



with lightness & darkness

AND OTHER BRIEF PIECES

DIANA ARTERIAN



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& DARKNESS
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#94

ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

I have trouble writing about race. When I say that, I mean what most white people mean when they make such a statement—I have trouble writing about races including my own. When I say “I have trouble,” I mean I feel troubled. How this trouble is braided with my privilege is undeniable. ARRANGEMENT OF PARTS, from which this chapbook is an excerpt, circles the braid, while concurrently orbiting experiences shared with my Pakistani-American partner of 11 years. Over these 11 years he has increasingly become considered the face of the enemy here in the U.S. and abroad. This country (and, indeed, most of the world) hands me an incredible amount of power and agency as a white, middle-class, hetero, cis-gender, and physically and mentally able person. This country oppresses me as a woman living in a patriarchy. I am deeply in love with a man of color who loves me in return. Our realities and how these realities manifest in our life together, our attempts to hash out the complicated nature of our interracial relationship, is the lynchpin of *With Lightness & Darkness and Other Brief Pieces*.

This lynchpin, however, didn’t reveal itself for some time. For years it was a kind of feeling in the dark, with some abrupt flashes of light on what the text—what I—was doing, and what I needed to do. Several years ago I received a simple assignment: return to a document daily (journaling, with a twist). My immediate impulse was to chronicle the oppression I was experiencing personally, as well as what the news bore up. This project was largely vague, with the speaker as a kind of cipher describing events without opinion. Considering my identity and privilege, there was little in the text that illustrated my stake in the matter of racial and class-based oppressions. Thankfully, this caught up with me relatively quickly,

when a misreading by a writer I deeply admire sent me reeling. This was not radical, they explained, but racist. The disjunction between my intention and the room for misunderstanding disturbed me to the point of almost abandoning the work.

This manuscript has gone through a dozen or so transformations since then with the aim to explicitly claim my politics in the text. I hope the titles alone—specifically my decision to use the preposition “with” in contrast to “on”—make this intention plain. If I were to give a piece the title “On Blackness,” what, exactly, would I be signaling? To me, considering the issues I interrogate in the work, “on” claimed an authoritative knowledge at best, or enacted colonial aggression at worst. “With,” however, allows for a kind of openness that is more in the spirit of my approach. “With” is standing beside, trying to hold space, trying to witness, to listen—to participate in a way that is as much about learning and recognition as response to events and the phenomena they illustrate.

The writer who responded so intensely to an early draft was (and is) a thoroughly generous person and ultimately talked me down from ditching this manuscript. They gave me some insight into how to proceed in a way that made my politics clear. I came away with the understanding that I needed and need to be anti-racist in bold, clear strokes. People who carry my level of privilege often aren’t explicitly attempting to fight bigotry. This silence (call it complacency or ignorance) is my lineage—it is the impulse I must confront, habitually. I attempt, over and over, to confront myself here.





WITH LIGHTNESS & DARKNESS

We are folded over each other on the couch. I'm poking your nose, claiming mine is bigger. You demand we measure, which we do, playfully, with the length and width of our fingers. Your nose is larger on all counts. You are triumphant, and shake your head in wonder at my blindness.

When your father first moved to the United States from Pakistan, a black bus driver would pass him daily and raise the Black Power fist. He knew nothing of the movement at that point—he just gave the fist salute back.

You are periodically mistaken for a black man, more often by black people than white people—in a place where lightness is prized.

Your dad jokes, *They left me in the oven for too long.*

Perhaps this reading of you is why when we are out and I hold open the door for a black woman and her child, with you standing behind me, she holds my eyes for a long beat and shakes her head.

You say it's something else entirely—maybe we took her parking spot. Yes, something stolen may be part of it.

Maybe the woman's focus was there, on reading you as black with me, white. Or on me with a man of color at all—a white woman of privilege with a brown man. Ostensibly I have easy access to men (white or otherwise), and most women of color do not. The numbers bear this out.

A dating site's blog clarified recently, *Black women reply the most [to matches], yet get by far the fewest replies. Essentially every race—including other blacks—singles them out for the cold shoulder.*

I often think about the woman. Her look, the shaking of her head. This was only one of the many things I discerned years after I fell for you.

