a nearby wax myrtle tree branch. I capture a few seconds of footage of the last nestling. I'm surprised by how much its beak has changed in one day. Or maybe I just want to imagine it's changing, that it's growing. I hit play on the footage and hold my phone's speaker to my ear, listening for a peep, a squeak, a breath. I only hear the sound of tissue-thin skin rubbing against the nest's jagged wall. I sense a loss of hope, in what, I'm not sure.

July 10<sup>th</sup>. The nest is empty. I don't know what happened and I worry I'm to blame, that my daily checks were intrusive, or that I jinxed the whole thing by paying too much attention to the matter. I want to cry, but I don't. I want to tell Joe, but I don't. I think about removing the nest. I think about hanging the fern somewhere else. I think about taking the fern down. But I don't.

In a recent interview with *Gravy*, a journal published by the Southern Foodways Alliance, Ruffin offers advice to future New Orleans transplants and, I would argue, every existing New Orleans transplant, including Solnit's who have been here for generations: "New Orleans is as welcoming as it is complex. It's such a unique place, and it can give you so much. Be prepared to give back. Have a plan for how you can contribute to the community and to disadvantaged people. One of the worst things I see is when people come down here and don't know that we say hello when we pass someone on the street. It's important, so be aware of the little things like that.

"Listen more than you talk," he writes.

It's August 5<sup>th</sup>. Joe and I take our Sunday morning coffee on our front porch. We sit, side by side, at our yellow bistro set, hearts turned toward Congress Street. We've trimmed our ferns,

and our neighbors can see us now. Our vincas' fuchsia faces shake by the same breeze that unlatches our front door and closes it again. Unlatch, close. Unlatch, close. Three houses down Harold weedwhacks the edges of his St. Augustine lawn he claims is still ruined from The Storm. It's the neatest one on our block, maybe even in the Upper Nine.

A car missing its muffler putts past on our right, heading east on Galvez, bounce music bumping. The little boy who lives across the street runs out in his underwear to his mom's car parked against the flow of traffic to retrieve her purse. He doesn't notice us right away. But Joe shifts his chair closer to mine, metal screaming against concrete, and the boy runs back into his house, giggling, purse in hand. Marvin steps up into his truck wearing a perfectly pressed khaki suit and silk tie, and hits play on the gospel CD we're convinced is always in the player, always queued up. He sits in the front seat for a few songs, gazing down the street. Sometimes when I look over at him his eyes are closed, head bowed.

When we were still renting in Uptown, Joe and I spent most Sunday mornings carrying our coffee through the neighborhood, marveling at houses. We didn't bother much with St. Charles where mansions stood tall and wide so far back from the sidewalk we didn't feel like we were in New Orleans anymore, or at least not the New Orleans we'd hoped to know. Instead we sauntered down Marengo, Constantinople, and Camp Street where we could see right into someone's living room and count the pieces of framed art on their walls, where double shotguns had morphed into spacious singles with camelbacks taller than palms in the backyard, where exterior paint color combinations made us wonder, *Why didn't we think of that?* Turquoise and tangerine. Magenta and mauve. Periwinkle and candy apple. We passed many people on these walks. About half said hello. Even fewer made eye contact. My Michigander within who was accustomed to greeting everyone found this disappointing.

Almost all of these houses in Uptown had porches, many of them lined with tiers of Zone 9 plants you can't grow in the Midwest, or a curtain of ferns exploding from their baskets with abandon. When Joe and I would stumble upon a porch like this our feet stopped. We'd take it all in. The potted petunias, the gnomes wearing Saints uniforms, the mismatched collection of rocking chairs, Adirondacks, and bistro sets, enough for the whole family to sit down at once, a forgotten drink in a Krewe of Bacchus cup. Our gazes traced the front doors, the shutters, the trim, trying to decipher a pattern, to read its story. I'd wonder how the porch looked, how it felt, from the inside when the plants' leaves were backlit by the sunrise. Eventually Joe would notice the Mercedes or Range Rover in the driveway, and make a comment on the porch owners' income. It was always more than we could imagine. We'd resume the walk and wonder if the porch owners were transplants like us or locals like we may never be.

*I want a house like that, I'd say. Not that big but that settled. And not in this neighborhood.*

*Someday, babe.*

Our home is not a luxurious double-to-single conversion. A Ford Focus rests in our driveway, uneven. A pile of art sits on a bookshelf waiting for frames our monthly budget spreadsheet says we can't afford yet. But today, August 5<sup>th</sup>, feels like a type of *someday*. This is our sixth or seventh time taking our morning coffee on our front porch, watching, listening to our neighborhood come alive, so for now we call it routine. Another month or two we might say it's a ritual. A few years, tradition.

Two doors down and across the street Frank rolls his and Harold's trashcans to the curb, wheels crunching concrete. We turn our heads toward the noise and lift our mugs, our morning salute. *How ya doin'?* Franks asks, projecting his gravelly voice over Marvin's gospel and

Harold's weed whacker. *All right, all right.* A rooster that none of us claim, that all of us complain about but most of us feed our stale bread, cock-a-doodle-does from the roof of Joe's car. He will do so again around noon, 3:00, and into the late evening. April leans against her front gate and glares at the rooster, shaking her head, flicking her cigarette's ash nowhere in particular. *Oh now he crow when he supposed to, huh?*

Mike, the first of our neighbors to introduce himself ten months back, returns from his daily jaunt to the corner store on his bicycle. He balances his brown-bagged 40 on his handlebars with one hand so he can greet us with the other. He waves to Joe, tips his faded Saints cap to me, and places his palm on his heart. We wave back.

Mike hits the brakes and dismounts, planting his feet on either side of the bike's frame. Standing smack dab in the middle of Congress, he holds his arms out wide like wings and smiles.

*God bless this day, y'all!* he says. *God bless this day.*

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## Ruby's Quilt, 3x6 Word Squares

### **Birth Quilt**

Should you be born into our family, you will get a quilt. My grandma will sew it for you by hand, resorting to the machine only when her knuckles throb and beg her to take a break. She will spend months on this quilt for you, retrieving fabric from her closet the day she learns of your pending arrival, and, even though she hasn't met you, even though you are nameless, your spine curled into your mother's curves that cradle you, this quilt will somehow *be* you. The pattern Grandma selects will become a visual rhythm by which you will learn to breathe, speak, dance. She will stitch your persona as you grow a body, face, voice, the two of you creating in tandem. This quilt will keep you warm when a womb no longer can. Over time it will remind you who you are when you've forgotten.

This quilt is where, for the first time, Grandma will meet you.

