THE FREEDOMS OF B. KUMASI

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by

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THE FREEDOMS OF B. KUMASI

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DEDICATION

TO

MY MOTHER
I'm very grateful for the continued support from my dissertation committee. Many thanks to the friends and editors who saw earlier versions of this work: Cheryl Telligman, Nicole Brown, Lacey Rowland, Lindsay Fowler, Micaela Bombard, Tofunmi Omowumi, Phong Nguyen and Trudy Lewis.

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Truth(s) Be Told: Citizenship & Composite Counterstories

I have long been concerned with what the United States of America owes its citizens. My mind is preoccupied with identifying gaps between the violent disparities endured by Black and marginalized communities and the rhetoric of official government documents and municipal records that establish protections for those within the nation’s borders. My creative work centers on sharing truths experienced by minority communities as a means of interrogating narratives that reinforce systems of oppression. My analytical approach to the writing of prose, and particularly fiction, has been shaped by scholarship and research in critical race theory. Many critics and academics adopt methodologies from critical race theory to examine the continued racial discrimination and social disparities in the United States, especially after the Civil Rights movement. Likewise, I apply these frameworks through storytelling. In invented narratives, I aim to engage in the practice of counter-storytelling as defined by critical race theorists such as Daniella Cook and Adrienne Dixson. In their landmark essay, “Writing Critical Race Theory and Method,” Cook and Dixson use a critical race lens, to examine the experiences of African-American educators in their efforts to rebuild New Orlean schools post-Katrina. The authors propose an approach to writing race research that engenders “composite counter-storytelling,” looking specifically at how counterstories composed of varying parts and elements communicate racialized constructions in American institutions. Cook and Dixson outline the aspects and potential for counter-storytelling:

1. **Provides** psychic preservation by not silencing the experiences of the oppressed
and thus exposing neglected evidence.

2. *Challenges* normative reality through an exchange that overcomes ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world one way.

3. *Privileges* the voices of people of color as the basis for understanding how race and racism function.

4. Purposefully *attempts* to disrupt liberal ideology.

Recognizing how counterstories provide, challenge, privilege and disrupt, I felt composite counter-storytelling was a methodology I could broaden and apply to my creative examinations of citizenship in the United States. I sought out examples of other authors already engaging in this work and how they approached counternarratives to dominant American ideologies. I found myself focused on the concept of compositing, thinking of a text narrative as an assemblage of elements.

I am attracted to fictional stories that feature and highlight legal and official texts or documents. Many of my favorite creative writers such as Percival Everett, Zinzi Clemmons, and John Edgar Wideman, blur the divisions between narrative invention, research, and reporting to produce stories that examine the social and geographical politics of their homelands. As a narrative approach, inserting nonfiction documents into fiction can be a means of responding to realities in a way that mobilizes social movement and political action. These authors subvert genre conventions to undermine national narratives that endanger the life and liberty of marginalized populations. There is reason to center novels that challenge genre conventions in discussions about narratives that reject isolationism, reinvent national narratives, give access to new, global, identities, and allow reflections on global challenges. There is reason to ask, how using historical artifacts and
documents in fiction might allow authors to highlight truths experienced by marginalized communities? How might disrupting imagined stories with legal documents and historical texts make space for the interrogation of social injustices? There is precedent throughout the twentieth century of Black authors and writers of color blurring the dominant structures of U.S. fiction to interrogate disparities. Notably, many of these writers insert nonfiction documents into their narratives to critique how marginalized citizens are excluded from their rights to equal protection granted by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. I argue that a composite counter-storytelling approach in fiction can interrogate the false American ideology that there is a common nationality and a universal national belief that all U.S. citizens are equal and entitled to unalienable rights.

**A Brief History of Composite Counter-Storytelling and Differentiations in Citizenship**

Differentiations in citizenship are at the center of counter-storytelling practices in literature since the 17th century—women-centered stories and slave narratives. Accordingly, a theme identified among many authors of U.S. fiction, are counternarrative texts that piece together elements true and imagined to respond to the ways in which sovereignty can delineate who are, and who are not, granted the right to life, liberty and government protection. This practice has become increasingly common following the end of World War II. Post 1945, Black and Indigenous soldiers returned from battle abroad and began to fight for the rights promised to them as American citizens. Within the nexus of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, there was greater appreciation for novels that employed less conventional structures to explore the ways in which the U.S.
fails to offer adequate support and protection to so many of its citizens, including veterans of color. Genre-blurring books like Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, having been unsuccessful on its initial release in 1923 during the Harlem Renaissance, gained new appreciation with its hardcover reprinting in 1967, in a political climate where larger segments of the U.S. population were questioning the proposed values of the nation. Toomer’s novel gained new fans and encouraged a generation of writers.

Ishmael Reed’s experimental novel *Mumbo Jumbo* came in 1972, following the 1969 paperback edition of *Cane* and the armed take-over of the Willard Straight Hall student union building at Cornell University in response to racism on campus. The narrative revolves around “Jes Grew” a virial personification of Blackness and the African Diaspora. A pair of 1920s Voodoo practitioners in New York City fight to discover the origins of “Jes Grew” before a secret society of white supremacists ends the spread of African American culture. Reed employs a composite approach to his counternarrative, disrupting the fiction with film script format, photographs of Art, and historical documents to build a geopolitical assemblage. The book’s incorporation of disparate elements undermine western genre conventions while also subverting the histories of western civilization on which white hegemony is founded. This work leads readers to question what segments of America’s population are not granted the right to preserve their cultural traditions and share their heritage. Reed’s contemporary, Fran Ross, published her novel *Oreo* in 1974. *Oreo* confronts disparities experienced by Black citizens of mixed race in urban America. As the protagonist searches for her birth father through episodic adventures that carry her from Philadelphia to New York City, Ross breaks the formality of the narrative with math equations, menus, print advertisements, diagrams, and standardized
tests. These texts demonstrate how, by disrupting fiction with nonfiction artifacts and documents, authors can prompt readers of U.S. fiction to expose, rethink, and deconstruct encoded messages of cultural texts (like the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights) that are universalizing and exclusionary.

One can see a composite counter-storytelling approach echoed in the novels of John Edgar Widman, in the way his fiction floats in and out of memoir to examine state sanctioned violence against Black bodies.¹ There is a similar approach in Dogeaters (1990), how Jessica Hagedorn punctuates her narratives about the Philippines with historical documents including passages from Associated Press articles and quotes from Filipino politicians, prompting U.S. readers to consider similar injustices in America.

Similarly, Colson Whitehead’s The Underground Railroad (2016), a Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel about the legacy of differentiated citizenship in America, is interjected with real warrants for runaway slaves from the digital collections of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Likewise, What We Lose (2017) by Zinzi Clemmons, includes nonfiction artifacts (photographs, charts, diagrams, quotes and citations) to aid its examination of race, citizenship, colorism, and African migration to the US.²

This critical approach to fiction is not about resolution. By subverting genre conventions, and muddying the divisions between fact and fiction with counternarratives

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¹ Wideman’s novel Philadelphia Fire (1990), inspired by the 1985 police bombing of a West Philadelphia row house headquartering a Black liberation group, features the author’s real correspondence with a relative of victims of the bombing (124-5). In Fanon (2008), a novelization of the life of postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon, Wideman breaks from conventional structure with Igbo folklore (8,15,25), quotes from a W.E.B. Du Bois (34-5), quotes from Fanon himself (17-9, 71, 169), and entire segments of Wideman’s personal reflections on the process of writing the book.

² Valeria Luiselli employs similar disruptions in her collaborative novel The Story of My Teeth (2015), and in Lost Children Archive (2019) which incorporates topographical maps, governmental documents and other legal texts to examine ongoing American policy of separating children from their parents at the Mexican-American border.
that incorporate nonfiction texts like legal documents, these writers follow through on a need for Creative Writing that provides us space to, as poet and theorist Gloria Anzuldua said in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, remap “our priorities--figuring out exactly what we believe in, what our lives mean, and what our purpose is as individuals, as a nation, and as world citizens” (22). These stories are more concerned with identifying sites for intervention; a method with greater focus on interrogating conventions and revealing the limitless intersections of being rather than offering resolution. They point out the gaps between what we say and what we do, and then leave it to the reader to consider how we might build better bridges.

**Percival Everett: Composite Counter-Storytelling in Practice**

When looking for contemporary fiction that best exemplifies how highlighting legal and official texts or documents can interrogate disparities between the rights assumed by U.S. citizenship, I discovered Percival Everett’s 1996 novel, *Watershed*. As a model of composite counter-storytelling in practice, the novel effectively employs real topographical reports, secondary sources detailing FBI interventions of Civil Rights organizations, and excerpts from treaties between the United States government and several Indian nations, to examine differentiations among the right to equal protection among U.S. citizens and nationals.

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3 Also included in *Watershed*’s use of secondary sources are reports from FBI interventions of civil rights organizations. This conveys how the U.S. government has actively worked to prevent some citizens the right to build coalitions that might offer them protection from state sanctioned violence (114, 123-4).

4 In *The Sympathizer*, Viet Ngyuen incorporates a similar composite counter-storytelling by injecting passages from Kubark, a Central Intelligence Agency interrogation manual (283-4, 344). This leads readers to consider how these interrogation techniques might have been perfected on American soil, potentially on U.S. citizens and nationals. Ngyuen also inserts a quote from Fodor’s Southeast Asia, an American travel
The book follows Robert Hawks, a Black hydrologist who gets involved in a violent water dispute between federal government agencies and a coalition of Native American political activists. The murder of two FBI agents near Robert’s vacation home in the mountains north of Denver, Colorado, disrupt his restful fishing trip. When he unknowingly offers a ride to one of the suspects of the killing, a resident of the fictional Plata Indian Reservation, Robert becomes an accomplice. As the book progresses, Robert aligns himself with the Plata and allies of the American Indian Revolution (130-3).

Throughout the novel, Everett includes passages, images and summaries of nonfiction texts that contextualize the conflicts of the narrative within a real-world history of U.S. legislation that strips away the equal right to protection from segments of the country’s population. The fragmented structure and interjections of legal documents help expand the significance of scenes like the exchange between Robert Hawks and Dicky Kills Enemy, a member of a Native American militia that has uncovered a toxic dumping ground in the Plata mountains and a dam engineered, presumably by the American government, to direct contaminated water into the local reservation. Robert decides to join their fight and explains that he feels an ethical responsibility to respond to the potential murder of dozens of people. Dicky corrects him:

“‘You can’t murder Indians,’” Dicky said.

“What?”

“‘Murder is a legal concept. You can kill an Indian, but you can’t murder one. You’ve got to have a law against it before it’s murder’” (187).

guide (147). Nguyen uses the passage to illustrate how the U.S. has helped produce and disseminate narratives that have attempted to define the identities of people of color around the world.
In Dicky’s estimation, Robert may feel a moral obligation to aid the Plata Reservation but it is not a result of an ethical imperative established by social contracts agreed to by citizens and ruling powers. Dicky identifies a gap between American rhetoric about equal rights to protection and the absence of legal documentation which extends those rights to his population. He inhabits a position within a country without laws that promise him safety. This position embodies the Homo Sacer as defined by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben examines the notion of humankind as a political animal. Drawing from Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics, Walter Benjamin’s focus on mere life, Carl Schmitt’s thoughts on the state of exception, and Hannah Arendt’s notion of statelessness, Agamben reflects on sovereignty as the political animal’s exercise of power over life. He explains the phenomenon of treating specific groups within a society as exceptions—Homo Sacer, taken from Roman law, a figure who is banned and may be killed by anybody. As Agamben writes:

> He has been excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his gens, nor (if he has been declared infamis et intestabilis) can he perform an juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is reduced to bare life stripped of ever right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land (183-4).

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5 Alexander G. Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Humans* is described as being in the “same conceptual borough as Agamben’s bare life,” but calls on Black Studies to provide explanations of how “techniques of domination, dispossession, expropriation, and violence are predicated upon the hierarchical ordering of racial, gender, sexual, economic, religious, and national differences” (1-3). Weheliye’s work explores how “blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot” (3).
Agamben’s words elaborate the concept of differentiated citizenship, expanding understanding of the ways in which governing bodies strip the right to equal protection from populations within its own borders. The above passage can apply to ways the United States government has excluded Native Americans.

To substantiate the claim that Native Americans do not share the same rights to equal protection as other U.S. citizens, Everett incorporates large elements of nonfiction. On the page, Dicky’s dialogue is followed by a line break and then an excerpt from a U.S. treaty declaring that “All animosities for past grievances” by indigenous Americans “shall henceforth cease” (187). This conveys a frustrating conflict experienced by many from native communities of belonging. Here is a legislative statute that demands a population dismiss their grievances for past transgressions committed against their community. The appearance of the article within the narrative conveys a dark irony as the characters in the novel are facing a current atrocity. In Watershed, Everett uses excerpts from treaties between the United States government and various Indian nations to highlight how laws that define native rights to protection as inalienable and indefeasible also reinforce differentiations between, what Agamben would refer to as, active and passive citizenship. Take for example, the following article that appears within the novel:

Article 11. The aforesaid tribe acknowledges its dependence on the Government of the United States, and promises to be friendly with all the citizens thereof, and to commit no depredations or other violence upon such citizens. And should any one or more violate this pledge, and the fact be proved to the satisfaction of the President, the property shall be returned, or, in default thereof, or if injured or destroyed, compensation may be made by the Government out of the annuities.
aforesaid tribe is hereby bound to deliver such offenders to the proper authorities for trial and punishment, and are held responsible, in its tribal capacity to make reparations for depredations so committed (48-9).

The article features a kind of double-speak common among U.S. legislation that aims to ratify democratic ideals of inclusivity within an U.S. history of systemic exclusion among populations within U.S. borders. The legislation recognizes the tribes’ forced dependence on U.S. infrastructure but demands courteousness from the indigenous population when interacting with citizens. This creates a division among the U.S. definitions of citizenship. The article betrays how legislation works to ensure that not all those born within the country are active members entitled to protection⁶. The language is more concerned with violence committed by Native Americans against those with more recognized citizenship.