The arrogant blindness of comfortable white women. (Audre Lorde)

∴

According to the Pew Center on the States, 1 in every 15 black males age 18 or older is incarcerated. When specifically considering black men between the ages of 20 to 34 (prime marrying age), 1 in 9 are behind bars.

Incarcerated men are often fathers but rarely husbands. They are less likely than nonincarcerated men to be married, but no less likely to have children. (Ralph Richard Banks)

The majority of black women are unmarried today, including 70 percent of professional black women. 'Where have all the black men gone?' is a common refrain heard among black women. (Michelle Alexander)

∴

You are read as black depending on the area you are in and the context of your body moving through that space. In south L.A.—sure, maybe. But at a university, where we first met, probably not. Though I misread you there, too. Working at a food court—where I worked for most of my college career—you came through, and

I noticed. In telling the story now I say you were Cute Guy #3 in my mind—one of a select few I would feel a thrill at seeing come through my cashier's line.

I misread you in that I took you for a foreigner, likely because the majority of South Asians attending this university that passed my line were not from the U.S. Your body in that context of other bodies provoking misinformation.

And I've found no one really instigates conversation with cashiers. Like most service employees, we take up a kind of invisible space.

So when I screwed up the courage to ask you what you were up to for the weekend, I was surprised by your surfer-easy response of, *Going to Orange County to spend it with my folks.*

∴

We have limited senses—we recognize this.

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? (William Blake)

Our five senses leave our world "clos'd," indeed.

We make tools to relieve that trouble.

The world is less clos'd by our telescopes and microphones and night-vision goggles. We still privilege our methods of perception. Although a dog can smell more acutely, and an eagle can see with more facility, we privilege our clos'd world. Nurture feelings of human high consciousness.

Dolphins are highly intelligent—often another animal is proclaimed to be as smart, or nearly. Crows will remember a face for their lifetime (never wrong a crow), squirrels are manipulators (fake nut burying).

∴

You read me wrong, too. Months after our first meeting, I got a lip ring, chopped my long blond hair to a short red something. I found myself enrolled in a class with you, felt bold and seated myself to your left on the first day, and we sat in those same seats for the entire semester. That October we saw each other at a party and drunkenly agreed to get dinner.

You misread me in that you thought I was a lesbian—not because I was presenting as relatively butch, but because of this party when we promised a kind of date. Someone had told you it was a gay party after you had stumbled into it, which just moments earlier had bore up a group of loud white men spouting unprompted anti-gay statements.

We misread one another because of the context of our encounters—contexts entirely informed by those surrounding us.

There is a hard disconnect between who we feel we are and how we appear, generally. That which surrounds us muddles our identities, blots our individuality.

But you and I connected, despite. The fix we pressed (press) for.

The last day of class I counted to a slow three in my mind, then asked if we were going to get that meal. You got my number, the classroom still full. Trying to break up our embarrassment, you called out, *Any other ladies wanna give me their digits?*

And it would be months before we were finally alone. My head in your lap, you nervously petting my hair, we tried to tell each other everything about ourselves through swigs of cheap wine.

∴

[T]he Census Bureau has made it official: White births are no longer a majority in the United States. (*New York Times*)

What better way to subvert the power ascribed to the white race than to multiply it out of existence?

∴

LIGHT [adj 1]—illuminated

LIGHT [adj 2]—blond, fair

LIGHT [adj 3]—not heavy

LIGHT [adj 4]—small in amount

LIGHT [adj 5]—simple, easy

LIGHT [adj 6]—funny, cheery

A month or so in, I thought about breaking it off. You slept in my bed while I palmed a mug at my kitchen table. I felt uncertain about coupling up, had finally made some kind of peace with solitude. *Maybe I'm not the kind of person who wants to be with anyone.*

Then another voice in my mind spoke. *If you end this, you will regret it.*

You love to remind me of this. *Just think*, you say, *you almost lost all of this*. You do a stupid dance, fingers over your nipples, tongue out, while I double over laughing.

There is a spectrum of desirable pigmentation. Where the poor work in factories (indoors, and thus pale), others soak up sun. This has been the case in Western society since the Industrial Revolution. In the eras prior, tawnniness meant poverty—working the earth.