## Butterflies

My quilt started during the 1940s in Hazen, Arkansas, a small rice town 20 miles or so east of Little Rock in the middle of Prairie County. My great-grandma, Carrie Rounsavall, stitched loose scraps of fabric together to make a group of butterflies. Each one consisted of five pieces of fabric: two larger pieces for the upper wings, two smaller pieces for the lower wings, and one long, narrow piece in the middle for the body. She recycled prints for the upper wings and bodies from blouses and dresses her daughters outgrew—apples, flowers, polka dots. She thoughtfully paired solid fabric to each print for the lower wings, careful to accent, not match, and reinforced their edges with a thick, black thread. When she finished sewing the swarm, she stacked them in a pile and stored them in a large shoebox along with a few spools of thread, a pin cushion made to look like a tomato, a packet of sewing needles, and a yellow measuring tape.

My quilt restarted during the 1980s in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a mid-size city equidistant to Detroit and Chicago. Carrie's health had taken a turn for the worse, so she gifted the box to my grandma, Katherine (Rounsavall) Seilheimer, during one of their last visits. Grandma was Carrie's youngest of seven children, and like most youngest children, she was her most adventurous one, too. Everyone else had stayed within state lines to raise a family, but in July of 1946, Hazen's hottest month, Katherine moved 780 miles north to build a life with a Yankee recently returned from the war in an up-and-coming city surrounded by small lakes.

When Grandma drove in to Kalamazoo for the first time just a few days after their wedding, it felt like the Land of Oz. She didn't know what to compare it to as she watched multiple hospitals, colleges and parks with tall trees scroll past the passenger window that I imagine she rolled down so a crisp summer breeze could roll over her skin. As Grandma raised two sons and a daughter, Kalamazoo continued to grow into a cultural hub known for Gibson Guitars, Shakespeare fishing rods, Checkered Cabs, and various pharmaceuticals. There was hardly any time to sit in the house and rummage through some box from home, from Hazen, a land that felt distant in more ways than one, when there was so much to see, so much to do.

Eventually Grandma's youngest, my dad, would graduate from college and move on like his older sister and brother to build his own family. With all of their grandchildren in school, an empty house, and a bustling savings account, she and Grandpa retired and spent a few months in Florida celebrating and picking oranges to ship to their grandkids. When they returned to Kalamazoo, Grandpa quickly took to a number of hobbies that he had placed on hold for about 40 years while he directed the photo engraving department at the Kalamazoo Gazette. Fishing, hunting, growing vegetables, collecting stamps. Quiet, solo activities. But the house was a mess.

*I washed and folded all the laundry, I scrubbed all the carpet, I relined the linen cabinets. That took me all of three days, she said. But then I was just bored. So I took out mother's box.*

When Grandma opened the large shoebox, she found the stack of butterflies, bright and waiting. She took them out, one by one, and spread them on the floor around her so she could see them all at once. She recognized her favorite blouse, her sister's skirt, the dress she'd worn to her first school dance. She doesn't remember if she cried or not, but she does remember knowing exactly what to do next.

## **Kaleidoscope**

The popular word for a group of butterflies is *swarm*, as in *a swarm of butterflies lifts from the flower patch as I walk by*. *Swarm* can also be used as a verb to show how living beings sometimes move in large groups with a purpose, as in *the protestors swarmed around the monument*. A lesser-used, more interesting term for a group of butterflies, though, is *kaleidoscope*, as in *a kaleidoscope of butterflies rests on a bed of petunias*. Chances are you're more familiar with *kaleidoscope* referring to a tube-like optical instrument you hold up to your eye with one hand while the other spins different colored pieces of glass to create different patterns

to build a different way of seeing.

## Swap

One wintery Chicago evening, I came back to my apartment with snowflakes in my hair to find Joe cocooned in my butterflies on my couch. He looked up from grading his high-school students' with a big Joe-smile (that is to say, painfully symmetrical and warm) but he did not unwrap. I shuffled to him under the weight of my school bag, my gym bag, my lunch bag and my need-to-grade-these-papers-yesterday bag, skipping the greeting.

“Why are you using my quilt?” I said, pointing to the wicker basket full of other options beside him. “I have a bajillion other blankets.”

“I know, but this one was out. It was easier to just grab it,” he explained. “How was your day?”

I dropped my bags in the middle of the living room floor, their collective thud sending JoJo in a furry flash under my bed.

“Here,” I said, tossing him some blanket from Target. “Use this.”

## **Fade**

When my grandma first gave me my quilt, the stuffing was plush, stitches tight. I remember it feeling like the largest blanket in the world, big enough to make a tent for reading and dreaming with the help of a table's edge or a couch's backrest. I remember wrapping the top edge around my neck so the rest would trail behind me like royalty, singing my adaptation of the Cowardly Lion's theme, "If I were Queen of the Forest." I remember feeling called to choose a favorite butterfly from the three-by-five kaleidoscope but, as a stickler for fairness, I resorted to rotating the title from one butterfly to the next every so often, left to right, so each one would feel recognized. One week it might be the pink mushroom butterfly, but the next it could be the daisy butterfly or the one with black diamonds. They never seemed to mind sharing.

When I was a child I never let this quilt rest, dragging it cross-state to visit family, wrapping it around my body shaking with nerves at figure skating competitions, spreading it out on the living room floor, a makeshift stage for countless stuffed animal theatre productions. In high school it acted as a meeting ground for my volleyball teammates and me to catch up on each other's latest crushes between matches. Later it would absorb my tears that inevitably followed said crush's rejection. In college it stayed mostly in the dorm, hanging from the back of my desk chair or folded at the foot of my extra long Twin size bed, a special layer for my feet during Michigan's less forgiving winter nights. Should I be sharing my dorm room bed that evening, I'd fold her up and let her rest in the closet until morning.

As an adult, I've grown less sure of what to do with my quilt because there's less of her today.

The fabric is starting to wear, parts of wings eaten away by time, friction, critters.

Stitches fray, exposing her insides.

Antennae disintegrate.

Colors fade.

I want to preserve her.

## **My**

In our home on Congress Street, almost every “my” has transformed into “our,” “me” is now “us.” I’m not complaining; this is part of marriage. As I write this, my butterfly quilt rests in our wicker basket beside our bookcase in our living room. It’s at the bottom of the pile, hidden. Sometimes when I remember it’s there, pain swirls beneath my sternum like a breeze through snow as I think of all my favorite butterflies crushed beneath the weight of other blankets I don’t care about as much. I rescue it from the bottom of the pile and give her a few good shakes, let her spread out on the open floor of our home office. I kneel at her side and smooth out each butterfly with my palms. Sometimes she just needs to breathe.