The statute formalizes a lawful seizure of tribal property by the Executive branch of the U.S., and discusses trial and punishment of offenders without a discussion of presumed innocence until proven guilty. There is no mention of potential penalty against citizens that violate members of the tribe--considered U.S. nationals due to their birth within the country’s borders. Agamben identifies government statutes like this as “a simple restriction of the democratic and egalitarian principle, in flagrant contradiction to the spirit and letter of the declarations” (131). The rhetoric in the articles cited in Watershed exemplify Agamben’s observations on sovereignty and biopolitics since the Roman age, what he calls a “constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside” (131).

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⁶ In her novel Everything I Never Told You, Celeste Ng interjects italicized verbiage from Virgina 1955 statute in Naim v. Naim meant “to preserve the racial integrity of its citizens” and to prevent “the corruption of blood.” Essentially, this law excluded the right to equal protection to any person born in Virginia to parents from different races.
The first section of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” The legislation goes on to establish protective clauses for citizens against the state, declaring that no governing body within the nation’s borders shall, “make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” These declarations stand in opposition to much of what the character of Robert Hawks witnesses in *Watershed*. When Dicky Kills Enemy and others affiliates of the American Indian Revolution first tell Robert about the existence of a toxic dumping ground and a dam diverting the contaminants to the Plata Reservation, Robert initially feels a sense of doubt. But soon he considers the revelation of the watershed conspiracy against a history of crimes committed by the government against Americans of color. Everett writes:

I didn’t believe what he was telling me, but I didn’t know why I didn’t believe him. The government was doing secret experiments, like the Tuskegee thing, all the time, and I realized that that was the scariest part of all, that in spite of knowledge of past transgressions, I still resisted belief in a new one, somehow believing that my country was somehow me, maybe. But it wasn’t my country (140).

Here Robert recalls the “40-year Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male.” Conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the U.S. Public Health Service, the study involved 600 African American men. The men were offered free medical care for their participation. 399 of the subjects had latent syphilis while 201 were not afflicted. Those with the disease
were not informed about their diagnosis by the medical professionals conducting the study. When the administrators of the U.S. Public Health Service lost funding for treatment of the subject, observation of the 600 men continued without notifying them that they would no longer receive real healthcare. After the study revealed that penicillin was successful in treating syphilis, the subjects were not given the antibiotic. Although the Black men of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study were told that the project would only last six months, the men were monitored by the U.S. Public Health Service for forty years. The unethical standards of the study eventually led to the passing of the National Research Act of 1974 which requires researchers to gain voluntary informed consent from all taking part in studies done or funded by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (DHEW). The act also requires that all government-supported studies using human subjects must be approved by the institutional review boards (“U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee”). By referencing this real-life study, Everett reminds the reader that Robert Hawks, as a Black man, has also shared a position of Homo Sacer for most of America’s history. Those from the same communities of belonging as Robert Hawks and the members of the Plata reservation have been continually denied the right to equal protection from their government due to laws and initiatives meant to reinforce the strength of America’s sovereignty.

Throughout Watershed, Robert must interrogate his own sense of belonging to the communities into which he has been born. The present action of the narration, set in the 1990s, is often disrupted by Robert’s memories of growing up during the Civil Rights Movement. The systemic racism Robert witnesses across three decades to the novel’s present, complicates ideals about the U.S. government’s progression towards racial
equality. Everett seems to argue that the victimization of certain citizens will never fully end because of how America has built and modeled its sovereignty. This is echoed by Agamben:

...the river of biopolitics that gave *homo sacer* his life runs its course in a hidden, but continuous fashion. It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double-sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the state order thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves (121).

The Homo Sacer’s fight for equal rights, like the right to protection, the struggle to experience full citizenship, will never be realized because the nation’s foundation depends on differentiations in citizenship. In this sense, attempts to become more active citizens, to contribute to a sovereignty’s success, can strip away their cultural and individual freedoms.\(^7\)

The disruption of his geopolitical fiction with legal truths create a space for the author and others to, in Agamben’s words, reckon with, elude or deceive, their differentiated citizenship (183-4). By constructing a counterstory composed of varying

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\(^7\) As an example, throughout *Watershed*, Robert is reminded of the Buffalo Soldiers, the Black cavalry regiments of the U.S. Army. Formed in 1866, these groups of African American servicemen were dispatched by the U.S. government to battle Native American tribes. The soldiers have been celebrated as patriots achieving a level of heroism once reserved for white male citizens. However, these Black regiments contributed to violent expansionist goals of the U.S. government. The Buffalo Soldiers gained greater recognition, differentiating themselves as active citizens at the expense of Native American lives and other minorities residing within American borders. Members of the Plata Reservation ask Robert if he is a Buffalo Soldier, questioning his allegiance to a nation that has a history of using him as a tool for conquest over other people of color (35, 53, 69).
disparate nonfiction elements, Everett can reflect common truths experienced by many Black and Indigenous people of color residents of the U.S. through the implementation of a composite counterstory, Everett can interrogate his relationship with national powers that demand allegiance while exposing him and other marginalized people to unconditioned threats of death.

**Composite Counter-Storytelling in The Freedoms of B. Kumasi**

My dissertation is a literary coming-of-age novel titled *The Freedoms of B. Kumasi*. The narrative follows a teenager in the United States who struggles to reconcile the myth of American exceptionalism and his experience as a young, black, West African immigrant. After the unexpected death of his dad, the young Ghanaian seeks consolation in found issues of *The Saturday Evening Post* and the illustrations of his father’s favorite artist, Norman Rockwell. This project responds to noted absences in African American Literature: texts that explore the issue of increasing African immigration to the USA against the frame of American idealism. These migrations demand new conceptualizations of the diaspora, multifaceted stories. How do contemporary immigrant narratives complicate what it means to be African or African American, and how does transnationality shape conflicts of intraracial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic difference? This dissertation focuses on multiple beings of citizenship, emphasizing complexity and situatedness. *The Freedoms of B. Kumasi* examines clashes between cultural tradition and globalization, alienation and exile.

Attempting to better understand and deploy composite counter-storytelling techniques within my novel, I considered ways to pull together varied texts and narratives
into a shared space on the page that would allow for more nuanced and expansive reflections on nationality, class and location. Through the inclusion of Rockwell paintings, real advertisements taken from the *Saturday Evening Post* and U.S. legal documents, my aim is to prompt interrogation of American idealism and the histories of assimilation that frame increased migration to the United States in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

My critical approach to fiction is exemplified in a scene in which the protagonist, Ben, and his mother complete a U.S. Naturalization ceremony to become citizens. Ben narrates the moment using a communal *we*, signifying how this is an experience shared by many.

We start with the national anthem. Many of us mumble through the words. There are about fifty of us, immigrants. We are from over thirteen countries. We’re instructed to stand as a U.S. Magistrate reads from a list of nations, recognizing the places we come from: Brazil, Columbia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, France, India, Norway, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Laos, Burkina Faso, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Turkey and Ghana. We clap for those told to stand after each nation is called. The Magistrate tells us, “Today you will be denying allegiance to the government of another nation, but this does not mean you must give up your love for that country you are from.” Many of us rise and drop our heads to this in agreement (162).

The scene continues with a district Judge leading the group of immigrants in taking the U.S. Oath of Citizenship, which I include in its entirety. It is presented as follows:
We repeat after him.... *I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen;*

Somewhere in the rear of the small auditorium a fussy baby whines on the verge of a full tantrum. *That I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law;* Some of us study the tiny flag in our hands. We consider the red, white and blue. Each of us has memorized the symbolism of these colors. We know that these hues are meant to convey the blood of America, its hardiness and valor, the country’s consciousness, pure as fresh fallen snow, and commitment as deep as an ocean trench to vigilance, perseverance, and justice. *that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law;* But each of us can’t help but see more than images intended by America’s founders. Looking at our tiny copies of the American flag, many of us can’t help but think about how its colors and patterns reflect the national symbols we’ve left behind; how one of those crimson bars could be like the blood spilled for our former country’s independence; how removing forty-nine of those stars and painting the remaining one black could turn it into a symbol of a different kind of freedom. What if lines were removed, painted new colors, maybe yellow or green? *that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law;* A woman coughs loudly on the south side of the room. If she missed reciting a section of the oath, will she still get her citizenship like the rest of
and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God. Although we have been told that we could avoid the “so help me God”, this is the part mom repeats the loudest, a few stray tears streaking from the corners of her eyes. She pulls her palms together and brings the steeple of her hands to her lips. The small flag is locked between her fingers. She prays, no one else can hear the details of it, what she says to God is covered by the soft shush of whispers.

“You are now citizens,” the District Judge says, “I invite you all to put your right hand over your heart for your first pledge of allegiance as true Americans” (163).

Here my intention is a kind of dual disruption. The Oath of Citizenship is more than an item of ceremony. It is a legal document that plays an integral part in the naturalization of people who are not born into U.S. Citizenship. By including this legal text in its entirety, I am highlighting its rhetoric and how it claims a kind of inclusivity that demands a denying of allegiance to any other nation or Sovereignty but offers no claims to rights or privileges pertaining thereto; there is no communication of protections granted to these new citizens. By interjecting expositional prose throughout the inclusion of the oath, its recitation, it reflects a conflict many marginalized citizens experience. In the scene, pledges to America are disrupted by their everyday experiences and aspects of their cultural identity. The page, a large block of text with no visual break, reflects the tensions between the nuances and multitudes of self and the ideal citizen America asks one to be. These conflicts and tensions are brought together in the scene, in a shared space on paper contributing to a broader understanding of the complexities of nationhood. It is a rejection of a full assimilation into
an American ideal of common nationality with a unified belief system. This
counternarrative is meant to illustrate the nuances of U.S. naturalization. A similar story
reported or observed from the perspective of a dominant white colonial culture would not
have the same depth. If the scene was told from a first-person perspective of the District
Judge, or even a distant third-person point of view, it might have reinforced a national
patriotism grounded in white hegemony. Instead, the composite story-telling has greater
potential to privilege voices that are often withheld. This style choice aids in critiquing
citizenship, breaking apart the rhetoric of this oath with the fictionalized realities of these
individuals.

Having studied examples of how composite counter-storytelling approaches have
benefited contemporary multicultural narratives concerned with citizenship, I explored
other fields of cultural and literary criticism to build a more extensive definition of the
method I’m attempting in my novel. I have recognized a considerable overlap in theme and
concepts between theorists of critical race studies, queer theory, and postcolonial
scholarship. Author and critical theorist Homi Bhabha’s perspective on hybridity featured
in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford--published in 1990, expands the concept of
composite storytelling. Bhabha says, “The notion of hybridity [...] is about the fact that in
any particular political struggle, new sites are always being opened up, and if you keep
referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in
them fully and productively and creatively” (216). This feels deftly applicable to written
narratives as sites of intervention. Hybridization, like the disruption of fiction with
nonfiction texts, can productively explore blurry struggles for equal rights among varying,
and blending, communities of citizenship.
I aim for *The Freedoms of B. Kumasi* to be viewed as an assemblage, as defined by Anzaldúa, contemporary philosopher Michael DeLanda, and theorist Jasbir Puar. In this scene I attempt to, “encompass not only ongoing attempts to destabilize identities and grids, but also the forces that continue to mandate and enforce them” (Puar 63). African American Studies professor Alexander G. Weheliye, drawing on DeLanda argues that “assemblages are inherently productive, entering into polyvalent becomings to produce and give expression to previously nonexistent realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, ideas, and so on” (*Habeas*, 43). 8 In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the origins of assemblage as a theoretical framework, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari stress the situatedness and the indeterminacy of identity; that there is no way to objectively demarcate gender, class, race or nationality. Despite the existence of documents like the U.S. Constitution and the Oath of Citizenship that attempt to delineate the national framework of a government and its citizens, works of composite disruptions that incorporate nonfiction artifacts like those legal documents into fiction about citizenship, reveal these delineations can never be definitive.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon encourages artists, critics and scholars to, “endeavour to invent a man in full” (236). Homi Bhabha, in his introduction to Fanon’s writing, suggests that this be done by freeing citizens from “univocal choice” and producing *projects of futurity* that reject bipolar tensions, rejects a single *this* or *that*, a *here* or there, a *then* or *now*, or a *fact* and *fiction* (xxiv). Through the

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8 It is important to note that Weheliye argues against the distinction of assemblage texts as “unavoidably positive or liberating particularly when set against putatively rigid structures such as race and colonialism” and rejects using words like “agency” or “resistance” when discussing the work of these forms. Weheliye suggests that assemblages do not assume change (47).
practice of composite counter-storytelling, the disruption of fiction with nonfiction, writers of U.S. counternarratives accomplish this effort. These blurring projects of futurity inhabit indeterminate spaces as a means of inventing a person, a people, a community of belonging, in full.

In *Thirdspace of Sovereignty*, Political Science professor Kevin Bruyneel points out that, “the invocation of spatial and temporal boundaries is a common practice of American political actors and institutions when trying to secure colonial power on” Black and Indigenous populations (xiv). Therefore, a break from genre rules established and propagated by colonial and white hegemonic institutions can be a means of resistance. To put it another way, including nonfictional artifacts, texts and legal documents in fiction can be a methodology for dismembering and rebuilding as a means of healing and addressing disparities. Through stylistic approaches that incorporate facts in fiction, writers, primarily authors of color, have established a tradition of assemblage in fiction that allows for more nuanced interpretations of intersections among U.S. identities and reflections on differentiated citizenship. *The Freedoms of B. Kumasi* is my response and addition to a tradition of form-bending works that incorporate fragmentation and disruption of genre, breaking the common understandings of form, and in doing so, challenging readers to question specific facets of American identity. Composite counterstories that do not tend to concern themselves with the possibility of building post-racial societies--no resolution--but are committed to prompting further sites of intervention.

**Composite Counter-Storytelling as a Continued Device**
In the essay “Art, as Device,” Viktor Shklovsky argues that “this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony.” Following this suggestion, composite counter-storytelling practices a kind of *estrangement*, a distancing effect in prose that guides readers towards really seeing the subject and not merely recognizing it. Shklovsky urges authors to use craft to distance the reader from things that have been experienced several times, suggesting that art has different ways of *re-sensitizing* things. Estrangement from a subject complicates a reader’s understanding of that subject. This method prompts readers to notice and engage in a more complex perception (161-3). While Shklovsky’s method avoids common explanations and cliched expressions, the urge to call a subject by its common name, composite counter-storytelling can go further. By distancing a work of literary fiction from conventions of the form and customs of genre by inserting nonfiction elements, an author can prompt an estrangement for the reader from communities of belonging and create opportunities to reexamine those identities. Composite counterstories, as acts of estrangement, are an effort to take apart and restructure the workings of political forces to account for, include, and empower minority identities. Thus, this is an effective method for representing experiences that had previously been overlooked, excluded, and/or unimaginable by the dominant white colonial culture.