My first inkling of this was as a teenager, reading *Pride and Prejudice*: *She has grown so brown and coarse!*

This statement-and-dance move number of yours never fails to make me laugh, perhaps because it brushes against the terrible truth of our near-loss with no trace of bitterness.

Workers moved from the fields to factories—the reverse then desirable. Darkness—to a degree. In the United States most menial labor (construction, crop harvest) is done by Latinxs, with 75% of crop workers in this country being born in Mexico. The need to delineate falls away for whites, so we tan and tan and tan.

Your father: *They left me in the oven for too long.*

The spectrum system is most crucial where the poor of the same race as the rich work outdoors. Particularly if there is a history of white colonialism, ingraining the observation that whiteness often means money and power.

Or maybe it has nothing to do with whites, as my part-white, part-Latina friend explains. *That shit has existed in places all over the world before whites colonized*, she says.

Too long. Burnt by comparison, I suppose, to what cultures keep telling us over and again that which implies agency (of some kind).

Any time you end up walking a few feet behind me, this triggers a horrible feeling. When you are carrying things and I am not, this is intensified.

How many of your ancestors had to walk behind white people to carry their shit? Maybe none have, just the trope hovers in my mind. Maybe my thinking this is problem enough. Assuming subservience of your progenitors. Thinking you marked by that. I should just ask.

When I ask for help cleaning our apartment a thought clicks open—the worry I’m treating you like a servant. So sometimes I just clean.

This leads to other problems. It is white guilt and fucked, and we are beyond that.

These knots twist in my mind. They breed and twist and breed.

I want to honor our differences, yet, more often than not, I grapple against them, fighting to create a space where it is just us—not what is beyond our actions.

I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction. I must constantly remind myself that the real leap consists of introducing invention into life. (Frantz Fanon)

This often feels impossible. You tell me to knock it off, try to pull me out of my head. This helps keep us going.

Any life saved in this place / is magic. (CAConrad)

When I see a spider, I fight the impulse to kill. I capture it, then drop it out the front door. One day there's a large spider in the windowsill while I'm showering. I smash it with a blunt object, fast.

I look at the curling legs with my quick heart and see my fear. Perhaps impelled by my nakedness. No cup nearby for non-violent capture.

We lie in bed together during trouble, talking it out, I eye your mouth, voice stretched in your throat and am terrified of a tongue's turn that will end it all.

It takes months for the thorax to decay. I try to have it serve as a reminder for control.

Our first date, in the rose garden, late, we tell each other everything—all we can.

In the amorous encounter, I keep rebounding—I am light.
(Roland Barthes)

I am *light*.

DARK [adj 1]—lack of light

DARK [adj 2]—shaded complexion, hair

DARK [adj 3]—hidden, secret

DARK [adj 4]—grim, hopeless

DARK [adj 5]—evil, satanic

DARK [adj 6]—ignorant

DARK [adj 7]—angry, upset

∴

After one of our first difficult conversations, I gathered my things, crying, and headed for your door.

Where are you going?

I'm leaving.

You can't go, you're upset. Please, sit down. (Gently.) Please. Talk to me.

Sometimes you pull inward but want to take me with you. You worry aloud at the woven-ness of our lives, worry of what breaking up would do to me. What leaving would do to me.

This is a recurring anxiety. Very early on you came at me with this concern. I always tell you what I told you the first time: *I would mourn this relationship, and miss you. But I would survive.*

For so long, we've had some variation of this conversation. The last time I finally asked, *What do you want from me? What do you want me to say?*

Your face shifted and worry became sadness, sorryness.

This is a terrible thing to make you repeat, you say.

It's actually kind of empowering, I respond. But it's not telling me anything I don't already know.

My hope is we reach a point of understanding one another so fully, where the outside shit doesn't matter, really.

∴

Poet and activist Brenda Hillman asks during a talk, *Why privilege sentience?*

This haunts me for months—I think about the earth and its vastness and age, how it is just biding its time until what harms it dies out.

Like it's taken just one breath in since its creation and not even started the breath out. All the molten guts and green and water in one bit of its existence, each human life not even a blip on its radar.

Humankind no matter how powerful cannot take away the rights of the earth. Ultimately nature rules. (bell hooks)

A year later I see Hillman speak again and ask about this statement, what she meant. She says many things. I take down: *Humans are just a small rind of matter, which is just a small rind of is-ness.*

Though miniscule, we receive a multitude of ways to enact our is-ness.