I’m protective of my quilt, and I’m less willing to share it as it disappears. It’s aged and fragile and it belongs to me. If I’m not careful with it, I’m not sure what might happen. Joe would try to care for it, that’s his way, but it’s not his quilt. This kaleidoscope is mine.

## A Secret

One of my memories of Grandma quilting is shot from the end of a long, dark hallway that opens into her living room. It's 2:00 in the morning or some other witching hour not meant for little girls like me unless I am at Grandma and Grandpa's and can tiptoe in the dark unnoticed. Grandma is sitting in a La-Z-Boy the color of slate with one leg tucked underneath her, the other's toes gently pushing against the floor to keep the chair rocking, back and forth, back and forth. The TV is off, and she doesn't play any music. The lamp on the table beside her glows, softening the edges of her profile, blurring her crow's feet and smile lines, illuminating her short white hair like a bulb under snow. Her coffee flooded with cream grows cold beside her as she pulls the threaded needle over and under, over and under. She doesn't startle when the grandfather clock sings about how late or early it is.

In this moment, I know she is my grandma. I know she is the same woman who puts milk in a saucer on the kitchen floor when I've committed to being a cat all afternoon again. I know she is the same woman who makes the world's best peanut butter toast and chocolate milk. The same woman who paints my nails red and agrees that a tutu is totally appropriate attire for a trip to the candy store. But she also seems different. She looks like a secret, a secret I couldn't tell you if I tried. I understand I'm lucky to see her like this and that I must keep quiet, I must keep still, if I don't want her to go away. In silence, I become a part of her secret. I hold my breath. I stifle tickles in my throat to the point of tears.

I want to know her like this forever.

## A Story

*Now, this was in the 60s and your daddy was about twelve years old. He had a nasty cyst on the back of his knee that made it freeze up when he tried to walk. It was pretty painful, too. So while your Grandpa was at work at the Gazette, I took him to see the family doctor, Dr. Schreuer.*

*The doctor's office was pretty busy that day, so they started putting two patients to a room. The nurse brought in a little black boy named Sam who had put his arm in his mother's washing machine. Now, don't forget this was the 60s, so all these household items with a child's lock on them, they just weren't like that back then. Anyway, Sam was about your daddy's age so they figured they could keep each other company. They thought nothing of mixing up a white family with a black one. But where I grew up, that sort of thing didn't happen. And I wasn't having it.*

*I pulled Dr. Schreuer aside and I told him that he needed to find a different room for that little boy. No child of mine was going to share a room with a colored child. He stood there quietly and let me say what I needed to say. When I was done he put one hand on my shoulder, looked me dead straight in the eye and said, "Now, Katherine. You don't mean that," and went right back in the room to check on the boys.*

*I wasn't used to people talking to me this way. But I wasn't back home either. I married Harvey, a Yankee is what my dad called him, and had been living in Michigan for almost twenty years at that point. This was just how it was. Of course, as soon as Dr. Schreuer said it I felt just awful. I knew it was wrong to feel that way and even more wrong to try and act on it. But for some reason I just couldn't help myself. Lucky for me, not only was Dr. Schreuer kind, he was discreet too. I think about that day often. I still don't know what to make of it.*

## A Language

As I grew up, sewing became a skill my Grandma and I shared.

*I know everyone likes their quilt, but you were the only one who asked how to do it, she told me once. You're the only one who showed any interest.*

When I was eight years old, she taught me to stitch in a straight line by drawing dashes across the top of fabric squares with a black, fine-point, permanent marker.

*Just follow the line I made.*

When I was nine, she showed me how to thread a needle by sticking the end of the thread in my mouth first to make it stiff with spit.

*Not too much now, you just want to dampen it.*

When I was ten, she showed me how to back stitch so I could complete an entire quilting square on my own.

*This one will take some practice.*

Over the years I made small pillows and door draft blockers for my teachers and friends, never realizing that anything I made could be kept for myself. I gave it all away, just like Grandma.

As I entered adulthood, sewing evolved into a language my Grandma and I exchanged. When I was twenty-one years old, I made her and my Grandpa a quilt top for their 65<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary with fabric squares made from photographs of each family member. After she opened it in front of the whole family, she grabbed my hand and led me down the hallway, the same one where I used to hide and watch her rock, back and forth, and sew, over and under. She spread the quilt top over her and Grandpa's bed so she could see all of our faces at once. She placed one open palm on her chest and the other on one of the squares as if to compare heartbeats. After a moment, she nodded and walked around the foot of the bed to cradle my face in her hands while hers pinched back tears.

Shared secrets don't need words.

## Dutch Girls

My parents' wedding quilt has five rows of four squares that are each twelve inches by twelve inches. Each square hosts the silhouette of a young girl wearing a bonnet and wooden shoes. Panels of hunter green fabric frame each square, a common color found in my parents' (which is to say my mom's) home décor. My mother's ancestry line takes root in the Netherlands, and she grew up in Holland, Michigan, home of the annual Tulip Festival where she performed with her high school's clog dance team. My dad's oldest brother, Randy, known for picking on the ones he loves most, continues to poke fun at my mom's Dutch heritage mostly when reinforcing his own German identity, thus all of our German identities, at the Seilheimer Christmas dinner table. Sometimes my mom has to put her utensils down and wipe away her tears she's laughing at Randy so hard.

When Michigan's weather started to warm, my mom would swap out the thick, hunter green comforter on her and dad's bed for their wedding quilt. In the summer though, when it was too hot for anything heavier than a top sheet, they kicked the quilt off their bodies, perhaps incorporating the unwanted layer into their dream where they were running from or to something. The quilt would cascade over their footboard like a waterfall, collecting in a pool on the carpet.

Some nights were too hot for me to sleep in my own room on the second floor, so I'd slither out of bed and tiptoe down the stairs, careful to avoid the looser boards on the third and sixth step from the bottom that would surely scream and give me away. My parents usually left their bedroom door open just a crack. If that was the case, I'd wait on my belly for a moment in the hallway and listen for my mom's sleeping breathing pattern, the one that pushed her closed lips open on the exhale. When I heard five of these breaths in a row, I'd slide their door open just enough for me to squeeze through and army crawl all the way to the waterfallen wedding quilt, collecting rug burns on my elbows and kneecaps.

Once I reached my destination, I'd curl into fetal position on top of the quilt and blow the coolest breath I could muster on my new burns, never questioning whether the exposed skin was worth it or not. I'd coordinate each blow with my mom's breathing pattern, both of us exhaling at the same time, until I fell asleep. As I drifted off I'd wonder about my own wedding quilt, if Grandma would still be alive to make it, and if it would be made of butterflies, Dutch girls, or something else I hadn't thought of yet.