Frantz Fanon’s discussion of Black and indigenous populations in *The Wretched of the Earth*, contributes to an understanding of the estranging effects of composite counter-storytelling. He writes, “The colonized, underdeveloped man is today a political creature in the most global sense of the term” (40). While Fanon’s use of “underdeveloped man” reinforces gendered and colonial hierarchies, employing his point about populations
colonized by foreign nations can expands Agamben’s observations. Fanon also provides an explanation for the effectiveness of nonfiction elements in fictional counternarratives, stating, “Truth is what hastens the dislocation of the colonial regime, what fosters the emergence of the nation. Truth is what protects the ‘natives’ and undoes the foreigners” (14). Disrupting fiction with nonfiction artifacts can be a method of decentralizing ruling powers.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution promises the right to equal protection to citizens and suggests that this promise is universal: one nation, with one class of citizenship with privileges extending to everyone born within the country’s borders. However, fictional counternarratives that employ nonfiction elements, as works of estrangement and assemblage, reveal gaps between the nation’s rhetoric and the realities faced by marginalized populations within its borders.° Besides illustrating that “social entities are not made up of bipolar oppositions,” the muddy and complex arrangements employed in composite counterstories, “place parameters like race, sex, age, nationality, etc., into relief” (Guattari, 26). Composite counter-storytelling as a Creative Writing strategy equips authors to aid the interrogation of differentiations in citizenship and the ways in which texts and documents that are meant to establish universal protections so often vary between U.S. populations.

° In Homi Bhaba’s foreword to Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, he poses the following question, “Without the rights of representation and participation, in the public sphere, can the subject ever be a citizen in the true sense of the term?” (xxiv). Bhaba goes on to question the legitimacy and virtue of a republic in which the “colonized citizen” is prevented from exercising collective and communal agency as equal members of society. He writes that, “formal citizenship—without-equality” is an “unresolvable embarrassment within the ideals and ideologies of the civilizing mission” (xxiv).
CREATIVE DISSERTATION

The Freedoms of B. Kumasi
by Donald Edem Quist

“All the fair brave words spoken about freedom that had been broadcast to the four corners of the earth took seed and grew where they had not been intended.”

– Kwame Nkrumah
I had chugged two 40s and was laid out on the floor of Tommy's bedroom, tracing bands of shadows from the window blinds. The lines streaked across the carpet reminding me of a crosswalk. I thought about grabbing the sketchbook out of my backpack but decided to let the moment go without trying and failing to copy it to paper. I rolled off my spine and onto my knees, reached out my arm and stretched a finger to pause Good Charlotte on the CD boombox rested on Tommy’s desk. We’d tried to give the band a serious listen because they were from just an hour away, but the whiny sugar-sweet sibling harmonies of the real-life twin vocalists were starting to make my head buzz in a way I didn’t like. I looked over at the digital clock on the shelf hanging above Tommy’s queen-size mattress. I squinted my eyes and stretched the blood-red glow of the analog numbers. Rocking my head back and forth, I made them dance. The time didn’t matter. I had nowhere else to be, neither did Tommy. No one would be expecting us. We were together most afternoons hanging out past dark when our friends headed home to join their families for dinner. It had been like this since my father was murdered last November. I didn’t always drink, but sometimes it helped me forget how much I missed my dad, whenever it felt like my chest might collapse in on itself as I suddenly remembered the weight of his cremated ashes and having to deliver part of his remains to family in Ghana this past summer. I was grateful Tommy had friends over twenty-one to buy us alcohol.

I stood up. The muscles in my legs quivered like walking across a floating dock. Tommy had left to use the bathroom and he had been gone for a while. I went to go find him wherever he was in the house. His family had moved recently. Their new place was one level but big and with a pool. I checked the living room, the den, all five bedrooms and
four bathrooms. I didn’t hear anything in the basement, and the kitchen was empty. The fridge wasn’t though, and I helped myself to some hand-made peanut butter cookies.

Tommy’s parents were not going to be home for at least another hour. Both of them have vicious commutes from the city. His mom ran a pretty nice bakery, and his dad was high up in the Food and Drug Administration.

I searched the kitchen for something to drink other than tap water. Tommy had mentioned his family keeping another fridge in their three-car garage. He had said it was stocked with sodas and bottles of juice. Tommy’s dad spent a lot of time there working on stuff and didn’t always feel like going into the house to get a drink. I made my way to the other fridge through a small walkway in the kitchen and entered at the back end of the garage, away from the street. It was dark in there. I eased farther in, pausing for a second to let my eyes adjust. There was a waxed, yellow, Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. It was from 1979. His dad bought it at a police auction as a project they could work on. The white fridge was sitting in front of the headlights of the car. I tiptoed to the icebox, cracked it open just far enough to look inside. I didn’t want to bump the front of the Firebird and risk scratching the paint. I grabbed a bottle of apple juice, and Tommy appeared from a shadow at the far corner of the garage. He walked to me pulling his shirt down over his belt. I didn’t ask him what he was doing in the dark alone, but he had been standing near a large stainless-steel cabinet. Beyond the silver doors I could see the handle of what looked like a shotgun.

I asked him about the cabinet.

He said it was his dad’s gun locker.
Tommy told me there was a mini arsenal in there. He listed numbers and European names like onomatopoeias: Beretta 87, Glock 17. He told me about bullets his dad had that explode on impact, shooting tiny hot pieces of shrapnel.

I was ready to change the subject so I pointed to the Firebird and said something about the progress he and his dad had been making. He looked over at the Trans Am, said he was over it, they didn’t work on it together anymore. He didn't believe they could ever really get the thing running again. I mentioned the missing rust spots and Tommy said his dad had done it himself and had it painted just a few weeks ago. He said his dad hadn't told him. Tommy just came home and the car was yellow. Tommy said he didn't care, he was too old and he didn't feel like spending hours sitting with his dad in a hot garage, or looking up instructions online, checking out library books on how to rebuild engines, or going to car shows.

Without a transition or anything, he asked me if I wanted to get high. I said yes but then he started grumbling about how he had paged his usual dealer an hour earlier and hadn't heard from him. I asked Tommy if he had checked with our friend Calvin. He nodded and shrugged, was quiet for a few seconds and then his eyes flashed. Tommy asked me if I still knew anyone in the city, someone we might be able to buy from. I said no, but he pushed. He said I must still know someone in the “hood” who deals. He reminded me about his stress migraines, how his brain was always moving and the only thing that really calmed him down was marijuana. He needed it, he said.

When I first moved to the suburbs and told people I had been living in the southeast corner of the city, they looked at me differently than the kids at my old school, not like some funny-sounding, dark-skinned boy, fresh off the boat from Africa. I was coming from
the kind of place they only knew in rap songs, the news, and movies about brave teachers who change the lives of inner-city kids. It felt good not to be viewed as foreign in a different way. And maybe that’s why I told Tommy I could probably get us a hook up.

We left the garage. Climbed into his old, crimson Jeep Cherokee. I told Tommy to take 270 to the Beltway. On the ride, I tried to be cool. Tommy was playing a mix CD with Dead Kennedys and the latest Blink 182, and we both were bouncing our heads and mumbling along to lyrics. As we drove I thought about how Tommy and I first became friends. I was new and he was in my Math class, both us struggling to get a B, every class was much harder than it was at my old school. I guess we noticed each other. He asked me what kinds of stuff I liked. I told him white people stuff like Punk and Art. I told him how I would record songs from the radio, top hits on DC 101 and HFS 99.1, to cassette. Tommy started chuckling. “What about Bad Brains?” he said. “What about Basquiat?” I admitted I didn’t know who they were. The next day he brought me a mix CD with a bunch of different bands that have Black members. He had wrapped the gift in a grayscale computer paper print-out of Basquiat’s crown. Later, last year when my dad died and my mom kind of got lost in herself, I started to go out at night. Tommy would take me to shows in the city sometimes and we’d mosh and sweat everything out.

As we passed bumper to bumper traffic outbound from the city, I wished for a jam in our direction. But the cars on our side of the highway kept moving. I hoped for some obstacle, but nothing got in our way and soon we were creeping through the concrete housing units I used to know. I laid my seat back trying to make myself flat enough to not be seen with Tommy, but not so low Tommy would figure out I was worried about it. He’d
ask me, “This way? That way?” I’d say “yeah” or “nah,” trying to seem relaxed. I thought if I didn’t recognize anybody outside the car and they didn’t recognize me, I’d be okay.

Tommy kept pointing people out and asking me if I knew them.

I told him to stop, reminded him not all Black people know each other.

And then I saw someone I knew. Really knew. A guy named Marcus who I used to go to school with was standing, laughing, with a bunch of dudes on a corner of a four-way stop. I tried to look in another direction but Tommy must have caught my reaction. He rolled his window down and shouted hello across the street to the group. They all turned and glared at Tommy’s jeep.

I tried to sink lower in my car seat. I begged him to go. Drive.

Sometimes things happen so fast that the memory is dreamlike. Fuzzy. There are gaps. I blinked and Tommy had spun the car to the other side of the street. My car window opened to the crew standing on the corner. Marcus moved closer. He came up to the car, rested his hand on the window, leaned forward and spoke to me, called me by the nickname he once gave me, 'Motherboy.' He asked me how I’d been. I told him, “Alright.” Marcus said he had heard about my dad, “Heard they shot him in his taxi not too far from here. Sorry for your loss.” I thanked him. “What are you doing around here?” Tommy cut in, told Marcus we were looking for weed, a lot of it. Marcus laughed. He said he could help us out, and he got into the backseat of Tommy’s Jeep and told us where to go. He gave us directions to the apartment complex where I used to live, where Marcus still lived.

It had been a few years. Everything was a lot brighter than I had remembered. I remembered the neighborhood always smelling like piss and sour dairy, like the stink around warm dumpsters. But it didn’t smell like that when we all got out. The brick
buildings weren’t as stained or grimy. There weren’t as many black spots of old gum speckling the sidewalk. Not as many cracks in the concrete and asphalt.

Marcus talked as he led the way, mostly to Tommy.

Marcus pointed out a spot in the courtyard where he had to pull some boys off me when I decided to try to fight one of them for playing keep-away with one of my sketchbooks. Marcus went on about how he was always looking out for me like that, and how I would have had fewer problems if I had just listened to him more. We entered my old building, I looked at the stairwell that led upstairs to the third floor where my family used to stay. I thought about who might be living there now. I wondered if they were happy here like we had been sometimes. Marcus led us to a unit at the farthest corner of the first floor. In all the years I had known him, I’d never seen where he lived. But when we got in there, I didn’t see his mom or little sister, just two other guys I didn’t know. They looked older than Marcus and they didn’t smile or even turn away from what they were watching on the living room TV. I couldn’t see the screen, but I heard D.C. Go-Go beats and guessed it probably was a music video.

Marcus led Tommy and I into a room, closed the door behind us and asked how much we needed. I was shuffling my feet and cracking my knuckles. Tommy asked if Marcus had $100 worth, said he didn’t want to wipe out Marcus’ supply. Marcus laughed. He walked over to a closet. He opened it, knelt inside and pulled out a canvas shopping bag. He reached in and removed two bricks of weed. “I got you,” he said, and clapped the stacks together. Marcus started bragging about his connections. He was speaking to Tommy, but he was looking at me. There was a bare twin mattress pushed against a wall of the room. I took a seat on the bed while Tommy stayed standing. We watched Marcus
prep a zip-lock bag of pot on his dresser, breaking and weighing pinched piles of marijuana. Marcus finished, passed Tommy the baggie and asked for payment. The two of them started arguing about how much it should be. Marcus demanded more money than Tommy thought the bag was worth. I could see veins rising in their necks as they both tried to hold back the urge to start yelling. Tommy kept saying no, argued $100 wasn’t fair for the amount. I noticed that Marcus was shorter than Tommy by several inches. But Marcus moved closer, got louder, told me to tell Tommy to show respect. Marcus slapped the small bag of weed to Tommy’s chest, told him to give the cash and go, threatened to call for the guys waiting in the living room.

And then Tommy raised his right arm and at the end of it was a revolver aimed straight at Marcus’ head. Marcus asked what the hell Tommy planned to do. He said Tommy didn’t have the nerve to shoot anybody, but I’d never seen Tommy’s face so cold. There was no fear. He stared at Marcus as if killing him would be easy. And then Tommy pulled back the hammer of the gun without blinking. His mouth twitched a smile as he moved to press the short barrel of the gun against Marcus’ forehead.

My back was wet with sweat. There wasn’t enough air around me. But Marcus laughed and promised Tommy if he pulled the trigger, he had better kill him because, if not, there’d be no place Tommy, or I, could hide. Then Tommy laughed too, and his laugh scared me. Tommy instructed him to get on his knees. Marcus did it slowly, shaking his head. Tommy told me to grab the canvas bag full of marijuana pulled from the closet. I shook my head. Said, “No.” Marcus warned me not to do it. Tommy said he was serious.

I picked up the bag.

It weighed a little less than my dad’s ashes.
Tommy let three shots go.

I had already started running after the first bang.

I don’t remember everything that happened next.

I relive it.

I’m there again.

I’m still there.

The ringing of the gunshots followed me out of the apartment, through the hallway, out the building and into the parking lot. The ringing was so loud I could barely see, just blurs of rusted metal, redbrick and grey concrete. I ran and then I was back with Tommy in his old Jeep. Flashes: shouting, coughing, and the screech of tires racing us away. The ringing stuck in my ears. I still hear it.
Freedom from Fear
Norman Rockwell
(c.1943)
Oil on Canvas
116.2 cm x 90.2 cm
Tommy calls over to me from the driver’s seat.

“Benny?”