You catch a walnut and begin to push your palms around it. I cannot believe you think you can open it this way, begin to say as much, but the *crack* cuts me off.

Lazing in bed, our legs tangled, you point your toes and stretch, my thigh caught between yours, and the muscles feel like they can bust my bone.

These gestures come to mind when we visit gardens, you cradling flowers, nose close, breathing in.

The impulse to be gentle, despite your power.

∴

I teach poetry to teenaged girls and young women. They become tight-knit, revealing much. Several have come out as gay or queer. After writing exercises, some read their words to the group.

One day a student says she will share, but may cry. She stares at her page, shakily. The other students turn. They lean in. One places her hand gently on her friend's arm. Another nudges closer until they are touching shoulders. Everyone eyes her, quiet.

The poem's content did not matter, was not yet given. Her friends' response, their emotional attention, was simultaneously silent and humming before she spoke.

I start trying to be kind to everything, even to inanimate objects. Especially inanimate objects. This involves treating them as if they were alive and capable of registering pain.

For example: being kind to a shopping cart when returning it to the row. The impulse is to slam.

What we do to what we think of as objects.

My impulse is nostalgic, perhaps. A shopping cart is not a body.

The universe that suckled us is a monster that does not care if we live or die—does not care if it itself grinds to a halt. (Annie Dillard)

The nicest thing you've ever said to me: *I don't like many people, and I like you a lot.*

Our small kind of matter, which we alone can preserve.

∴

You are barely awake. I'm telling you about an older white feminist defender of first-wave feminists who likened women's plight to slaves' plight. *She is terrible and ignorant! She is dated!*

Still blinking your eyes open, you take a pause, huskily sing (à la Folgers jingle): *The best part of wakin' up, is talkin' 'bout sla-a-ver-y!*

I love interracial couples, one white woman tells me. I don't really know what she means. *They're cute*, she clarifies.

I know a woman whose parents are a white Frenchman and a black woman from Senegal. She's often read as Arab in France, tormented on the street. Years ago, in South Africa as a child, she ran to head the hotel buffet line. An old white man grabbed her arm and pulled her farther back, behind all the whites. As a mixed-race person, she was placed ahead of her mother.

The story ends there. I turn over what her mother said to her once they were seated, if anything. How she parented, in that moment, shifting shame from herself to those who deserved it.

Whiteness needs to be made strange. (Richard Dyer)

Not that we need much help.

Like Charlie Rose asking Toni Morrison why she writes about race. Morrison: *Tolstoy writes about race all the time. So does Zola, so does James Joyce.*

We are all marked, bear that mark up (or have it borne) differently.

Displace all reduction. (Édouard Glissant)

Something to work toward.

WITH MARRIAGE

It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings, says Freud. Freud, who simply pressed Martha's hand when she accepted his marriage proposal.

At one point your sciatic nerve is acting up, so I massage analgesic into your glute while you lie prone on our bed. We talk while I rub, then you grow quiet. *Do you want to get married?* I laugh, say you just want a nurse you don't have to pay.

[Compulsory heterosexuality is] the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives. (Adrienne Rich)

For we have been taught from childhood onward (when we first begin to read families as a unit, hear fairytales) that men and women belong together. Even if they are prepubescent, or non-human, or cartoons. Marriage is what saves the woman (rather than endangers her). Fed this shit for so long, even though I know it is fucked, I deeply desire to see a union happen in a narrative.

Barbara Leigh Bodichon writes about the laws concerning women and marriage in Victorian England: *[The wife's] existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband... She cannot be found guilty of stealing from her husband or of setting his house on fire, as they are one person in law. A husband and wife cannot be found guilty of*

conspiracy, as that offence cannot be committed unless there are two persons.

When a husband and wife stood alone in a room, there was only one person there.

In 1979 the definition of rape underwent scrutiny in the U.S., eventually amended from “when a man who forces sex upon a woman who is not his wife” to “any woman.” California Senator Bob Wilson protested—this was an issue of privacy between husband and wife. Senator Wilson, before a group of women lobbyists, asked, *But if you can't rape your wife, who can you rape?*

The *New York Times* runs an article about Muslim women who enjoy sexual agency for a time and, when they want to marry, due to conservatism among their own families or that of their fiancé's, seek out hymen reconstruction surgery.