Sometimes my dad would wake up when it was still dark out and find me asleep on the floor. Each time he'd scoop me up and carry me back upstairs. If I woke while he was carrying me, I made my body extra floppy so he'd think he was doing a good job. Then he'd place me on my bed where the kaleidoscope waited.

## Wedding Quilt

Should you marry into my family, you will get a quilt. My Grandma will sew it for you and your partner by hand, resorting to the machine only when her knuckles throb and beg her to take a break. She will spend months on this quilt for you both, retrieving fabric from her closet the day she learns of your pending nuptials, and, even though she may have just met you, even though you might be a mystery to her still, this quilt will somehow *represent* you. The pattern Grandma selects will become a storyboard by which you will understand your impact on your new family. She will stitch your union as you plan a wedding, a honeymoon, a life, the three of you creating in tandem. This quilt will keep you two warm when the heater is refusing to kick on again, when you're too mad to spoon each other to sleep again. Over time it will remind you what your union is for even when that might be hard to imagine.

This quilt is where, for the first time, Grandma will see you.

## Trees and Bears

My brother, Frank, and his wife, Trenna, have a rather unique wedding quilt. Grandma didn't sew theirs until 2007, so her skills had expanded since the kaleidoscope and the Dutch girls. Rather than organizing the same image into rows of squares, Frank and Trenna's quilt depicts a wintery outdoor scene with snow-covered pine trees and bears under a star-filled sky, a scene that could easily play backdrop to any number of my new sister's childhood memories.

Trenna was raised in Munising, Michigan, a small, rural town in the Upper Peninsula where they average 153 inches of snow per year. She grew up in a large, cabin-inspired house in the middle of the woods beside a small lake, miles away from neighbors and the county road that connected them to civilization. She recalls snowmobiling to school when the roads were closed and spending many an afternoon alternating between a dip in their near-frozen lake and a sit in a sauna her dad built at the water's edge. She doesn't wear any makeup (just a little mascara and eye shadow on her wedding day), can count the number of times she's worn a dress on one hand, and has recently taken to drinking Old Fashioneds like her Grandpa.

Trenna met my brother while they were both undergraduates at Michigan Tech University in Houghton, another small town in the UP where they average 218 inches of snow per year. There she earned her degree in Geology while my brother earned his in Forestry. Both of their careers are centered around restoring and honoring our earth's natural cycles and rhythms, so you might say they're environmental advocates, but they don't see it that way. They'd tell you they're just doing their jobs. They served pasties and venison at their wedding, honeymooned in Glacier National Park, a landscape that runs in the same vein as the UP, and gave their daughter the Finnish word for winter, "Talvi," as a middle name.

I was curious how my Grandma would sew Trenna into the fabric of our family because she didn't share many details about herself. Trenna didn't tell tall (and long) tales as my brother did or express much of a preference when crafting a holiday dinner menu or deciding how to spend a warm Sunday afternoon with family. She wasn't rude or cold; she was just private, saving her opinions for moments with my brother behind closed doors. I didn't understand at first that Trenna is more apt to show than tell, more likely to give you her time and assistance than say, "I love you." We had a difficult time finding a rhythm.

Even though she hasn't said it out loud, I sense Trenna treasures their quilt. She keeps it out year-round, folded neatly over the back of their couch. She's the only one of us who has their quilt on display in a room where guests gather. She's the only one who has never put their quilt in a closet.

I feel like I know Trenna the way she wishes to be known when I curl up in their quilt during my visits. Rooted, resilient, rustic.

Joe shares more than Trenna. He's given Grandma more material to work with simply by being his charming, considerate self. I wondered what Grandma would see in him. I wondered how she'd use our shared language to explain him to me.

## You Don't Mean That

On Christmas Eve after everyone left Grandma's house, I hung back for our usual one-on-one time. Joe and I had only been dating for a few months, so we decided to spend Christmas with our own. Having heard from my parents that night over honey-baked ham that there was a new man in my life, Grandma asked about him as soon as her front door closed behind the last guest. *I'm gonna warm up my coffee, and then I want to hear all about him.*

I took a seat on the couch while Grandma put her mug in the microwave for one minute and thirty seconds. A *Christmas Story* played on her television with the volume turned too low to hear any of Ralphie's pleas for a Red Ryder BB Gun. Grandma's tree, the shortest one yet, sat on a glass top patio table on the screen porch off the living room. It seemed like Grandma's Christmas trees shrank a little more every holiday since Grandpa had passed three years ago. *No one to decorate it with, she said. Too many memories to unwrap.*

Grandma speedwalked from the kitchen to the living room, holding her mug away from her body as her short white hair resisted the breeze. She rolled past two photo boards overflowing with Christmas cards and handwritten letters from distant relatives in Arkansas. Some of the notes were from her nieces and nephews, but most of them were from her nieces' and nephews' kids. Like most youngest children, Grandma watched all of her siblings pass on. She's seen many of their children pass on as well. Grandpa was also the youngest of six by five years. They were the only ones left for a while. *Now it's just me.*

Grandma sat in the armchair beside the Grandfather clock and set her mug on the end table. I smiled, knowing she would take no more than a couple sips of her coffee before forgetting about it. She just warms up the same pour, over and over again, carting it around the house with her wherever she goes.

I told Grandma the Joe-basics: *he's a high school English teacher, he grew up in Plainfield, a Chicago suburb, he was a drum major in his high school band and studied Political Science at the University of Iowa.* I explained how adorable I thought it was that he insisted on calling my parents Mr. and Mrs. Seilheimer despite their requests for him to use their first names instead. I told her about the time he drove across town to bring me flowers "just because." *And guess what? He even likes my cat!*

*You must have a picture of him.*

I pulled up my favorite picture of Joe and hesitated. Then I handed her the phone.

Grandma sat on the edge of her seat as she studied Joe's face. She shook her head. She sat up straight and opened her mouth to speak, her shoulders rising as she took a deep breath in. She held on to everything for a moment. Then her lungs released a sigh that filled the room, her shoulders rolled back, and she handed me my phone. She slid back in her chair and rested both hands on top of each armrest. Her lips pinched together, twisting the wrinkles around her mouth. Her feet stamped into the carpet and her fingertips fumbled with the cuffs of her sweatshirt. Her head pressed into the backrest. She took a sip of her coffee.