But I pretend not to hear him over the rush of wind pouring in through the passenger side windows. I’m looking out at rural roads that bleed through the suburbs and cities, twisting, grey, veins bordered by pastures and woods. Sometimes a sharp curve opens up into acres of green, rolling hills punctuated by a single farmhouse. I imagine the lives in those country homes. I like to think the folks are happy rooted between metro areas, content like figures in a Norman Rockwell picture.

I remember Rockwell and his painting *Freedom from Fear*: two children sharing a bed, sleeping, a mother bent at the waist pulling sheets over the resting kids while a dad watches. In the father’s hand a newspaper says the words, “BOMBINGS” and unknown “HORROR.” But those tragedies seem so far away from the dark room where the kids sleep, far from the light glowing in the background leading downstairs to other parts of the home just as safe. Rockwell shows distance from danger elsewhere, a freedom from fear of a terrible death. That’s the same sense I get looking at these country homes on rural American roads.

I’ve been thinking about Rockwell a lot since I got back from Ghana a few weeks ago.

But really, I’ve been thinking about Rockwell since my dad died.

I don’t talk about these things with Tommy.

We haven’t talked about stuff like that in a long time.

My stomach flops as Tommy speeds the car forward over dips and rises.
“Benny?” Tommy starts again.

I glare at him. My hands, clenched into fists, still buzz with adrenaline.

“We good?” he asks.

I pause, dumbed by stray beams of sunlight slicing through the canopies beyond the car and bouncing off the polished revolver resting in the cup holder between us. The bricks of marijuana tucked in a canvas shopping bag on the floorboard by my feet mute me. I hold because the breeze can’t blast the faint stink of gunpowder caught in my throat.

I wonder if the same smell hugged my father in his last moments.

“Benny? I know it got crazy back there.”

I watch Tommy. His grin means no chance at an apology. The wind whips and licks his auburn hair like a flame. He lets slip a short, sharp, laugh. The remaining hours of daylight slap his freckled face reddened from a summer by his parent’s pool. He looks like a boy, I think, but he’s a year older than me.

“I didn't mean to shoot the gun,” he says.

I turn away, returning to the trees blurring past.

“Benny? You hear me?”

“No.”

“Benny.”

"Stop calling me that."

x

I’m not sure where I want to go. I’m not ready to be alone with myself and the mental replay of the robbery, but I can’t be around Tommy anymore. I ask him to take me to the public library. He drops me off at the farthest end of the parking lot. I get out and neither
of us say goodbye. He drives away with the gun and all that weed, peeling his tires, screeching rubber on asphalt, popping over a speed bump, speeding past a school district summer reading road banner. When Tommy’s burgundy car disappears, concerned parents and their young children look in my direction for some kind of explanation. I shrug back at them.

I don’t go inside the library.

I haven’t entered for over a year.

My dad loved libraries. He told me, when he first arrived to America, he’d spend any free time he could afford at city libraries, learning. At the library he found information on housing, studied for his naturalization process, figured out how to do his taxes, how to get his taxi medallion, and researched the steps to bring my mom and me across the Atlantic when I was little. He always kept a library card. He habitually brought home more books than he could read: novels, histories, and a ton of art books to share with me. Some would get lost, missing in the house or in his cab. For months following his death, my mom would still receive overdue notices in the mail. She never did find all the books. One of the librarians excused the fees after mom finally called to explain the situation.

It was in his school’s library as a kid when dad first got the idea to immigrate to America. He discovered a ratty stack of yellowing Saturday Evening Posts donated by some American Christian church probably worried Ghana’s decolonization might lead the nation to Communism. Dad discovered Norman Rockwell on the covers of these magazines. Living under a military government and a series of coups, idyllic scenes of the freedoms of the United States hooked my dad. He'd remind me how lucky I am to be here.
He wanted to name me Norman but my mom said no. I got another name instead, but my father still hoped for me to become an artist. Rockwell led my father to become an appreciator of American Art. It didn’t matter who dad discovered afterward--Hopper, O'Keeffe, Warhol, Wyeth--dad placed Rockwell above them all. A master building a dream.

I don’t share my dad’s love for Rockwell. I'm into more expressionist stuff. And I’ve got no intentions to visit the library anytime soon.

The library is walking distance to Beth’s house, and I really want to see her. Last year we started hanging out. We’ve done a bunch of stuff couples do, but I’ve never asked her to be my girlfriend. I’m just not sure I deserve someone like her, especially after today. I need to talk to someone. I’m nervous and scared. Beth is the only person I know who might be able to put me at ease right now. It’s not that she’ll know the right thing to say or do. I’m not even sure I’ll be able to tell her about robbing Marcus at gunpoint. But she always makes me feel comfortable in my skin in a way I don’t fully understand. She’s good at listening. So that’s where I’m headed.

x

Beth has nice parents. Her mom offers me food and invites me to dinner whenever I visit. Beth’s dad likes to talk to me about music and poverty and Africa and slavery and how so many of his conservative colleagues at the State Department don’t understand the role of socioeconomic factors in modern problems. He asks me a lot of questions, but he has a lot of the answers anyway.

Cutting into his grilled peppered steak, Beth’s dad asks me about Ghana across the dining table.
“Beth told me you spent this past summer in West Africa. How cool was that?”

I nod, pushing a bloody hunk of beef around the plate in front of me. Usually, I’m grateful Beth’s family always prepares more food than they need in case someone unexpected comes over. My stomach is empty and hungry, but everything tastes bitter in my mouth, soured by the thoughts of what Marcus might be doing at that moment, if he wasn’t killed or wounded by the gunshots.

Beth’s little brother looks up from his spaghetti to ask if I saw a lion on my most recent trip.

Beth apologizes: “He’s been watching The Lion King on repeat.”

It’s fine, I say. “I might have seen a lion one time in Ghana, at the zoo.”

Beth’s parents laugh. Her mom refills my water and then asks how the first week of the school year has been.

“Do you have ideas about what you want to do after high school?”

Beth’s dad chuckles and interjects, “Well that’s kind of a weird question, isn’t it? Like, hey, do you know what you’re doing for the rest of your life?”

She smiles. “He knows I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s fine,” I say, “With everything over the last year, I haven’t really thought about it much. I know I’d want to stay in the area for my mom.”

“I can understand that,” Beth’s dad says. “I imagine she’s going to need you for a while after what happened to your father. Did police ever make any further leads?”

I shake my head.

Beth rubs my arm as her father goes on a sympathetic rant about how if my dad had been an upper-middle class white man a killer would have already been brought to justice.
“Sorry,” he says finally, “it’s just so frustrating to know what you and your mother are going through.”

I nod and continue eating.

Beth’s mom interjects, “Have you started applying anywhere in state? There’s always community or tech. And I’ve seen some of your drawings. You’re good enough to get into a decent program. I’m sure a local smaller school would be glad to have you.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I stare down into my plate, chopping logs of asparagus and mounds of mashed potatoes in half with my fork. “I don’t know.”

“I encouraged Beth to start applying her junior year and she’s already heard back from one of her safety schools. We’re pretty proud of her.”

I don’t know how to ask Beth’s mom what she means when she describes any degree-granting institution as safety. As the conversation continues, I begin to understand that there are those who have earned multiple options for making their lives better. There are those that have to weigh whatever opportunities they get, and those that don’t.

Beth’s cheeks and neck turn red. “Thanks, yeah, that’s enough mom.”

“You should be proud and I’m sure all your friends will be happy for you… Right?” Beth’s mother looks to me, her eyes asking me to agree.

“Yes,” I say. “That’s very cool.”

I don’t speak much after that. We continue eating. I smile and nod politely to acknowledge that I’m listening as Beth’s parents move into a discussion about the genius of the first season of The Simpsons. After dinner, Beth’s dad does the dishes, and her mom gets Beth’s brother bathed and ready for bed. Beth’s dad tells me to go downstairs into the basement and check out the new changes he’s made to their home theater. Beth leads me
from the dining room through the living room. She pauses at the stairs. She seems to consider the flight of steps leading down.

“So, that’s pretty cool you’re thinking about going to college. You should. That’s good.”

I ask her what schools she is thinking about.

“Penn State would be ideal,” she says. “I haven’t submitted all my application materials to them yet. Mom’s sure I’m going to get in,” she rolls her eyes, “and maybe I can get a cheerleading scholarship or something.”

I nod.

Beth turns to the adjoining steps that would take us upstairs.

She grabs my hand, says, “I want to show you something. You’re an artist, I think you’ll appreciate it.”

She guides me up the steps and onto the second floor. We move down a hall and enter Beth’s room. I have never been where she sleeps while her parents are home. At the end of the last school year, I’d come over to help her study for our Art History elective. Every time we finished reading or doing flashcards, we’d make-out until we heard one of her parents’ cars pull into the driveway. We’d quickly button and straighten our clothes and rush downstairs to the den or kitchen to be discovered by Beth’s mom or dad. We’d look innocent and respectful, reading out loud to each other from our Art History textbooks, studying and taking notes.

It has been months since Beth and I have been alone together. She closes her bedroom door behind me. Her room is tropical themed, inspired by a family cruise to St. Thomas and the Virgin Island, but too many pastel-pink things make the space look like a
room in a Barbie dream home. Beth fawns over things she finds exotic and distant. I think being African and my sadness about my dad’s death were things that first attracted her to me.

Beth tells me I can sit on the chair at her desk. She shuts off the lights and then lies face-up on her bed. We’re several feet apart, but when Beth tells me to look at the ceiling, we look up together. Her stucco ceiling is splattered with glitter paint and glow in the dark stars. A series of wild swirls and streaks make an expressionist night sky.

“It’s my Jackson Pollock solar system,” she says proudly, and I can see her smiling without glancing at her face. “Sorry about my parents during dinner. Well, not sorry for them, like, I love them and I’m super thankful to have them. I’m just trying to apologize for all of their questions and comments and stuff.”

I tell her it’s okay.

“I told them you went to Ghana this summer and just got back but I didn’t give details. How was it? Are you okay to talk about it? I mean, you don’t have to if you don’t want to, I’m just saying, I’m here. I can listen.”

I crack my knuckles.

I say, “Thank you.”

She rustles on the bed.

“Was it weird being back there? Damn, now I’m interrogating you just like mom and dad. Never mind. I’m quiet. Talk if you want.”

I chuckle, nervous. “It was a little weird, going back to Ghana. It was the first time returning since my mom brought me to America when I was five.” My hands are getting sweaty but I keep talking. "I got off the plane and saw so many uncles and aunts and
cousins, friends of my father. And everyone kept asking me if I remembered them, and I didn’t. I didn’t remember anyone. And they looked disappointed when I said that. But they didn’t feel real to me anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like... So many of them have become characters in stories my father and mother would tell me growing up. Or they’re just the faint voices I’ve heard chatting with my parents on the long-distance phone card calls they’d make every Sunday.”

Her breathing gets heavier.

“Everyone kept welcoming me home. But I didn’t feel at home.”

Beth clears her throat and adds, “It must have been overwhelming. You went back alone. Your mom wasn’t there. Any grandparents?”

“No, my mom’s parents are dead, and my dad was orphaned when he was a little younger than me.”

“That’s really hard.”

I want to pull Beth closer to me, press my chest to hers and breathe her. Instead, I continue staring at the ceiling and say, “I went to Ghana with my father’s ashes. Folks seemed sad I hadn’t brought his body so that he could be buried with family. There was a graveside funeral anyway but, no body. We couldn’t have afforded to bring him home. People seemed disappointed my mom hadn’t come too, but we barely had enough for me to get there and back.”

I hear Beth swallow. She asks me to go on, so I do. I talk. I tell her about the plane taking off on my return flight to the U.S. I tell Beth about how the city lights of Accra were blanketed in darkness as the plane rose higher, and how I didn’t think of the family I was
leaving behind again, or the mother I would see again. I thought about a little girl I had met on my trip. Her name was Yetsa. She was six, and her family was too poor for school or closed-toe shoes. We found each other both walking around Teshie junction, where she sold bags of clean drinking water to commuters on route to the city in tro tros, motorbikes, trucks, and luxury cars. She had cut her foot on a piece of broken glass embedded in the red clay bordering the streets. I saw her crying by a road gutter, her wound packed and clotted with dirt. I was teased throughout my visit for having forgotten how to speak Ga or Ewe like my parents. I could understand when people spoke to me in these tribal languages but couldn’t respond. I was more American now. So, my communication with Yetsa was mixed. She spoke and I’d respond with body movements and hand gestures. I offered her a ride on my back. She pointed the way. After half an hour we arrived at her small home. Yetsa’s mother, who didn’t look a whole lot older than me, was outside bathing Yetsa’s little brother in a tin washtub. I let the little girl down. Her mother started to slap and pinch her. Yetsa had failed. Her injury would cost the family money. I tell Beth about the plane rising to 30,000 feet and thinking about Yetsa. I talk to Beth about how I slouched in my window seat, tears blurring my vision, trying to focus my attention on the passing night clouds, trying to fight a rising dread that comes with feeling helpless to stop, and somehow responsible for, the pain of so many others I’ve flown away from.

Beth tells me to come over to the bed. She slides to make room. I listen. I get on the twin-size mattress with her. I wrap an arm under her neck, struggling to control my heart rate, afraid she might hear the thumping past my sternum. She rolls into me, nestling. My fingers tease her thick black curls.

“I missed this,” she says. “Are you okay?”
“I’m okay enough.”

x

I walk home. It’s a couple of miles when I cut through the country club golf course separating the larger freestanding homes from the townhouses without sprawling lawns. I like strolling the green. It’s quiet. I dodge sprinklers, picking up lost balls and tossing them into ponds or pushing them deep into sand traps. I enjoy hiding things, knowing something exists in places others can’t find.

I’m here, shuffling across the manicured grass and rubbing beads of hair at the back of my neck. The familiar feel between my fingertips comforts me. Maybe I could be the same person after today. Maybe Tommy could still be who I thought he was too.