The worry over maintaining an intact hymen thus made moot (albeit only among those who can afford it).

When the journalist asks a hymenoplastic surgeon if this is immoral or deceitful, he replies, *I have colleagues in the United States whose patients do this as a Valentine's present to their husbands.*

How many places in the / body were made to be destroyed / once?
(Sharon Olds)

The gift of puncture. That pop. If gentle, like roe between teeth.

All this surfaces in my mind when people ask if we will ever get married. It is louder than any desire for a contract binding us together.

Of course, that may change.

One white friend simply asks, *Do you think it'll stick?* I like this. Marriage has nothing to do with it.

Anyway, this is all *very, very heterocetera*. (Audre Lorde)

When I am alone with a heterosexual man, even if we are both romantically unavailable, the specter of compulsory heterosexuality hangs around me like a fog. There is some kind of expectation, though there is no desire. If we're in public I know how people read us, as I have read so many—as together. This is even the case with my brother, whom so many have taken as a boyfriend or husband. In short, in my life I often feel a third party present, a presence. This is not a metaphor.

The pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality is shifting though, to where I note two men on the street and think them coupled—then check myself, for what do I know of their lives?

I don't know that this is a step in the right direction.

Perhaps compulsory sexuality (of any kind) is the next recognition. Seeing our impulse to read relationships of any two people as romance—blotting out more-than-two romantic relationships, those whose sexualities are defined by lack of sexual interest, or the (often far more important) friendships that don't brush on desire.

I worry over this idea. Note my mind's pairing of those who touch close, hold eye contact. I work to trace my training.

WITH ENTERING & DESIRE

When our hands clasp, I find your cuts and, absent-mindedly, press my nails in. Or I scratch at your fingernails with mine, work my nails under your nails. You pull away when I do this.

It is when I am absent-minded—my mind is “absent” of thought or intention. So, empty, what is it attempting? What am I working toward?

My mother tells me of her elementary schoolteacher conducting an experiment. She let a bee land on her palm, sting her. Instead of thrashing, she watched as it worked the stinger out, then back in.

Perhaps I want to be the bee rather than the hand, for once. To probe rather than be that which remains still during probing.

This is not a sexual interest, for me—more a diffuse curiosity.

So, what is a hole? ... Maybe what I mean is, how did it happen?
(William Pope.L)

I read about a man placing an unrolled condom over his index and middle fingers. Thumb skyward, curling ring and pinky, his hand thus cocked gun-like, he sets his sights on the female speaker as they idle side-by-side in a traffic jam.

A white woman tells me, *It's really difficult for a woman to have sex with a man and, when the man doesn't continue to pursue her*

romantically, when it's clear that he wanted to have sex with her just the once, for that woman to say 'It's not my fault.'

A white friend recalls a night she thought she was going to have sex for the first time. The white man she is seeing directs her to get naked and lie on her bed. She does. He opens small packets of blueberry-flavored lube onto her. He rubs the lube across her breasts, torso, arms, legs—all over her body. He stops, stares at her. *Look at you. You're dirty. You're so disgusting*, he says. Then he leaves.

She lay there for a while, the lights off.

A half-native Hawaiian, half-white friend tells me about discovering a condom in her vagina, hours after sex. *It's odd being a woman*, she says. *Sometimes I'm disgusted. The fact that stuff can get lost or forgotten in there. It freaks me out.*

To me the shock is the vagina's habit of retaining. How cum takes days to fully leave my body.

I read a woman's description of having penetrative sex after giving vaginal birth. She explains how weird it felt, for a long while.

I think of this while we're having sex and see how odd it is, still, though I haven't given birth. To have something outward enter. And to want it to—often desperately. The intense pleasure masking the profound physical strangeness.

How uncomfortable it felt with other men when I did not particularly want it, even when it wasn't a question of it being a tight fit.

One author describes a female character's first experience of penetrative sex as “a stripe of pain.”