## **A Response, Christmas Eve**

*He's not the right color.*

*He's handsome, but he's not right for my Nora.*

*We thought this might happen when you started teaching at that school.*

*It's ok, but not for our family.*

*This is dangerous.*

## **A Response, Christmas Day**

*I don't know why I feel this way.*

*But I do.*

*I just want you to be safe.*

*I just want you to be happy.*

*I want to be able to explain this.*

*But I can't.*

*Don't worry about me.*

## **A Message, Delivered**

*How'd it go?*

*I'm not sure.*

*You're not sure?*

*No. She had a lot of responses.*

*Was it good?*

*No.*

*What did she say?*

*I don't want to repeat it.*

*Did she use the n-word?*

*No. No she didn't.*

*Ok.*

*Ok?*

*Yeah. It's ok. Don't worry about me.*

## A Response, Ongoing

First was anger. From me, not from Joe. Never from Joe. At least not on the surface. He'd leave this matter between Grandma and me and promise he'd do whatever he could to make it better. Which was very little. Which should have been nothing. *I can listen*, he said. *I can listen to you talk this through*. Regrettably I'd take him up on this offer. I'd unravel because my Grandma unraveled and Joe would make a choice to stitch me back together, to reinforce our edging, to endure. He'd love me through it. And I'd take up every inch of space without ever asking how he felt; I thought it was obvious we should both be pissed.

Next I'd make excuses. Or build a context. I don't know if there's a difference. Every sentence became an effort to empathize, to understand why Grandma might oppose our relationship. I started by researching her past, overlapping timelines on the dry erase board in our office, tracking her journey from Hazen to Kalamazoo, rebuilding a history. I would do all of this without speaking to her.

Then I'd find conclusions. Or excuses. I don't know if there's a difference. I'd start saying things to my friends like, "Well, when she married Grandpa in Little Rock anti-miscegenation laws were still in play," or "Who knows what she's seen, you know? Maybe she has a reason to believe this is dangerous," or "Joe made a good point, we don't see her that often now that we live down here. So if she really isn't ok with it we'd only have to face it like, what, twice a year?"

And I'd write about it. Poorly. And share it anyway. Read it out loud to Joe anyway. Who would love me anyway.

And just like that, New Orleans became our refuge.

Then a proposal, a ring, a promise.

Another drive from the South to the North.

Another message to deliver in the cold.

Another response.

Another drive back home where it's warm.

## Baskets

Grandma gifted us our wedding quilt immediately following our ceremony. She decided not to attend the reception because *I think it will be too much for me*. Her anxiety had increased over the last few years. Small family gatherings had started to overwhelm her. A few times she'd abruptly left birthday parties and barbecues with a round of half-hugs and shaky farewells. But what would be too much for her at our reception wasn't clear. Or it was crystal. There's always a different way to see her, to read her responses.

Joe and I were married in Kalamazoo College's Stetson Chapel on the top of a hill. After the ceremony, Grandma pulled us back inside the chapel where we all sat on a bench, me in the middle. She requested that we only open the card and keep the quilt folded in the gift bag until the next day *when things have settled down, when you get a quiet moment*. She told Joe how much she enjoyed meeting both of his grandmothers whose husbands had passed within a year or two of Grandpa. She studied his face and told him he looked handsome.

We followed Grandma's wishes. The next day we unfolded the quilt, giving it a few shakes, spreading it on my parents' living room floor so we could see it all at once.

Our wedding quilt has five rows of four squares. Patches of purple prints team up to make a basket with a handle at the center of each one. This quilt is not new. Grandma made it by hand in 1995. A small rectangular patch on the back reveals this. *When you were little you told me you liked this quilt*, Grandma explained to me later. *So I held on to it for you*.

I don't remember this quilt, but it does look like something I would have loved as a little girl—purple was my favorite color. Perhaps when I told her how pretty I thought it was, Grandma wondered if she would be alive to make me a wedding quilt. I'm the youngest. I'm adventurous. *I knew you'd marry, but not right away. You have too many things to do*.

But I don't know what empty, purple baskets have to do with Joe. I don't know what she's trying to tell me.

The quilt has been used exactly one time. A friend of a friend crashed at our house one night after a Mardi Gras parade. She was dressed like a mermaid donned in pleather leggings, a purple bob wig and glitter and rhinestones wherever she could stick them. It was hot that night, so I'm sure she had been sweating, maybe even to the point of brewing up some body odor. I didn't even blink when she pulled the quilt out from underneath other blankets in the wicker basket beside the TV stand. It didn't occur to me that I might not want a sweaty, booze-infused Mardi Gras reveler to be the first one wrapped up in the quilt my Grandma stitched together by hand under the light of one lamp, her half full coffee mug waiting in the microwave. It didn't occur to me that it should have been wrapped around Joe and me on a cold, damp New Orleans night in January when the winter seeps through the floorboards and chills you to the bone.

These things occur to me now.

## **Joe's Response**

*Sometimes this quilt makes me sad  
because this quilt could mean two things  
It might mean she can't quilt anymore  
that sewing hurts her hands too much  
But it could also mean she doesn't know me  
She didn't take the time to get to know me  
It might mean both things  
But either way  
Both ways  
it makes  
me  
sad*

## Back Stitch

I'm not pregnant. But I don't need to be with-child to carry you. My womb isn't the only place I will have cradled you, fed you, wondered about you. I hold you in my mind, my first womb. You've been there for quite some time now, there, in the middle of my brain using my eyes like windows, my ears like headphones, inundated by the sights and sounds of my day-to-day, my joy, my pain.

Even though you live in my mind, you're not always of my mind, are you? Like any woman with Rounsavall-blood coursing through her veins, you have your own language, secrets, responses. So even though I want you to have a quilt, even though I'd like to speak this language with you, I'd understand if you don't want those sounds in your voice yet. I'd understand if you don't want to share this secret.

But Ruby, should you be born into our family, I will still make you a quilt. I will sew the fabric pieces together following the line my grandma, your great-grandma has made, the same line her mother made, and, when you're ready, you might follow this line all the way back to them if you like. And when you meet Grandma, your great grandma, take all of her in. Her language, her secrets, her responses. Know all of her. It might take her a minute. She might need some space. But her love will grow to include you, to cocoon your body, to ease your mind. If you want it.

Even though I haven't met you yet, even though at best you are an idea, a figment, a dot in that discussion your dad and I have from time to time when our savings account hits quadruple-digits again, even though you might not think you need a quilt, I will hold this quilt until you're ready. It might be good to have it on hand.

Or at the bottom of a basket.

Or hidden in a closet.

Just in case.