Last spring, Tommy and his girlfriend, Murry, me and Beth, got drunk and high and stumbled onto the golf course one night. We fell onto our backs bumbling into each other, laughing. We looked up and we all saw a scratch across the sky, like God dragging a key across the navy blue. Soon the scratch was followed by another and another and soon the night opened up into a meteor shower. We giggled between silences, stunned by those falling stars spinning above us like a mobile above our crib. I felt a hand fumble for mine against the damp grass, and I reached out too, we clasped fingers, me and them, and I remember not feeling so alone or angry or afraid, like I didn’t always have to be just me, I could also be a part of an US. When we all started complaining about the shivering cold, the hand pulled away. The others started climbing to their feet. Tommy helped me up. Our small group began heading home in different directions. Before Tommy left, he hugged me and said, “I’m sorry your dad was murdered.” And it was the first time I had heard the
word, *murder*, mentioned with my loss and didn’t feel a frenzied panic explode in my lungs. It was the first hint that there would eventually be a time after all the mourning.

x

The rented townhouse I share with my mother is dark--no welcoming light left on by the front door, no glow from the outside on either floor. I push through the privacy fence around the small overgrown yard. It whistles and creaks behind me. Blades tickle my legs through my jeans, stepping through the calf-tall grass. The yard is supposed to be my responsibility, but I’ve ignored weed-whacking and trimming the grass like many of my other duties around the house. At the front door, I look up to the second floor, checking to see if the squeaking gate might have called my mother's attention to her bedroom window. There is no silhouette against the blinds.

I don’t bother removing the house key from my pocket. Over the last year, my mother has developed a habit of leaving the door unlocked. I think it’s a response to the randomness of tragedy. My mom leaving the door unlocked is like an invitation to an uncaring universe to do its worst. If thieves and killers wanted to come in and take everything, whatever. My mom would face a cruel world with indifference.

I creep through the quiet house, taking off my shoes and then shuffling through the shadows to the kitchen. I fill a glass with tap water and head upstairs. On the second floor, hurried, hushed, voices and muscle memory guide me to a flickering light cutting through the black--the twinkling vertical slash not unlike those comets I once watched slicing through a night sky with my friends. Moving to the line of light, I raise a hand to push through a cracked open door and the dark opens into my mom’s bedroom. My mother is snoring, mouth wide open, on top of the comforter and covers of the bed she used to share
with my father. A nineteen-inch tube television perched on the dresser puts the space in dancing blue light. A friend at the grocery store where mom works, upgraded to flat-screen and gave my mom their old TV set. My father hated television. He’d never allow a TV in any of the bedrooms. But he’s gone now. On the screen are two middle-aged, white, women discussing a device that would make chopping fruits and vegetables as easy as a snap. It’s convenient and cheap: free shipping and handling to one’s front door with a few monthly payments of $19.95. A bargain for something of much greater value. I’ve been curious about my mother’s recent attraction to infomercials and home shopping channels. I asked her about it once. She said the women on the screen sounded nice and looked happy. Very different than the women who came into the grocery store everyday frowning as they reached for the ready-made dinners my mother and her coworkers prepare in the Home Meal Replacement area.

I walk over to the bedside table and place the glass of water for my mom to find when she wakes up. She’ll be getting out of bed in a few hours to start her early morning shift at 4:30, to turn on the fryer and change the oil, preheat the ovens and power on the rotisseries, unload and unbox the carryout containers.

I scan my mother. She looks tired even while dreaming. I grab a knit blanket folded at the end of the bed. She sleeps on top of the covers, never underneath. My father was the last one to change the sheets and make the bed. This past summer while I was away in Ghana, mom started sleeping on the bed again. Before that, she spent months on the living room couch.

I shake the blanket over my mother, and as I tug the cloth above her shoulders, my foot taps the neck of an empty vodka bottle peeking from beneath the bedframe. I breathe
deep, whisper goodnight to my mom, and push the bottle further under the bed with the tip of my toe.

I watch her like that for a while. I feel like that Rockwell father studying his sleeping children. I remember the look of seriousness on the father’s face in that painting, and the light in the hallway behind him, and I wonder if Rockwell also meant to remind observers that looming threats will always exist. There is no total security, no perfect distance. I think about the ways freedom from fear is not freedom from worry, sneaking out of the bedroom to another dark part of the house.
Some have trouble resisting the urge to turn their dead into saints. I remember my father as human and complicated. He believed in giving more than he took. But he still took, especially if he thought his taking was meaningful. This is something I’ve been learning about my dad while sorting through the objects he’s left behind. Among the possessions he left behind is a scrapbook of clippings torn and cut from issues of the Saturday Evening Post. The scrapbook isn’t organized. I can’t find a clear connection between the random articles, print advertisements and magazine covers my father has collected. Flipping through the scrapbook pages, I imagine dad hidden behind a study carrel or a row of book stacks in a quiet corner of a rural Ghana library. I try to guess my father’s reason to take each text and image. My dad has scrawled a date below every clipping pasted into his book. What did he experience on the thirteenth of January 1972, and how could it relate to a published letter from Theodore Roosevelt to a foreign ambassador? What is so important about a mail-order ad for a bicycle, and how can it help me know my father? What I can trace for sure in dad’s Post clippings is his vision of America, a vision he felt so entitled to he’d destroy periodicals that he didn’t own. My dad once beat me when he discovered I had dog-eared pages and scribbled in a library art book. As his open palm rained on my head and back, he called me a vandal. He said the book didn’t belong to me, I needed to respect the community’s property. But my dad’s righteousness is shaded by his clipping of Norman Rockwell’s Rosie the Riveter, ripped from a library copy of a May 29th, 1943, Saturday Evening Post, cover.
I like being at school. All the classwork, assignments and activities, keeps me busy so I don’t have too much time to think about everything that’s wrong with me. But today, during my drawing class, my friend Pat tells me rumors about myself. We're both straddling our art horses and bench easels. He's rounding the top of a skull sitting on a bed sheet on a table at the front of the classroom. I'm shading the jawbone.

"Did you really rob a bunch of gang members?" Pat whispers.

Beside the skull sits a budding tulip bulb. The other students are silent while Dr. Ambush moves around the room monitoring progress and giving feedback. The room echoes the scratch and shushes of drawing pencils on paper. Below the table raising our model objects, a CD player plays the wild pluck, strum, and woodwind honk of Cartola's "Preciso Me Encontrar."

"I don't know why you hang around with that boy," Pat says quietly. "He was kicked out of school."

I explain, "He still goes to school here."

"Yes, at night. Night classes. Are you into him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you like the boy, eh? He is cute with those freckles. Cute for a colonizer." I see Pat grinning in my peripheral vision.

I laugh. "You can't resist bringing colonization into everything. His family is Irish."

"White is white and colonization is a part of everything," Pat says. "You know, if you and Tommy are more than friends, that's okay. I get it. No shame in it."
"Then why don't you and that Liberian boy on the lacrosse team ever speak in public?"

Pat's pencil stops. He peers around us to see if any of the other students might have overheard me. "Okay, fine. I'm just saying you should choose better company. It's not like when you first arrived at this school two years ago. People know you now. You have other options than that weird stoner kid. You should come to Pan-African Club. We're growing. We're in the process of becoming a registered student organization."

"Spending my time with kids in dashikis practicing Yoruba for future college language credit doesn't sound like fun to me."

"There's more to it than that. We've also been organizing fundraisers for relief aid and informational culture programs to raise awareness of issues plaguing the continent."

I listen to Pat go on in perfect American English. He was born here, like the majority of the other students in his club, children of parents who were affluent in their old country and middle-class in America. Sometimes I'm hyperaware of how the influence of my early accent pins my tongue to the floor of my mouth. I think faster than I can speak. My voice often crashes behind my teeth. I mumble a lot.

"You don't have to sell this to me, Pat."

"You're Ghanaian. I guessed you'd share the same vision as Kwame Nkrumah."

"The United States of Africa, might have worked once but I'm not sure now." I pick up a sharpener resting on my art horse between my legs. I talk as I twist my pencil. "All the countries are so different. It's cool what you all are doing with that club but I'm not into having a group of first-gens see my last name and judge me for not being fluent in Twi. I don't think it's for me."
Pat shrugs his shoulders and leans into his work, preparing to detail the subtle jags and points around the skull's nasal cavity. I set down my pointed charcoal pencil and reach for chalk. I try to capture the florescent ceiling light bouncing off the skull and waxy bulb of the tulip. I drag the white chalk gently under the black lines, careful not to overlap the two. Our teacher, Dr. Ambush, explained one day that many Art theorists and critics divide lines and colors between masculine and feminine. She said she wanted us to challenge this notion, its origin and intention. She said she dismisses the unnecessary gendering of art, but she wanted us to know it was a thing if we ever attend Art school and collide with a professor who insists bold, navy, straight, lines are for boys and thin, fuchsia, contour, lines are for girls. Curving a streak of white across my paper I question how those critics and theorists might see a broad border made of an absence of color. What about black being the presence of all color? How can they be so confident dividing elements of art or life?

I pull the chalk away, lean back on my art horse to take perspective. A skull and budding flora. Death and life. I've read stuff about Hieronymus Bosch and other Christian Renaissance painters who would recognize these as symbols of memento mori, reminders that everyone will die. If Dr. Ambush faced the skull toward an hourglass, away from the tulip bulb, it would make the symbolism clearer, maybe, or too obvious. Maybe life and art are only defined by this or that: foreign or native, straight, curved, male, female, is, isn't, white, black, here and gone.

x

Pat usually sits with me at lunch. He has other friends he could eat with, but I think he does it as a favor to me. This semester Beth has a different lunch period. Tommy was expelled
for bringing a knife to school, but even if he were around, I probably wouldn’t want to eat lunch with him now.

Pat and I join the river of students flowing down the wide steps to the first floor of the building. We shuffle in rows of lines toward the glow of soda and vending machines, like penguins marching to sea. There's less fear of being overheard below the chatter and squawks of more than a hundred other students. Wadling past the doors of the cafeteria, I quietly say to Pat, “Hey, if you hear any more rumors about me and Tommy, just don't say anything."

"Kumasi, I don’t need cops knocking on my door asking me questions about you. Associating with a felon won't improve my chances of getting into a good college."

“Thanks.”

“Whatever."

Pat and I press our way through the propped doors. Once able to move more freely we speed to our usual table at the far end by the windows. We have to get to it fast or it gets taken. It is different: a small picnic table that seats four people, six at most, unlike the field of car-long fiberglass rectangles filling the rest of the cafeteria. The table used to sit outside, although it's been indoors as long as I've known it. I was told the picnic table once rested beyond the glass doors that would lead out to a paved patio where students could enjoy fresh air and sunlight and a view of the recreation fields bordered by the forests wrapping a third of the campus--very different than my old school in the city. I'm told the table was brought in and the doors to the patio locked after the school shooting in Columbine, Colorado. I still appreciate the view near the glass doors of the cafeteria, and
all the windows. I like being able to catch the warmth of the sun on my skin through the
glass, and I like getting to watch the trees change color through the school year.

We place our book-bags down on our picnic table's wooden benches graffitied by
decades of permanent marker, pencil and scratches. With our seats claimed, we move to
the lunch line. The conversations in the cafeteria are louder than the day before, and most
everyone is discussing homecoming. Earlier, an announcement on the schools' morning
news broadcast, informed each classroom that the theme of this fall's dance would be
TIME.

Reaching for a lunch tray I ask Pat if he plans to attend homecoming. He scoffs and
says no, pointing at the sloppy-joes. The lunch lady at the serving station lobs a wet pile of
shredded mystery meat onto a burger bun. Her gloved hands press the sandwich together
and slaps it onto Pat’s tray. I ask for some cream of broccoli soup and a plate of French
fries. We grab utensils, condiments, napkins and drinks, and Pat leads the way back to the
table.

I hear Pat sigh and grumble. A few yards ahead I see Tommy’s girlfriend Murry
has appeared by our bags. She has taken a seat on one of the benches. Our friend Al is with
her too, sitting on top of the picnic table, adding to its markings with a white-out pen, her
feet pressed firmly in Pat’s seat.

“Your ass is hanging out those shorts,” Pat says to Al. "Like, your entire ass is all
over our table. Who wants to eat off it now?"

Al caps her pen and glares at Pat. "Excuse me. Fuck you."

I sit beside Pat whose lunch try rests inches from Al's thighs. I’m across from
Murry.
“You really aren't going to move, huh?” Pat goes on. “I’m going to have to spend my lunch starring at your hairy back. Shouldn’t you girls be in class?”

Al peers over her shoulder to say, "We came to talk to Benny."

Pat notices my grimace. He speaks for me, "Why do all of you still call him that?"

Al waves her hand as if shooing a fly. She uncaps her correction fluid pen and returns to doodling fat cartoon bees on the picnic table.

Murry asks me, “You heard about homecoming?”

“What about it?”

“Are you going?”

I reply, dunking one of my fries into my cup of soup, "Maybe."

Al shakes her head, “The theme is TIME? How would you even decorate for that? What is there going to be a bunch of paper-mâché clocks everywhere? I mean, what are they going to build a fucking DeLorean out of cardboard boxes?"

Pat joins in, "Maybe they could hang a bunch of old issues of *Time* magazine."

Al turns to Pat, smiling. "That's pretty good."

He swallows a bite of his sloppy-joe and wipes his mouth with a napkin. "I'm not trying to impress you."

“Why do you hang out with this guy, Benny?” Al asks. “He’s a pretentious asshole. He's wearing a V-neck sweater and penny loafers." Murry continues to ignore Al and Pat. She steals one of my fries and tells me, “I want us all to go to homecoming together.”

“Yeah, tonight, we’re going to start looking for dresses,” Al adds.

I sip from my soup. "Okay?"
“I’ve been talking to Beth,” Murry says. “She told me you’ve been coming over to have dinner with her family. If you asked her to homecoming, she’d say yes. You could finally ask her out and be a legit couple instead of whatever it is you two are doing now.”

“Did you skip class just to come talk to me about homecoming?”

Al snickers, “Any excuse to leave pre-calculus.”

I can feel Murry studying my mood.

“Tommy wanted me to tell you he is sorry,” Murry says.

"Is she serious," Pat says.

My hands turn into fists.

“Tommy told me what happened," Murry says. Her voice trembles. "We checked obituaries online together. We watched the news, and read through some of the city papers. There was nothing about a murder or about a robbery. And they don’t know where either of you live. They’re never going to find you.”

“Someone could have died, Murry.”

“He apologized.”

“It’s not enough.”