Andrea Dworkin writes of the permeable female body, *its corporeal solidness a lie*. She continues, *[A woman] has a hole between her legs that men can, must, do enter... [that slit] appears to be the key to women's lower human status. By definition... she is intended to have a lesser privacy, a lesser integrity of the body, a lesser sense of self.*

Some women I know worry over pregnancy without having had vaginal penetrative sex with a man for over nine months—had this worry even as teenagers, before they'd ever experienced this type of sexual encounter.

I had similar feelings as a teenager, but they were cordoned off to stress dreams. I understand this worry—the potential is always there, it seems. The body built to betray what you want as a virgin kid. And you see the stories of women unaware of their pregnancies until the moment of birth—a living nightmare.

Forty-five virgin births self-reported in the U.S. between 1995–2008. I know a white man who was born despite his father having a vasectomy and his mother having her tubes tied.

A Latina tells her boyfriend she will not abort their third child. He beats her on the stomach. *You don't wanna take it out, I'll take it out through your mouth*, he says.

I don't know if she left, if the fetus survived.

My white professor mentions in class that he was molested as a child. I approach him after, commend his bravery at being so open. He shrugs, *It wasn't penetrative*.

How can I be without border? (Julia Kristeva)

∴

A group of us are standing in a circle on the street. An older black man walks up to us and tells us he is a war veteran sleeping under a nearby bridge. One of us gives him a little cash.

Eyes on you, his friendliness fades. He points, *You. You need to watch out. I'm watching you and your kind. You need to stop blowing people up, you and your terrorist friends.*

Amazing how so few, through violence, can eclipse the identities of so many—to the point where a homeless veteran, a man of color himself, cannot stand by and say nothing. We all tell him he doesn't know what he's talking about. Someone asks him to leave. He doesn't, and instead turns to me and tells me I should stay when the others go. Become his bridge-wife. I explain that the man over there, the man he is watching, we're together. He gets a look of desperate excitement. He points his fingers at all three of us, *But, me and him ...you and me!*

He decides he and you (both Other, both men of color) are equivalents. And I am another Other—a woman sexualized, connecting you. Drawing the thin line to a triangle, giving the trouble there space to open and breathe.

I tell him the truth, looking at you. *He has my heart.*

Teaching Neruda to students and lines I have read over and again suddenly still me: *I don't know any other way to love, / except in this form in which I am not nor are you, / so close that your hand upon my chest is mine*

My body is then a vibration of knowing for I have felt this, the lack of boundary, with you. I have felt love as a shadow that enters, too.

∴

A young white woman, speaking about one of her lovers, says, [*He told me fucking me was like fucking the wind.*]

This woman is not the wind—not a cipher due to her former lovers (the man's meaning). While fucking we are all, ideally, coils of pleasure, interested in that which make the other(s), and the self, tremble.

A white male co-worker asks me why I'm not eating. I explain I am observing Ramadan, with you. He chuckles. *The sex better be amazing!* he says.

Because to deny the self in an arena for a partner, that partner must overcompensate in another, apparently.

This is not how I have found things to work. There is continuous movement and shifting, endless generosity, and continual sacrifice, on both sides (which also happens to make for amazing sex).

∴

A white woman tells me she pulls up to a stoplight and realizes the white man in the next car is jerking off, staring at her. She gives a look of disgust and anger.

He continues, more vigorously.

This is not uncommon. A 2014 survey found that 65% of women in the U.S. have experienced street harassment. Of these women, 14% endure flashing or public masturbation. More than 2 in 3 women in this country encounter sexual aggression when simply walking down the street.

In a chart plotting the ages of leading male actors (Denzel Washington, Harrison Ford) in films compared to the ages of their female love interests, the men get older while the counterparts hover around 30. Potential evolutionary reasons for this: the hetero male desire for fertile women, their capacity to carry and bear their genetic material. I realize this is a bullshit excuse. But I'm not trying to excuse, just interrogate.

Though strange, there is some room for empowerment here. A cis-woman's capacity to bear children will invariably end (if she ever had it). To be entered and changed, at least physically, forever. Our (hormonal) trajectory or drive may move beyond desire to procreate, the event of birth.

This is not to diminish that desire, but to consider what lies beyond. We are blessed with the potential of multiple trajectories, while heterosexual cis-men may not be. That drive may never leave (if *they* ever had it).

We potentially have the capacity to desire, fuck, generate—and move on.