Kiese Laymon, Womanism, and a T-Shirt:  
An Observance of Black Motherhood  
(after Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*)

A friend gave me a sky blue T-shirt with “WOMANIST” printed across the chest in bold, black text. It was a nod to a graduate course we’d taken together called “#Blacklivesmatter in Southern Literature” during which we’d both deepened our love for writers like Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Kiese Laymon, Jesmyn Ward, and Toni Cade Bambara. My friend’s heart was in the right place; she wanted to honor what tightened our bond—a mutual admiration and respect for black Southern writers—but the thought of me, a white woman, wearing a “WOMANIST” shirt my friend, another white woman, gave me felt wrong somehow. I wasn’t able to articulate why when I quickly thanked her for the gift.

A womanist space is sacred, necessary, and, in direct response to the erasure of intersectionality gaping at the troughs of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism, inclusive. But how does someone who is not a black woman function in a womanist space? *Can* they function in a womanist space? *Should* they? And what am I supposed to do with this T-shirt?

*Recently, I read at a college and was asked by one of the audience what I considered the major difference between the literature written by black and by white Americans. I had not spent a lot of time considering this question, since it is not the difference between them that interests me, but, rather, the way black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story—the same story, for the most part—with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. Until this is generally recognized, literature will always be broken into bits, black and white, and there will always be questions, wanting neat answers...*

Alice  
Walker

As an essayist, I find myself visiting Kiese Laymon’s work for answers often; there are countless reasons to admire his craft. He’s been working in academia for years but insists on using language that is accessible and clear. Such language allows him to co-attack complex and overlapping concepts of race, gender, and class with his reader, not at them. This approach allows Laymon to reveal more truths, more questions, more hope while his humility positions him to only take up as much space on the page as is necessary, carving out room for other artists’ voices—and he doesn’t take or give the title of “artist” lightly. Instead he repeatedly busts it open to include everyone from the laborer to the professor, from the writer to the reader, from me to you.

In the prologue of his first essay collection, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, Laymon explains that *one of the responsibilities of American writers is to broaden the confines, sensibilities, and generative capacity of American literature by broadening the audience to whom we write, and hoping that broadened audience writes back with brutal imagination, magic, and brilliance*. The tricky part of broadening is maintaining sight of the specific, to not zoom out so far that the blaze of this immense story shrinks to a flicker and no one is warm, no one is loved. We must sharpen the flames’ resolution, dance in every light, and celebrate every shadow.

Layli  
Phillips

Laymon does not explicitly state that he is a womanist in his work. Rather, a womanist energy radiates from his words. In the introduction of *The Womanist Reader*, Editor Layli Phillips suggests that womanism is more often shown than explained. *What this reflects is the tendency of womanism to be approached and expressed intuitively rather than analytically.* Womanism isn't just the text an artist like Laymon produces—it's their voice, tone, reverberation. *While some view this as problematic, there are good reasons for it—reasons that only affirm the distinctiveness and incommensurability of womanism vis-à-vis other perspectives with which it might be confused or conflated...By maintaining its autonomy outside established intellectual and political structures, womanism has preserved its accessibility to a broad spectrum of people from diverse walks of life and retained its ability to flourish...to burn, to spread like wildfire, to inspire the most immense story possible.*

The tag on my “WOMANIST” T-shirt tells me it was made in China. I picture its possible journey. I see a Chinese woman stamping a black woman's theory on a shirt to be bought by a white woman so it could stay up, up, up on the top shelf of another white woman's closet, looming above her black husband's dress shirts that hang like ghosts below. This T-shirt might be an attempt at broadening, and this essay might be my attempt to write back to Laymon. I'm sure my story is one in the multitude of different perspectives building a larger story. But, so far, this shirt isn't keeping anyone warm.

One crucial element of Laymon's work is his regard for black women. From his grandmama to his childhood crush to Lauryn Hill to the fictional Shalaya Crump from his debut novel, *Long Division*, and back again, Laymon blankets the women he brings to the page with a love that witnesses every facet of their being. He wraps them in a reverence they are denied in their day-to-day by anti-black, sexist, and classist systems and structures that are built to extinguish their power. Particularly in his essays, Laymon is in perpetual search for his mother's and grandmama's gardens, and through this search he finds his own peace and freedom, his own definition of what it means to be a black man in America.

Gary L.  
Lemons

*I believe womanism, as Alice Walker conceived it, to be a liberatory location for remaking black manhood toward a male identity that transgresses the boundaries of patriarchy—freeing us from the oppressive racist/sexist, sexually “othered” space we occupied in the past.* Should such an invitation be extended to Laymon and his readership, it won't be automatic, not without condition or reason. Before womanism may embrace black men (and, to that effect, white men and white women), black men must first *acknowledge and begin to confront the existence of sexism in black liberation struggle as one of the chief obstacles impeding its advancement.* In other words, we need to engage in a deep self-examination of our privilege, experiences, ideas, and impressions as absorbed from the external and stored in our internal before potentially and unintentionally continuing to oppress others with it all. We need to do *the work* (and then some) before we can ever think about wearing the T-shirt.

A secondary but potent impact of Laymon's essays is an opportunity for his non-black, feminist readers to interact with a womanist space respectfully, effectively, and humbly, to

overcome their (my) self-centered (human) desire for neat answers on how to exist, a chance for them (me) to see, once and for all, how immense our collective story really is, always has been. Through this opportunity, reading Laymon's work becomes a way to access *the work*.

Walker

Womanist: *From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish." i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.*

I struggle to recall a white expression synonymous with "You acting womanish." The closest I can manage is "Girl Power!" thanks to the Spice Girls circa 1996, but this catchy slogan doesn't land closely at all. There's a big difference between a woman and a girl. There's a big difference between black mothers reflecting their black daughters' behavior back to them verbally and a pop culture band targeting one of the most influential and lucrative markets in the world (albeit while spreading a positive message). By this logic, white girls generally experience a more childlike childhood than their black counterparts. White girls get to relish their youth and naiveté safely while skipping over the realization of how their race does or does not grant them access to certain opportunities and spaces. But what does girl power become when the white girl grows into a white woman?

I look to myself as an example, and the answer is unclear. My girl power days are long gone, though I see flickers of them in in my 7-year-old niece constantly, for better or for worse. Will I see the same spark in my own daughter?

My girl power didn't translate to adulthood. It wasn't built to. White girls aren't often taught to see themselves beyond the patriarchal structure they are born into, similar to how white feminism fails to inspire the collective to see themselves beyond the white-centric structures that simultaneously elevate and hold them back from achieving the gender-equity they so desire. It seems we don't have a vision (yet) to see ourselves out of this pickle either. Or, perhaps, I just don't see it.

*Feminist as fuck* or *The future is female* might be/could be the adult *Girl Power!* But I'm not sure I'd wear the T-shirt. Pasted across my chest, these phrases could signal too many things out of my control: mainstream, whites only, exclusive, man-hating, gender-binary dependent, blind to intersectionality, ineffective, a wave that keeps crashing. Crashing. Crashing.