She bites her lower lip. “So, you’re just going to throw away a friendship for one mistake? Benny, please. I’m scared for him. He hasn’t registered for evening courses this semester. He just spends all day hotboxing Calvin’s basement.”

“That’s usual,” I say.

“No, but they’ve been getting into other stuff, drinking cough syrup and snorting Calvin’s medicine and shit. They’ve been doing K, like, a lot.”

I don’t recognize the last one, “K?”
“Ketamine,” Al clarifies. “My father uses it to sedate animals at his clinic.”

Pat says he’s heard about some players on the lacrosse team shooting ketamine between their toes at parties. Al asks Pat how he would know anyone on lacrosse. Pat ignores the question and returns to eating.

“Benny,” Murry says lowering her voice, “Tommy’s been talking to Calvin about dealing; selling that weed you two stole.”

Pat removes his glasses and rubs his temples. “Why do you all assume I want to know all of these details? You know I could report this?”

“Benny trusts you,” Murry says. “And you could have left this table a while ago.”

Murry returns her focus to me. “I get you’re angry, but this is bad. And it could be bad for you too if Tommy were to get caught, if cops asked questions about where Tommy’s stuff came from.” Murry tucks her hair behind her ears and rolls her neck. “Could you just talk to him, please?”

“Tommy doesn’t have parents?” Pat grumbles.

“Pat, I get that you don’t like Tommy, or me, or Al, or any of Benny’s other friends, probably because of some bullshit you’ve heard like this conversation you’ve been eavesdropping now, but if you’d like to get to know us, you can join our homecoming plans if you want. Dinner first? All of us caravan?”

“No,” Al says.

I see nervousness in Pat’s grin.

“Just let Benny know whatever you decide so I can add you and your date to whatever reservation we make.” Murry swings her legs out from beneath the picnic table and stands.
“I didn’t even go with you all to homecoming last year,” I say.

“Right, but we did come by your house to pick you up for the after party,” Al explains. “We go to my ex’s, Mike Chen-Edisto’s house. His mother’s out of town on a business trip. Everybody’s rolling on ecstasy. Me and Mike spend the whole night screaming about how much we want to bang each other but neither of us is brave enough to make the first move.”

“You two were so annoying,” Murry says.

“How would you know? You and Tommy disappeared for most of the night and later we catch you giving Tommy a hand-job in the living room on top of Benny’s coat.” Pat shakes his head and pretends to retch. Al looks at me, grins, “Oh, but Benny didn’t care.” Every muscle in my back and neck tightens. “We caught this fool, sprawled out on a blanket in the back lawn, bawling while fingering some pink-haired chick who happened to be Mike’s mother’s girlfriend!”

I want to disintegrate. I want my atoms to break apart, phase down through the bench of the table, through the linoleum floor, and rest in the quiet earth away from Al’s belly laughter and Pat’s disgusted stare.

Murry's shoulders jump violently trying to suppress her giggles.

“What was her name again, Benny?” Al asks. “I think it started with an R. Rachel? Rebecca?”

I see flashes of me and the woman Al is trying to name tangled up together, sour tongues and kisses salted with tears in a dark backyard, talking about my father’s death and the funeral arrangements. "Katie,” I say finally to the table.
“That’s it! Katie. I don’t think Mike ever managed to tell his mom what happened with you and Katie.”

I let my vision wander to the glass doors leading outside. I peer through the windows to look for the blur of birds over the trimmed practice fields. After a few more chuckles, Al is silent. I’m still thinking about Katie.

Murry clears her throat, “Benny, will you try to talk to Tommy?”

I look down into my soup, admiring the green crowns of broccoli peaking from the golden bisque like the tops of trees in a dense fog.

“I might stop by Calvin’s later,” I say.

Murry smiles.

Al climbs off the table, raising a middle finger to Pat and says, “Love you, Benny.”

Murry thanks me and then she and Al turn to hurry out of the cafeteria and back to class. When they are out of sight, Pat shovels the rest of his sandwich into his mouth. He swallows and takes a sip from his carton of milk. I finish my fries and soup. Neither of us says anything for the rest of the lunch period, while I’m thinking about what Katie might be doing at that moment.

x

Katie looks like Norman Rockwell’s riveter. Perched naked on the edge of the California king, one leg crossed over the other, a forearm tucked under her breasts and an elbow propping up the other arm connected to a hand pulling a cigarette to and from her mouth, Katie could have been a better figure model for Rosie than Mary Doyle Keefe the thin Vermonter Rockwell turned into his feminine icon. In biographies that my dad often borrowed from the library, I learned that Rockwell later apologized to Keefe for
exaggerating her curves, but I guess he wanted to make Rosie big enough to hold American ideas about strength. Rosie is large, large enough to carry the heavy rivet gun balanced on her lap; too large to be bothered by the dangerous messages pinned under her feet. Rosie is big enough to step easily into the work that used to be only for men. Katie is like that too, large in the same ways.

Smoke bellows from her lips, sending chalky streams through the air. The smoke twists between us, churning. She pulls ringlets of her dyed-pink hair away from her eyes and stares down at herself.

“I hate how tiny my nipples are,” she mumbles with the cigarette bouncing on her bottom lip.

“I like your nipples,” I say.

“It doesn’t really matter if you like them or not, kiddo.”

I don't know what to say to this. So, I say, "Al mentioned you at school today."

"Who is Al?"

"Alice, she used to date Mike."

"Oh right, the girlfriend from India."

"Her family is Pakistani. She was born here."

Katie nods, “Well, what did Alice say?”

“She brought up the night we met.”

“In that tent Mike pitched in the yard,” Katie smiles, remembering. “God, you were so sad. I would have done anything to get you to stop crying.” Her eyes search my body from my face to my naked chest and arms to my legs covered by a bedsheet. Her gaze lingers on the outline of my crotch beneath the linen.
I shake my head. Katie frowns and rises from the bed. She walks across the room to ash her cigarette in a teacup resting on a dresser by an open window. I squint against the sunlight bouncing from her pale skin.

“Do you ever feel bad for Mike’s mom?” I ask.

“Susan,” Katie says. “Her name is Susan.”

“What would Susan say about us being here together.”

“Together? You and I are not together.” She stabs her cigarette filter into the bottom of the cup and moves toward the bed. “Susan and I have an open thing. She does what she wants when she’s traveling, and I do what I want while she’s away.”

“But I’m not a girl.”

She laughs. “I like getting penetrated, sometimes by dudes. If Susan would get mad about anything, it would be your age.”

Katie is twenty-seven. She has a degree in Art. I don’t know where from. She never talks about it. One time, when I asked to know more, Katie told me a joke: “What’s the difference between a large pizza and a BA in Art? The pizza can feed a family.” Before I knew Katie, she was living with her parents again for the first time in her adult life. Then she attended a gallery show hosted by one of her former professors. At the event, Katie met Susan Chen-Edisto, a lobbyist for one of the country’s largest pharmaceutical companies. Katie says Susan was enamored. Katie calls Susan her patron.

She crawls beside me and lies on her back, her arms crossed behind her head.

“You’re cool. We’re cool, but we aren’t anything. We’re like friends.”
I reach over and my fingers trace a blue vein running beneath her skin from her jaw to her collarbone. Her pores pucker, tiny bumps racing across her flesh. “Does Mike care?” I ask.

“Not really, not enough to tell his mom. He doesn’t care about anything. He’s counting down the days until he can graduate and leave. I’m pretty sure he’ll enlist in the Army if it means he can get out of this house. He hates Susan, blames her for the divorce.”

“Okay.”

“What’s going on with you? You’ve been kind of weird today. And I haven’t seen you in a while.” I’m a little upset she didn’t notice I was gone longer than ‘awhile.’ I haven’t visited her since before I left for Africa in May.

“Nothing,” I say. I take a breath. “I don’t feel like myself. Not since I’ve returned to the States. I was in Ghana for most of the summer, returning my dad’s ashes.” I can feel Katie trying not to look at me. I like to think that I can make her nervous sometimes too.

“I don’t mean in the way people usually do when they try to describe an out-of-body experience. Not exactly. I’m here, but there’s something else with me. I’ve been talking to myself more.

“That’s normal,” Katie says. “A lot of people do that.”

“No, it’s like narrating myself to myself. I don’t feel like just myself.”

“Hmm. Anything else?”

“I got into some dangerous stuff with Tommy.”

“The redhead kid?” Katie rolls onto her side to face me now. “What did you two do?”
I often get confessional around Katie, maybe because I first met her a few months after my dad died. I can tell her anything and I know she won’t judge me because she doesn’t care, not really. Maybe being intimate with someone means sharing the parts of yourself that make you fearful and knowing the other person won’t care. Maybe that’s what older people mean when I hear them talk about vulnerability.

So, I guess that is why I tell Katie how Tommy and I stole two bricks of weed from drug dealers I used to know. I tell her everything and explain how scared I am now of some kind of retaliation. Katie touches my arm. She runs a finger over the immunization scar below my left shoulder and I wait for her to say something else. I wait for her to ask a question. But she doesn't, and I wish Katie was Beth.

There’s no need to tell Katie anymore. I don’t bother telling her how I didn't look back to see if Marcus had been hit. I don’t bother to describe Tommy catching up to me or us running together. She rises from the bed, picks up and pulls on a crumpled sundress from off the floor. Her body movement tells me that Mike will be home soon and that it’s time to gather my clothes and leave. Katie walks with me downstairs but heads to the kitchen while I go for the door. No reason to bother saying goodbye.
The phone has been ringing but I don’t feel like answering. I’m in the kitchen frying an egg to eat with a ball of kenkey and some shito. The kenkey warming in the microwave is from Auntie Ami, the shito was brought by Auntie Abla. They’re not my real aunts, not blood, but good friends of my mom from church. Auntie Abla and Auntie Ami helped a lot with dad’s funeral arrangements and raising money to send me to Ghana. Even though we’ve stopped going to church and congregation events, they still bring food by every once in a while. Sometimes they call the house to ask how my mother is and I tell them she’s fine. She’s okay. She’s tired from taking on more hours at the grocery store. She’s sleeping. She’ll call them back, even though she won’t. Mom barely talks to anyone anymore, even me. She’s usually at work by the time I get up for school, and in bed snoring when I get home. She’s upstairs now, dreaming. So tired from planning and preparing new ways to feed other people. So tired from work and spiked glasses of orange juice, the smell of this egg bubbling in vegetable oil and the sour starch of boiling kenkey rising through the house won’t wake her.

The phone ringing again won’t wake her.

I turn away from the stove and reach for the receiver mounted to the wall.

I say hello.

“Benny! Come down to Calvin’s house.”

“No.”

I hear Al pull away from the phone and laugh. Under her wheezing chuckle, bottles clink and someone coughs like an asthma attack. Tommy shouts over Al, “Come on, Benny! Stop faking on your friends.”
I haven’t seen or spoken to Tommy since we robbed Marcus.

“Yeah, bitch,” I hear Calvin yell.

Sounds of wrestling over the phone, and then Al returns. “Hey, sorry about that. Come over, please.” Al lowers her voice, “It’s just me, Calvin and Tommy. Murry was supposed to be here by now but she’s late. The boys are getting kind of weird.” Al laughs again and whispers into the receiver, “I’m the only brown person.”

I imagine Al alone with Tommy and Calvin. I think about what they might be saying about race and where people are from, jokes passed off as things some other people might think, not Tommy and Calvin, so obviously not racist both always careful to use conditionals before saying things that might offend their friends like Al, Murry, Beth and me.

“I’m not racist but...”

“I’m not saying I agree but...”

“If I were racist, wouldn’t it be crazy if I...”

I think about Al, and how I’ve felt sometimes when it was just me alone with Tommy and Calvin, and I say, “Alright, I’ll be down there in a bit.”

“Yes! Thank you.”

I hang up the phone. The microwave dings. The golden edges of the egg are the way I like it. I’ll eat later. Turning off the stove, I move the warm pan to a cold coil.

Calvin’s home is like mine, it’s just him and his mother too. But his dad is absent not dead, and his mother spends most of her time at her boyfriend’s apartment in the city. I don’t knock at Calvin’s house. The door is never locked, just like at my house now. Calvin is
most always at home anyway. He doesn’t work--besides occasionally selling weed and some of his ADHD medication--and he doesn’t go to school. Calvin tells people he dropped out to become a full-time caretaker for his mother. He’s never told me what makes her sick and I’ve never asked. Calvin drives her to physical therapy and doctor appointments, but walking through the living room, over the ash-stained carpet, past the tattered furniture and crusty dishes, shows how much effort he gives to taking care of the house. I go through the kitchen and down the stairs leading to the basement where I’m sure to find a group of my friends.

Calvin’s place is kind of like mine, but his house has no silence.

Coming off the bottom step I hear the voice of Tom Hanks with a slow southern drawl. Below that is excited chattering. I follow the voices. Murry, Al and Calvin are crowded on a ratty loveseat with missing cushions. The space is dank with pot smoke. A pair of beer cans rest between Murry and Al’s feet. Calvin grunts to acknowledge me before forcing a salad spoon of cereal into his mouth.

Al greets me with a nod. I ask Murry when she arrived, and she says just a few minutes before me.

“You just missed Tommy,” Murry says, and I realize maybe Tommy is trying to avoid me too.

They are all watching a television sat on a large, upturned bucket. Tom Hanks is speaking over a montage of him running on the screen.

Murry turns to me. She asks, “You think Forrest Gump might have HIV?”

Al bites her bottom lip, “She’s been going on about this the whole movie.”

I ask Murry to explain.
“Well, doesn’t Jenny die from some mysterious virus. And it’s the late 70s early 80s? Sounds like HIV to me. Jenny was clearly sleeping around and using needles and stuff. She probably caught something and it’s not crazy to assume she gave it to Forrest.”

“But that would mean Forrest’s son has AIDS too?” Calvin mutters with his cheeks packed with sugar-frosted puffs. He shakes his shaggy blond hair from his face as he chews.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Murry says.

I’m smiling now. I move closer to the group.

“No,” Al says, “Just because Jenny had HIV doesn’t mean her son has it. Don’t be stupid.”

Calvin swallows, “You guys are really fucking up this movie for me.” He sets his bowl of cereal on the floor. “Benny, change the channel.”

I hate not being asked, so I say, “Use a remote.”