I am probably kidding myself.

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There are methods of violation that can and do exist without physical touching, or even what we would consider violence.

For some reason I find myself explaining to a white man that I have a thick vein in the nook where my left leg meets my torso. He likes this. He likes that I have a vein. That blood pumps thicker there. That you can see my blood without pricking.

Me, 18 and hearing white men talk of all possible orifices by which to enter—they included nostrils in the litany.

To overhear a bull session is traumatic to a woman. (Shulamith Firestone)

I just stood there. These were my friends, one of whom I was fucking.

I discover that a friendly white man I knew growing up struggled with meth addiction, drove cabs at night for extra money. He went to the women's prison some 60 miles out of town to pick up the fresh releases at midnight. They never had money. He took sex instead, spent the next day telling the 16-year-old women co-workers at a co-op about his sexual exploits.

One of the 16-year-olds was my half-Hawaiian, half-white best friend who didn't tell me as she didn't know I knew him. We piece it together, years later.

Approximately 32 percent of [male] study participants said that they would have 'intentions to force a woman to sexual intercourse' if 'nobody would ever know and there wouldn't be any consequences.'

How can a [heterosexual] woman break out of the patriarchal discourse when her desire and her oppression come from the same system? (Danielle Pafunda)

People get used to living around loud noise so that they don't hear it anymore, but that doesn't mean their ears are not damaged. Being surrounded by violence and the threat of violence damages people. (Jennifer Nedelsky)

This is the accretive nature of oppression—its gathered, crushing weight.

This space, with you, is rare. It's precious. While it is not always easy, nor are we identical in our politics, you are open. You ask, *What do you mean?* And, elsewhere, your hands on me, *How does this feel?*

WITH HAUNTING

My mother and I drive through upstate New York. Towns largely comprised of buildings FOR LEASE and raised porches bowing groundward. Peppered between houses are blue and gold signs denoting historical importance. They are everywhere, some stuck in front of empty fields.

The only town not half-abandoned is Auburn, its state prison giving work to locals.

We drive over an hour to go to a restaurant in Aurora, home to Wells College. It is a beautiful afternoon, and our young white waiter is so delicate when setting down our cutlery I nearly kiss his hand.

We eat. I note how much a college can do for a town—Aurora is pretty, manicured. My mother launches into the story of Pleasant Rowland, the creator of the American Girl dolls franchise. An alumna of Wells, Rowland returned to Aurora with the intent of restoring historic sites. She created a foundation and partnered up with Wells. She was here to live out her days. Locals created coalitions and eventually brought down the project. They cursed at Rowland when they saw her on the street. She left.

It's a piece of shit, but it's our piece of shit, my mother explains.

After lunch we make our way to Cayuga Lake and its protected stone ruin, an old mill. The lake brings up Lake Champlain, where my

mother and her sister took all us cousins when we were kids every summer for nearly a decade, finding giant summer houses to hold us. We swept the dead bugs off the table each morning before breakfast.

One rainy day a few of us found a long piece of wood and decided to paint it. Bird-shaped, so we made it a pelican, signing our names on its grey back—creating an artifact. Saying we would come back and find it one day with our own kids, before walking through the rain and setting it deep in the woods.

It must be rotting somewhere. Paint lifted by weather and time, settled in the soil around it. Looking like any other piece of wood. Bugs carving through it.

Objects endure outside of your line of vision or thought, or are destroyed, but can still “be” in time-space, somewhere. Like the philosopher who talked of the color red—how you can destroy a red thing but still Red exists.

Every time I find a man of color attractive, thoughts bubble up, mingle.

The main feeling, and it comes quick, is the trouble. The white heterosexual women who exoticize men of color. Or the early stages of the Feminist and Civil Rights Movements, when white feminists were trying to fuck away their white guilt with black men.

This isn't as troubled as conscious white hetero men must feel about dating and partnering with women of color. There exoticism often reigns. White men have traveled the world and raped, stolen, enslaved women of color for millennia. Produced more servants and slaves through rape.

Or not traveled. I have a friend whose grandfather walked onto a reservation and bought a 14-year-old Dakota wife.

What a woman slave means, as property, to a white “master,” is a special horror. That consistent brutality is a different ghost than mine. There master/servant/slave dynamics haunt.