*Taking the term from the Southern black folk expression of mother to female children "you acting womanish," Walker suggests that black women's concrete history fosters a womanist worldview accessible primarily and perhaps exclusively to black women. "Womanish" girls*

Patricia  
Hill Collins

*acted in outrageous, courageous, and willful ways, attributes that freed them from the conventions long limiting white women. Womanish girls wanted to know more and in greater depth than was considered good for them. They were responsible, in charge, and serious.*

In an interview with Kemi Lijadu and Leah Fessler at *Quartz at Work*, Laymon stated that *I definitely identify as a feminist because feminism, particularly black feminism, is really the only consistent force in my life that has demanded gender-based liberation internally and externally.* Laymon's mother demanded a lot from her son academically, making her presence a consistent force behind his work. She was extremely responsible, in charge, and serious, and wanted her son to be, too.

Laymon draws a full, complex depiction of his mother's love ranging from physical abuse to rigorous at-home writing routines to supporting his collegiate journey financially and emotionally. In essays like "The Worst of White Folk," he flashes his readers back to childhood memories, like failing to control his laughter during mass as his friend, David Rozier, farted into his own palm before shaking hands with his teachers and peers, an outburst that got him suspended and landed him a whupping at home.

(1) Kiese  
Laymon

*Later that evening, in our black neighborhoods, our mothers called their mothers. Under our grandmothers' guidance, our backs, elbows, knees, necks, and thighs were destroyed... We figured it was our mothers' way of keeping us out of black gangs, black prisons, black clinics, black cemeteries. We knew it was their way of proving to our grandmothers that they were responsible, of proving how their womanish ways had developed into a shield they threw in front of, onto their sons' bodies. Their mothers acted grown because they'd always been grown and wanted their sons to have the chance to be grown, too.*

But maybe I broaden too much here. Maybe I've failed to see that broadening can only be done from the inside. Broadening from the outside isn't broadening—it's breaking in, intruding, tearing open, stealing. I'm left to ponder how a non-black feminist who believes in womanist values expresses as much responsibly—in writing? Thoughtful observation? Silent reflection? Layli Phillips would suggest that if I'm womanist then it's already within me. That I would be more inclined to express it rather than analyze it, to figure it out.

But white feminists have so much left to figure out, so many layers to melt down before our intuition might spark.

Laymon  
with Susan  
Larson

*For my mother, definitely, and for my grandmother, to a lesser extent, they thought loving me was telling me to avoid the police and telling me to lose weight... That was one of the ways that they expressed love, it's still one of the ways my mother expresses love to me... I appreciate all of that, but my concern is there are other things we're not talking about, I think these conversations about food and police are so important, but they sometimes become a proxy for other things we're not talking about... women, thankfully, have been trying to talk and write and deal with the politics of bodies forever, and I learned a lot from a lot of those writers... I just wanted to write our own version of that influenced by... these*

women writers...

While even Laymon questions some of his mother's parenting techniques, many of Laymon's white readers display a lack of understanding for a black mother's experience when they ask questions like *are you still in touch with her?* They don't see the strings that tie Laymon's mother's hands. They don't see how her world is less forgiving, that it doesn't allow her the freedom of most white parents to celebrate her child's life instead of constantly trying to prevent his death. For example, some white readers assume Laymon's mother is somehow disposable to him. They don't see how she burns purple at the root of her son's fire.

(3) Laymon *PSA for future white interviewers: HEAVY is made possible because my black mother was loved by her black mother, and my black mother gave me an artistic practice to unravel and revise the love, terror and intimacy that made us. I am relentless with that practice, her practice. That practice is why I am alive. My mama gave me that. My mama, the mama white interviewers keep asking me if I still talk to, made my book possible, was with me along all the journeys, and yesterday asked, with joy, "Who is gonna play me in the movie, Kie?" If you must impose your mommy issues on my book, interrogate your mommy issues before interviewing me about mine...*

My mother didn't raise a black son. But I might. So I meditate on Laymon's mother's practice. I wonder how much of her practice I might follow if I birth a black son. I wonder how much I should adopt from her and other black mothers and how much is meant only for my observation, my understanding. I want to learn and protect, but I don't want to appropriate and offend. I want to be the best mother I can be.

This is about so much more than a T-shirt.

Walker *Womanist: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." ...*

I used to teach at Collins Academy, a public high school on the west side of Chicago that houses a 99% black student population. As a teacher I had a reputation for growing meaningful relationships with my students, of talking them down or inspiring them to open up; I often felt more successful at offering my students unreasonable love than I did at increasing their test scores. One day during my lunch period, Eyeja, a student from my sophomore English class, invited me to join her and a few of her peers at Black Girls Rock,

a weekly after-school meeting led by three of our black female educators that was centered around black female empowerment. *You should come, Ms. Seilheimer, Eyeja said. You will get to learn more about us and there will be snacks.* I hesitated to respond to Eyeja's invitation the same way I hesitated to respond to my friend's gift, the "WOMANIST" T-shirt. On the surface it made sense for me to tag along with Eyeja. My students knew I loved them, loved celebrating them. But entering this particular space felt wrong somehow. *You know I love a good snack, I finally said. But let me think about it.*

My students are not my children. They have mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles of their own. These are not roles they need me to fill. They need me to be their teacher. Through teaching at schools like Collins I saw how to love black boys, girls, men, and women in a way they've always deserved. I wasn't perfect every day. I didn't always say the right thing or shed the right, white layer or self-examine deeply enough, but my students and coworkers allowed me to try. I did not hesitate to receive that gift.

Collins

Walker's response of "*the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented,*" both criticizes colorism within African American communities and broadens the notion of humanity to make all people people of color. Reading this passage as metaphor, womanism thus furnishes a vision where the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity. This interpretation resonates with me. I can easily envision myself, my students, my in-laws, my husband, and our potential children all blooming side-by-side, an immense (and beautiful) story indeed. But a single white bloom in a bed of beiges and browns, even if on the perimeter, could be cause for distraction, no matter how nurturing that white bloom might be. There are so many places for that white bloom to take root, and so many other beiges and browns that might need that soil, that space. If that white bloom chooses to grow there, it must grow carefully.