Everyone looks up at me, agrees that I’m the one standing, so I should press the station dial. I grumble, “I’m only turning it once. Whatever it is, that’s where it’s staying unless one of you gets up to scan channels.”

A flash on the screen and then Tom Hanks becomes Alex Trebeck.

“Ugh, Jeopardy,” Al says.

Alex Trebeck interrupts, “It’s time for the final Jeopardy Question.”

“I’d bet anyone $100 I get the question right,” Calvin says.

Murry folds her arms, “Oh, you want to show off what you’ve learned studying for the G.E.D.?”

Calvin pushes, “Seriously, anyone want to bet?”
Alex Trebeck gives the answer: *three state capitals five letters long.*

I notice Murry raise an eyebrow at me.

I ask Calvin how he has one-hundred dollars to gamble, “You’re the only dealer I’ve ever known who is always be broke.”

“I’ve been helping Tommy sell that skunk weed you and he snatched. That shit is real low-quality by the way. Most of the younger kids around here don’t know the difference though, or don’t care. I charge way more than it is worth.”

I ask, “You’re selling it to kids? How old? Like, middle-schoolers?”

“Yeah, at the skatepark. Relax, I started smoking marijuana at thirteen. It’s not that big a deal.”

Al laughs, “Who is that supposed to comfort?”

“Calvin, that’s real sleazy,” Murry says.

“Talk to your boyfriend about it. If I’m so sleazy, what’s that make him?”

Murry rises from the loveseat.

“Dover, Delaware. Salem, Oregon. Boise, Idaho.” Calvin says to the television, as Murry heads upstairs.

“That’s correct,” says Alex.

We hear Murry’s steps on the creaking floorboards overhead.

“Is she leaving,” I ask them.

“Who cares,” Calvin answers. “Murry might be cute and Chinese, and look like Lucy Liu, but I don’t know how Tommy puts up with her. She’s been kind of a bitch lately.”

Al says what I’m thinking, “Murry’s Korean, and she doesn’t look like Lucy Liu.”
“They’re both East-Asian, whatever. Regardless, ever since the school year started, she’s been nagging Tommy and whining to me. I’m not the one who came up with the idea of selling that shit.”

I turn to Al, “You thinking about dealing too?”

Al scratches her chin. “Don’t tell Murry, but I’m not sure what’s the harm in me making a couple sales to some of the altar boys at my church. Just enough to get a new pair of shoes I want. But that’s it, for real. I’m not trying to get caught with anything and get deported or something. And my parents said if I don’t start doing better, they’ll ship me back to Karachi to live with my Grandma.”

Calvin rolls his eyes.

“My mom has said the same thing before,” I say.

Al nods, “It must be an immigrant parent thing. How is your mother doing?”

I tell her I don’t know, and she understands that this means I don’t really want to talk about it. She nods again, slower this time.

“I get it,” Calvin says. “There’s plenty to sell, you know, if you wanted to help out your mom with bills.”

My brain buzzes with the possibility of relieving some of my mother’s burden. I’ve seen the past due notices and the payday loan offers in the mail. But then I remember the added risk of getting arrested and potentially deported like Al said, leaving my mother to feel even more alone in a country she doesn’t belong to. But then I imagine having enough money to take Beth to homecoming: tickets, dinner, and new dress clothes not reserved for church services or funerals.

“No,” I finally say to Calvin.
“You good?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

He turns to Al. Without Murry squeezed between them, Calvin looks uncomfortable with how little space now separates their bodies. I catch Calvin studying the gap before jumping to his feet, exclaiming, “Alright, I’m about to roll a blunt if you two would like to partake.”

“Is it free?” Al asks. “Last time you fucking tried to charge me for taking a hit.”

Calving grins, “I’m a businessman. You all can’t always come over to my place assuming everything is complimentary.”

I ask, “Is this like a free sample then?”

Calvin ignores me. His lanky frame slinks across the room to the washing and drying machines in the far corner. He keeps his weed and pills in empty detergent powder containers. Al gets up and searches her pockets for a lighter. Calvin materializes a cigarillo. The only time Calvin moves gracefully is when he rolls. There’s some kind of elegance in the way he slices the Swisher with a fingernail and scraps its mulchy guts, replacing them with green grains. His eyes are entranced while binding the process with moisture from his pink tongue and grey lips. He pauses to examine his adaptation. I wonder if I make the same face when I sketch in drawing class. He’s an artist, I say to myself, and Al passes him the lighter to complete the work. We all observe a few seconds of silent appreciation. Is there always a brief moment after every blunt finished when the creator, and their audience, get quiet, and discover some part of themselves has been holding their breath?
School starts in a few minutes. I’m sorting through my locker for the textbooks I’ll need for my morning classes. Pat’s locker is next to mine. He taps my shoulder to get my attention. Pat’s shaking his head at a scene on the other side of the hallway. The only Black kid on the lacrosse team is dancing while his teammates clap, stomp and laugh.

I see Pat’s jaws tighten. Through gritted teeth he says, “Look at them, cheering for their little Liberian boy. It’s embarrassing.”

“I’m not sure he feels that way,” I say.

“He’s cooning, just to get those white boys to like him. They’ll never like him, not really. It’s so desperate.”

“It might not be like that, Pat.”

“Like what?”

“If he were white too, it wouldn’t mean anything.”

“But he’s not white, Kumasi.”

I load books into my backpack, close my locker and spin the combination dial. I stand beside Pat, watching the Liberian boy dance a little longer. The performance draws more viewers. The white lacrosse players holler louder and some teachers have come to the doorway of their classroom to find the source of the shouting. The intensity of the Black boy’s dancing increases as his audience grows. He punctuates choreography from pop music groups with signature moves from solo R&B singers. In the gaps between dances, his body makes moves like some of the old folks do at Ghanaian parties—flapping elbows, jumping knees and bending backs like at a baby’s outdooring. The blending in his dance is beautiful but I can’t find the joy and ease I usually see in the faces of aunties and uncles
gathered to celebrate an African sacrament, a birth, a wedding, a homegoing. Instead, below the Liberian boy’s smile I see something that resembles fear.

I ask Pat, “Are you going to talk to him about this later?”

“I don’t know.”

“You two talk about homecoming?”

“Is that a joke?”

I shake my head.

“Yes, we talked about it. He’s taking some popular heifer on the soccer team. We might meet up somewhere after.”

I nod. “I’m planning to ask Beth about homecoming today.”

“That’s good. I like Beth. She’s too good for you.”

“Hey, I know this is awkward, but if she says yes, do you think I could borrow some cash?”

Pat shrugs a probable yes. I thank him and say I’ll see him later in drawing class. Leaving Pat to watch the dancing end to loud applause, I join the stream of students moving through the halls to first period.

It’s later. I’m sitting at my desk in second period, a Social Science class called Problems of the Twentieth Century. The lights are off and our teacher, Mr. Schwartz, is about to show a documentary about the bankruptcy of a city in Michigan following the collapse of its main industry. Mr. Schwartz stands beside the television and VCR at the front of the room, ranting about wage gaps and huge disparities in wealth, and how everything is connected.
I’m not paying too much attention. I am writing a note to pass to Beth in the hall between classes. This semester our schedules have us heading in opposite directions. We’ve stayed in contact through our letters. They never really say anything, but it is nice having someone to write to. This particular note has swelled to two pages, front and back, explaining in detail all the tortures I’d rather endure than listen to Mr. Schwartz talk about the correlation between floundering economies and deteriorating race relations. I don’t really think much about things like that, unlike Beth. She cares about everything. She says having a Palestinian mom makes her more sensitive to the suffering of others. She once told me, “Churches are people, gospels in motion, walking cathedrals.” Beth’s deep. I meant for this note to ask her to homecoming, but I’m writing around what I want to say. Beth often confronts me about not saying what I need to.

I finish the letter with a post script, “Homecoming?” I draw two boxes, write Yes below one square and No below the other. An immediate rush of embarrassment--regret in using permanent pen instead of erasable pencil--tosses my stomach. Maybe she’ll think the boxes are cute, or ironic.

Mr. Schwartz turns around to push the tape into the VCR and my seventh-period history teacher, Mr. Torrez, charges into the classroom from across the hall. He tells Mr. Schwartz that someone has flown an airplane into a building.

The class stirs nervously as Mr. Schwartz punches the TV Menu button and two shiny metal towers fade into focus, thick smoke rolling out past the gleam of broken windowpanes. I lean closer in my desk, squinting at the flicker of flames behind the dark fog. I’m close enough to hear Mr. Schwartz say, “Bob, I don’t think this is an accident.”

x
In the halls after class ends, everyone speaks without commas or periods. The endless streams of speech review what we’ve all seen—a second commercial airliner slammed into another tower. Several thousand pounds of steel vanished into a wall of glass. I try to avoid joining the murmurs. I follow my usual route because that’s what I think Beth would do. She’s reliable. She will go the same way she always does. She will know that panicking, congesting the halls like the kids bouncing from one locker to the next, will not help anyone.

Rumors float past my ears that can’t be true.

“There are more planes,” someone says.

“The nation is under attack,” says someone else.

I try to think of other things, but they all lead to thoughts of Beth. I should have seen her in the hall by now. Perhaps she decided to go straight to her AP English class. Maybe this isn’t the quickest route. Maybe she has tried to avoid the crowds on the first floor, going up and over and taking the E-Hall stairway down.

I turn around and speed to her classroom.

I’ll be late, but I need to talk to her.

The bell rings when I reach Beth’s class. I peer inside through a narrow window in the door. The teacher and students are all fixated on the classroom television.

Some are crying. I can’t see the screen. I scan the room.

I don’t find Beth.

I wait outside of the door, but she never shows up.
When I finally get to the boys' locker room for gym class. No one has changed into their workout clothes. All the boys have huddled into Coach Reynolds’ office to glare at the thirteen-inch TV sitting on his desk. I have to push through to see. On the screen there’s a fuming crater in the side of another building. Beneath the heads of the muted newscasters, closed captions confirm a third plane crash.

x

Back in the halls between periods, horseshoes form around rich kids lending out their cellular phones for people to call family. Wealthy bullies, usually hungry for drama, have found the best version of themselves delivering messages and reporting on the disaster. I overhear one of them say there’s been a fourth plane crash in a field. Yesterday, she was a liar inventing the kind of gossip that put other girls’ names on bathroom stalls. Today she is as trustworthy and up to date as the news ticker scrolling across the bottom of the classroom TV screens. Tomorrow is harder to imagine. But the class bells keep things moving forward, reminding me that everything isn’t falling totally apart. Each chime promises a next, and eventually, maybe, a day when this is past.

x

I shuffle into my next period. There are kids everywhere, lining the walls, gathered at the front, sitting cross-legged around Ms. Thackston’s desk. Some teachers have abandoned their classes, forcing neighboring teachers to house stray students. Standing at the back near my desk is Al, she shares third period with Beth. I move to my seat as Ms. Thackston asks everyone to be considerate of others. I offer my desk to Al. Her eyelids are puffy and red from crying. She shakes her head slowly. Ms. Thackston moves to the corner of the
room, stepping over the kids sprawled on the floor, and sits on the edge of her desk. She grabs a remote from a stack of student essays and raises the volume of the TV.

I whisper to Al under the blaring headline news. I ask her if she’s seen Beth.

She says, “Yes, this morning before school.” But Beth never came to their class.

I nod, and then turn to stare past the students leaned against the window.

I’m on the third floor, so now I can see the military helicopters, news choppers, and fighter jets tearing across the sky.

Beth says everything is temporary.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the note I had written earlier. It’s folded like a paper football. The triangle shape makes it easier to slide into Beth’s palm as we pass. I poke the tips of my fingers with its pointed edges.

There is a collective gasp, and then the shocked pops of hands over gaping mouths.

I look to the wall-mounted television at the corner of the room. Massive buildings collapse into plumes of tar-colored smoke, cameras switch angles, and then I see my fear mirrored in the eyes of a woman greyed by the dust of the wreckage. Tears streak her clay face. She claws at the cop’s forearm, her screams silent under the broadcaster’s commentary. The officer begins to cough violently, choking on the heavy ash. He drops to his knees and as his hands shoot up around his throat. The woman runs back toward the fallen structures.

The camera doesn’t follow her.

She is lost in the fallout enveloping the city.

I feel the woman’s frenzy invades me.

I can see myself leaping from my desk, rushing past Ms. Thackston who calls after me. I imagine racing through the halls, my feet squeaking against linoleum. I almost fall to
the ground sliding onto B-Hall, but I regain my balance and jog faster, full speed. In my mind, I’m zigzagging from door to door, peeking into every classroom for Beth.

School is dismissed early. Concerned parents are waiting to pick up their children and take them somewhere safe. When I exit the building, I don’t search for my friends. I try to find Beth in the commotion, and when I can’t find her, I run as fast as I can to home.

I arrive at home with plans to call Beth’s house. But I’m surprised when I open the door and find my mother, awake, sorting through the stacks of mail covering the surface of the table where our family used to eat dinner. Mom’s seated, calm, one particular piece of mail in her hands has her full attention. She’s still in her work clothes: black slacks and chef’s coat streaked with a few flour stains.

“Ma!”

I rush over to her, forgetting to take my shoes off before running across the carpet. I hug her tight, nuzzle the mesh top of her cook’s cap. I breathe deep the salty sweat mixed with the coconut oil and lavender rubbed every morning into her buzzed scalp.

She wiggles against my embrace to look up at me, confused. “Aye, Benny?”

“Ma, are you okay?”

Released from my arms, she leans back in her chair and returns to reading a formal-looking letter pinched between her fingers. “The grocery store closed,” she says, “because of all this foolishness with the planes. Crazy.”

Mom doesn’t look up from the letter. I want her to say something, do something, to acknowledge how afraid and small I feel. I want to call Beth’s house to see if she’s okay.
“Mom, the nation is under attack. This is serious.”

“Ah, it is serious. I am going to lose those hours.”

I throw my bookbag on the floor, yank a chair away from the table and sit down.

My mother raises an eyebrow at me. “Calm down,” she says.

“What?”

“Do not speak to me with that tone.” In Twi she asks me if I understand.

She knows I’ve lost the ability to reply to her in anything other than English.

I nod, “We’re in danger and you’re just sitting there like nothing is happening.”