Homeward, my mom and I stop at a blue and gold sign: HARRIET TUBMAN'S HOME FOR AGED AND INDIGENT NEGROES. Despite its being Harriet Tubman's lifelong dream it doesn't look much better than the other houses around here. I stand on the stoop, my foot where Harriet Tubman's foot once was. I take a photo of the house, the sign. Why am I sad?

I go to a reading and hear a poem about a slave named Fortune. After his death, Fortune's bones hung in his “master's” office, Fortune's wife Dinah having to dust the bones, remembering them with flesh, gesture, affection. And I know everyone in that room thinks of her own beloved. Having to see their bones, remaining a servant in a home where your beloved hangs. Your “master” boiling the limbs. Yet I am the only one who is crying. Overwhelmed by the thought. Who thinks of dusting your bones and weeps.

Or not. Likely others know this more deeply, maybe have such a story in familial past. I can claim nothing of their minds' pain. My pain in response to oppression other than my own doesn't matter. It matters that I feel it, that I consider experiences outside myself and feel something, but my pain does not. Their pain does. Hold the eye-mind there. Don't give a fuck about my tears in response—they are the appropriate sympathetic response. They are not special. A white woman's tears don't matter much. At least not here.

In a place where lightness is prized.

[S]he is not the subject of the haunting, she is a witness. (Brenda Coultas)

When working at an auction house that sold Civil War ephemera, I read letters home, to wives, brothers. I transcribed difficult script for hours. One white Northern soldier's ardent affection for his wife struck me. How he missed her. Talking of unraveling her knitting to bother her for fun. How she must look smart when he comes home.

I did the research on the soldier to write up the item for the catalog. He reenlisted three months after the letter, and died of dysentery three months after that. How I cried in bed that night, mourning her loss.

You held me, said, *Maybe you need a new job.*

I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. (William Wordsworth)

In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. (Hélène Cixous)

Is my pain here more apt? White tears, for whites? None of my people were here that early.

I do not know the answers to these questions.

Our excessive emotions are so patently painful and harmful to us as a species that I can hardly believe that they have evolved. (Annie Dillard)

But I will not block feeling.

For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. (Audre Lorde)

WITH SEARCHING

My mother tells me about a fountain in the Japanese portion of the Metropolitan Museum. It is a stone slab 10 feet long, a few feet wide. The surface of the water completely still—what falls from the long lip hardly makes a sound.

The mere thought of this is enough.

I go to the Met weeks later and look for the fountain. I walk into a room and turn my head to the dark look of an ancient statue, eyes directly on mine. This steals my breath and surprises me to the point where I take dizzy steps through the space.

Eventually I find the fountain, though it is smaller than what she described. I take a video for my mother. There are many pennies in the well of it. I dig one from my pocket and toss it in. After the little *plink*, a museum worker briskly walks over and tells me that I am not allowed to throw pennies in the well, that it is an artifact, while I burn with shame.

When I am embarrassed over something (shitting when you can hear, misremembering something essential), you laugh. *The best part of being together*, you explain, *is that we can be human around each other.*

I show the video to my mother. She tells me it is not the fountain.

The mosquito banging at the window to come in for hours.

NOTES

THE DATING SITE'S BLOG...

"How Your Race Affects The Messages You Get," by Christian Rudder, October 5, 2009. <http://blog.okcupid.com/index.php/your-race-affects-whether-people-write-you-back/>

ACCORDING TO THE PEW CENTER...

The Pew Research Center put out this chart in July, 2014 in an article entitled, "Chart of the Week: The black-white gap in incarceration rates," by George Gao. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/18/chart-of-the-week-the-black-white-gap-in-incarceration-rates/>

IN 1979 THE DEFINITION OF RAPE...

I initially read this in Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse*. After quoting Senator Wilson's question of "But if you can't rape your wife, who can you rape?" Dworkin writes, "The answer, of course, is no one," 209-210. The original quotation is from Diana E.H. Russell's *Rape in Marriage*, 18.

A 2014 SURVEY FOUND THAT 65 PERCENT...

"Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces: A National Street Harassment Report" put out by the organization Stop Street Harassment. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/National-Street-Harassment-Report-November-29-20151.pdf>

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