Lemons

*Against the inhumanity of our past—[black men] must create a place/space to make ourselves over again in our own image. It must not be reconstructed in the very mythology which sexually demonized our bodies as the scourge of white womanhood, but rather one which frees us to be black in the most radically revolutionary manner, to be male in the most non-oppressive, anti-sexist way, to be feminist in the most supportive, non-patriarchal way to being about an end to the domination, subordination, and mistreatment of women exactly because they are women.*

Laymon  
with CF  
Crunktastic

*We are literally encouraged to lean on black women when the chips are down, when society telling us we ain't shit...we're not just talking about leaning on mothers or leaning on sisters, I'm talking about leaning on black women, and black women for the most part when we lean are there, right? They too are being told they ain't shit but they hold us up...but then what we do is we turn it around personally, economically, structurally, and punish the sole group of people who historically we been able to lean on...there's part of me that*

wants to believe in this idea that we are so suspicious of ourselves that when folks do show us that kind of unreasonable love, it's... another reason to distrust or to hurt them, and also part of me wants to buy into this idea that we sometimes might not believe that we deserve to be loved unreasonably so in hurting black women we might be attempting to hurt ourselves too...

Audre  
Lorde

Just as Lorde did not mean for her essay *Man Child: A Black Lesbian Mother's Response* to act as *theoretical discussion for Lesbian mothers and their sons, nor a how-to article*, I'm sure Laymon and his mother, who read and approved drafts of his memoir, *Heavy*, prior to publication, did not mean for the memoir to instruct its readers on how to be a black mother. At the same time engaging with Lorde and Laymon's words allows me to keep my observance of black motherhood private as it develops, to be one of the *women making contact within ourselves and with each other across the restrictions of a printed page, bent upon the use of our own/one another's knowledges*. In their words I can grow carefully on the perimeter unnoticed.

While Lorde addresses black lesbian mothers specifically, she speaks to a broader audience as Laymon suggests we should, as Walker's immense story implies we've been doing for quite some time, striking a chord in-tune with Laymon's mother's parenting. *Raising black children—male and female—in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. If they cannot love and resist at the same time, they will probably not survive. And in order to survive, they must let go*. While Lorde leaves what black children must release ambiguous, Lemons might suggest that, for black sons in particular, they must release previously held conceptions of black manhood as depicted within a white patriarchal structure. Laymon actively remakes himself over and over again in his own image and, as an educator, holds space for his black male students to do the same, positioning Laymon as one of the *Black men who dream and who act and who own their feelings* and who hearten Lorde in knowing her son does not *step out alone*. I, too, am heartened knowing my husband is one of these men. That I'm not alone, and that our son, should we create one, will have his father at his side, making and remaking black masculinity in tandem.

Lorde

*Jonathan (Lorde's son) has had the advantage of growing up within a nonsexist relationship, one in which this society's pseudo-natural assumptions of ruler/ruled are being challenged. And this is not only because Frances and I are lesbians, for unfortunately there are some lesbians who are still locked into patriarchal patterns of unequal power relationships. These assumptions of power relationships are being questioned because Frances and I, often painfully and with varying degrees of success, attempt to evaluate and measure over and over again our feelings concerning power, our own and others'. And we explore with care those areas concerning how it is used and expressed between us and between us and the children, openly and otherwise.*

To express Lorde's sentiment in a different way:

Our children might have *an advantage by growing up within an anti-racist relationship, one in which this society's deranged assumptions of black vs. white are being challenged. And this is not only because Joe is black and I am white, for unfortunately there are some black-*

Lorde

white couples *who are still locked into white-centric patterns of unequal power relationships. These assumptions of power relationships should be constantly questioned. Joe and I, likely painfully and with varying degrees of success, will attempt to evaluate and measure over and over again our feelings concerning power and race, our own and others'. We will explore with care those areas concerning how it is used and expressed between us and between us and our potential children, openly and otherwise.*

Lorde appears to agree with Phillips when sharing that the *truest direction comes from inside. I give the most strength to my children by being willing to look within myself, and in being honest with them about what I find there, without expecting a response beyond their years. In this way they begin to learn to look beyond their own fears. At the same time, every line I write shrieks there are no easy solutions, no neat answers, no singular way to dance in every light and celebrate every shadow.*

While my observance of motherhood forever continues, one question remains: what am I supposed to do with the T-shirt?

Phillips

*Men of color, particularly Black men, have participated in the womanist enterprise almost from the beginning. No wonder there is so much for me to learn from Laymon and my husband. White women have questioned whether they, too, might be womanists. To date, I have not seen this question posed by white men, but this fact does not preclude the possibility that White men could be womanists. Again, while such an event is hard to imagine at this time, its possibility must be acknowledged and even envisioned if womanism is to fulfill its full potential as a social-change perspective and praxis, if the whole garden is to bloom, if the whole immense story is to be read and understood.*

Phillips continues: *That being said, womanism is not, at this time, a free for all. The working policy is as follows: you're a womanist if you say you're a womanist, not necessarily because you own, wear, or gift the T-shirt, but others can contest you or ask you what womanism means for you. Womanism requires that one's ethnic and cultural origins be acknowledged from the outset.*

The T-shirt shall remain up, up, up in my closet, warm with possibility and examination, a gift I do not hesitate to receive.

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## Epilogue: Stay in Movement

There's this belief in the figure skating world that the jump you avoid is the jump you need to practice the most. In my case, it was the double loop. At one point, I really had it. I could tack it on to the landing of other jumps to boost points and morale. For a while everyone agreed that my double loop was one of the biggest, one of the strongest. Then one day, I was warming up my double loop and got careless, presumptuous. I assumed it was there because it always had been, and I hurled myself into the air, thoughtless. My double loop but wasn't there, my body started to tilt, and I fell, fracturing my tailbone.

After that I never quite regained trust in my backwards outside edge. At first I continued to practice the double loop and injure myself to the point of not being able to walk from class to class at school the next day. Eventually I stopped practicing it altogether and told myself it was self-preservation. I focused on other jumps, like the Lutz or the axel, that made me feel more powerful and in control. Over time my coaches started saying I "lost" my double loop, a term we used to describe the moment a skater's capability of completing a specific element escaped them in such a grand way that everyone else was picking up on it.

I've since traded in my skates for the page, double loops for essays, and I am tempted to avoid, to quit. Especially when it comes to writing about my whiteness. These essays are my resistance, and yet, I don't trust them, not completely. I sense there's more they need to say before I can trust them, before I could ever ask my students, Joe, Ruby, or Joe Lee Robinson IV to trust them. To trust me.

So, I practice. I write. I'm not leaving the rink this time. I will stay with the page, because I have a husband who loves me, a home to nest, and a family to build. I will stay in movement.

I'm stubborn that way.

## Vita

Nora Seilheimer was born in Saint Clair, Michigan. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree in English with a Creative Writing Emphasis from Kalamazoo, Michigan in June 2008. She joined the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop in 2016 to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction and become the Associate Editor of *Bayou Magazine* in 2017.