My mother folds the letter and passes it to me. “This country is big,” she tells me, “Benny, everybody is always in danger, every day, everywhere. Here less so than other places. Things fall from the sky. Bad things happen. All true. What do we do, ah-huh, but what we were going to do anyway? We can’t worry about America.”

Mom has told me stories about rain seasons in her rural city growing up. She had experienced downpours that could pull the earth out from under you. She’s used to moving on when foundations crack and landmarks collapse. But I’m not.

“What is this?” I ask, unfolding the letter my mother passed to me. It’s addressed from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Mom is silent as I read:
Notice of Removal of Conditional Basis of Lawful Permanent Residence. My full name below the names of my father and mother.

CONGRATULATIONS! Your request for the removal of the conditional basis of your permanent resident status has been approved. You are deemed to be Lawful Permanent Residents of the United States as of the date of your original admission or adjustment of status...

“Ma, we’re going to be citizens.”

She sighs deep, her eyes squint through me, thinking. Her jaw tightens and behind her closed lips her tongue races over the fronts of her top and bottom teeth.

“Yes,” she says. “I suppose we will.”
In the art books my dad would bring home to admire and share with me, I began to notice two kinds of Norman Rockwell paintings. The first kind idealizes life in America: cute moments of small-town life—boy scouts, church moms, charming girls, and dopy but loveable dads. These paintings seem to be more about pleasing advertisers and making nostalgia to sell magazines. The other Rockwells are about responding to threats to the union of the nation. These are oil-on-canvas pictures of family dining tables divided by politics, Black children entering white neighborhoods to be greeted with curiosity and rage, and there are scenes of civilians dealing with the consequences of war overseas. These paintings are more obviously patriotic, they're goal is to show American values. Both types of Rockwells have the same motivation. They mean to show there is such a thing as a unified national identity, even in difference. But it’s not true of course. Right? The problems one group of Americans live with aren’t likely to be considered problems for everyone who lives in America. Injustice anywhere in the USA is not an injustice everywhere in the United States. Rockwell might have liked the idea of illustrating how, despite the differences of its population, there still is some shared belief in what it means to be American. His work, even in the less idyllic stuff, tries to offer comfort in a common understanding and belief in principles of liberty and justice for all. I think about this a lot in the days after the terrorist attack in September. And as my mother and I start to prepare for our naturalization, I wonder if I know what it means to become an American the same way Rockwell and his imagined audience does. Would it ever be possible for me to share in a common idea of what it means to be a citizen?
Murray invited a bunch of us to come drink in the woods by Beth’s house. Al and I are waiting for the others at the edge of the neighborhood, at the mouth of a foot-worn trail leading down into the forest. In a few weeks the lush green of the trees will turn shades of brown and orange, fall from the branches, and the clearing by the creek where we sometimes like to gather will be visible to Beth’s neighbors. I know the subtle change is already happening, even if I can’t find any evidence of it yet. I guess everything is always in transition from one season to another. Gradients in color, temperature and pressure that I can sense but not always see.

“That’s cool that you and your mom are going to be citizens.” Al says. “But it seems like kind of a weird time to be making more Americans, doesn’t it?”

Bending down to pick a puffy white dandelion, I ask her what she means.

“Well, like with everything that happened on the 11th. I’d think they’d be super cautious about welcoming people into the country.”

I blow the seeds from the stem and drop it into grass. I tell her, “The approval was in the mail before the attacks.”

“Right. I guess that’s true. Besides they’ll probably need more citizens to fight if a war breaks out.” Al punches my arm, teasing. She grins but her eyes are serious.

“War with who even?”

“I don’t know.” She runs her hands through her hair. “The way people are talking, maybe the whole Middle East.” She points at our friends appearing at the top of the grassy hill sloping down toward us—Calvin carrying a twenty-four case of beer under his arm with Murry and Beth following behind him.
Beth looks different than she did yesterday in school, and when she’s close enough to speak instead of yell, I say, “You’re blonde.”

Beth smiles, pulls some stray locks away from her face and tucks them behind her ears.

“I dyed my hair,” Beth replies. “That okay with you?”

“No. I mean, yes, it looks great, it’s just that I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Well, you know, lately anyone who looks like a certain kind of person gets treated a certain kind of way. It hasn't been too bad. Most people are just very angry right now and it doesn't seem to matter to them that my family is Palestinian and Persian, not Saudi, or Egyptian, or Lebanese or from the U.A.E."

Al nods, "I've been thinking about putting some highlights in my hair too. Maybe even getting some non-prescriptive contacts. I'm not trying to get mistaken for Afghani right now."

Beth says, “Outside the mall the other day some dude from one of the other high schools shouted ‘U-S-A’ in my face and then told me to ‘go home to Osama.’”

"I'm sorry," I say. “That’s terrible."

Murry echoes an apology, says, “Really awful, you guys.”

Beth tells us it’s fine.

Al corrects her, "No it isn't."

"You're right,” Beth agrees. “It's not fine."

Beth smiles at Al, “I think you’re pretty hot with or without highlights and contacts.”

Al rolls her eyes playfully and says, “Thanks.”
Calvin has kept walking on without us, huffing to himself. We all follow him now, onto the trail and down into the forest. The path is narrow and we form a line. I’m at the end, behind Beth. I reach for Beth’s arm and pull her gently, asking her without words to slow down a little so we can put distance between us and the others. When they’re heads have disappeared behind a thicket of branches and I speak a little over a whisper to Beth.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask if you were planning to go to homecoming. I mean, if they still have it.”

She frowns and I begin cracking the knuckles in my fingers.

“I had thought about it. Why?”

“Come on, Beth. You know what I want to ask.”

“I think I do, but you need to ask.”

We both give a little laugh, but my chuckle sounds fake in my own ears.

“Would you want to go to homecoming with me?”

“Why’d it take you so long to ask?”

I shrug and shake my head. When I begin to try to explain she says, “Never mind. You don’t need to tell me why you haven’t done something. You’re doing it now. We’re not dating, right? Just kind of talking? It’s kind of none of my business. You’ve been dealing with all that drug crap with Tommy. With planes flying into buildings, and prayer events, and candlelight vigils, maybe there really wasn’t a great time to ask. It’s not fair of me to just put my expectations on you like that. Jeez, I’m a spaz. Sorry.”

I tell her not to worry about it.

“All that to say, yes. I’ll go with you. Sure. I was just kind of feeling weird that you hadn’t asked. I like you and I’m pretty sure you like me. So, I was like, what is the hold-
up, you know? But it’s not like anyone else was asking, so it’s not like I was rejecting other offers waiting on you.”

I’m grinning. Beth’s rambling makes me feel more comfortable. It lets me know she’s just as anxious as me. Admiring her in high-waisted shorts and a spaghetti strap tank-top, I run my fingers over her bare arms. Gooseflesh.

“So, you heard about Tommy and robbing that guy?”

“Murry told me. Did he really have a gun?”

I nod, “Yeah.” I swallow a nervous lump down my throat. “You don’t think I’m garbage?”

Beth frowns, “I don’t blame you for that situation at all really. I don’t know how you can even stand to be around him. I don’t know why Murry is still with him after that.” She folds her arms. “If I’m going to homecoming with you, we’re not riding with them. You ride with me.”

She pinches the front of my t-shirt and I say, “Okay.”

I pull her waist closer and we kiss. She smells like cucumbers and watermelon. I briefly think of Katie and how she always smells like cinnamon, mildew and smoke. Katie’s scent paints my entire body so that I always have to take a long shower after I meet with her. When Beth pulls back, smiling, I want to linger with her like that. She turns away from me and continues into the woods. I go behind her. The dappled sunlight cutting through the canopy overhead bounces off Beth’s new honey locks.

At the clearing we separate.

She moves toward the shallow, bubbling, creek.
I take a seat on the ground beside the beers. I reach inside the case, remove a can and pull the tab to crack it open. I take a sip and join everyone else listening to Calvin rant.

“What I don’t understand is why they didn’t hit the Statue of Liberty or Mount Rushmore if they really wanted to piss us off,” Calvin says. He tosses a heavy rotten branch into the trunk of a large tree. The log splinters, shooting kindling across the clearing. Some of the debris lands near Murry. She’s seated on a large rock, her feet dangling into the water, tiny ripples echoing from her big toe. Tommy is sat next to her. He must have come from the other side of the creek.

Beth is stomping around now barefoot in the ankle high water. She stops exploring the soft rock-bed with her heels to respond to Calvin, her arms, hips and face showing her disappointment.

“Calvin, the goal wasn’t to piss anyone off. There’s way more to it than that.” Beth waddles from the center of the creek to the bank. She slips into her canvas shoes and comes over to me. I’m sitting cross-legged. She hovers above me before deciding to kick my legs apart to seat herself down on the forest floor between my knees. “Nothing’s gonna change my world,” she hums, as she leans back and rests her head on my chest. “I’ve got that song stuck in my head. Not the one by the Beatles but the one by Fiona Apple.”

Tommy leaves Murry’s rock and takes steps toward me.

Beth can feel my body tense and she squeezes my thigh. Tommy and I still haven’t talked since the drive back from Marcus. He shoves his hand in the twenty-four-case sitting next to me. We make eye contact and I quickly drop my gaze to his shoes.

Tommy says to Beth, “That version sucks and you’re wrong. Those fuckers who attacked us hate everything about us. There isn’t more to it than that.”
“Right,” Calvin says. “Those sand-niggers hate us cause America’s so fucking awesome and they’re jealous!”

An invisible band squeezes my forehead and temples. I shout, “No. Not cool.”

Tommy, walking back to Murry on the rock, speaks to me for the first time in weeks, “He’s not talking about Black people, Benny.”

“I think it’s a little more complicated than that,” Al says. She’s standing on the other side of the creek packing a pipe with weed. “You think that it’s just that simple? They hate America because it is cooler than other countries? Cause the USA’s got music videos, and big cars, and apple pie is so damn tasty?”

“Yes,” Calvin says.

Beth speaks up, asks, “So, it has nothing to do with America’s foreign policy, or neocolonization, or messing with shit in the Middle East since World War II?”

“What the hell are you even talking about?” Tommy says.

“Murry, get your man,” Al says, coughing out a cloud of pot vapor. “Can you believe this?”

“Tommy, Calvin, chill.” Murry says. “Let it go.”

Al is staring at Calvin. He barks, “What?” at her.


"Hey, sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you,” Calvin says, raising his arms like he’s under arrest. I wonder about his body language and how his hands in the air make Al’s anger something like a weapon preventing him from feeling free.
“Right, no apology needed down here,” I say. “Just your average, everyday n-word down here.” After I say it, I ask myself why I felt the need to. Everyone chuckles except Beth whose skull on my chest shakes back and forth softly, disapproving.

Al continues to gawk at Calvin. She lowers the weed bowl and steps across creek stones to get closer to him.

“I said sorry,” Calvin says to Al. “You can stop looking at me like you’re going to jihad me. I didn’t mean you. I wasn’t referring to you.”

“Who did you mean?”

“I don’t know, dude... Muhammad's, I guess. Camel-jockeys, you know?”

“Muslims?”

“It was a joke, okay?”

Beth’s body shuffles between my legs. I look down at her just in time to catch her exchanging glances with Murry.

Tommy gets involved, says, “Look, I’m having trouble understanding why you’re getting on Calvin’s case. Yeah, Cal might not have used the preferred term, or whatever, but why do you care so much? It’s just words. Those people are killers! They’d kill any of us here if given the chance.”

Al’s frustration is growing. “Many in my family are Muslim.” Murry stands up and moves to Al, trying to place a hand on her shoulder. Al slaps Murry’s hand away. “Not all Muslims are terrorists. They’re not all out to get you. Americans just keep lumping people like me…”

Tommy cuts her off, “People like you?”

“Tommy, stop,” Murry says.
He looks up at the tops of the trees. His shoulders relax and a hand falls into his pocket. He chugs his beer and then hops over to Calvin for a cigarette. Murry attempts once again to place a hand on Al. Just like before she slaps the hand away.

Al growls, “Stop trying to fix everything all the damn time!” She addresses everyone now, shouting, “You are all doing a great job killing my buzz.”

“Hey, maybe we should just go back to doing what we always do together,” Murry says.

Beth scoffs, “Telling dick and fart jokes and laughing about the last time we all got really wasted?”

Several seconds pass letting a silence grow between the group.

Finally, Murry replies, “At least we were happier when we did that.”

We all trade looks, moving from one glance to another. “Maybe they will reinstate the draft, maybe there are religious assholes who won’t stop until America falls, maybe the government is lying, maybe, maybe, maybe. What can we do about it? We can sit here talking. It is not going to change anything and none of us are in a position to make things happen anyway.”

“Not yet,” I overhear Beth mumble to herself.

Murry continues, “Isn’t the whole point of terrorism to disrupt our routine?”

"Staying aware of current events isn’t letting the bad guys win,” Beth says. “It is important to talk about hard things.”

Calvin says, “Let’s let it go and just have a good time, like Murry is saying. Let’s do what we do and stop debating already.”

“Debate is good,” Beth says.
“Yeah, but I think we’d all rather be doing something else,” Al says, her shoulders rolling forward. She looks defeated.

Beth twists her neck to search my face for support. But I quietly agree with the movement toward forgetting. Everything is already so hard enough.

“We could talk about homecoming,” Murry says. “We haven’t figured out everything for that.”

Beth grunts. She leans over to grab a beer, and then rises to her feet.

She returns to the water.

“You think they’ll still go through with homecoming?” Al asks.

“I think so,” Murry says.

I watch Tommy pick up a thin branch and start an imaginary sword fight with Calvin.

Al returns to pacing the other bank across the creek. She resumes smoking, the tiny flame of the lighter dipping into the marijuana pipe with each inhale. I wonder if her weed came from one of the bricks I helped steal. My heart beats faster considering it. I inhale and exhale, listening to Beth seated on a boulder several feet away. Focusing on her and the sounds she’s making helps stop myself from spiraling into fear of Marcus or police coming after me. She’s singing gently to herself between sips of cheap beer, “Nothing’s gonna change my world.”
Beth should be arriving soon to pick me up for the homecoming dance. I keep looking over myself in the long mirror hanging on the back of my bedroom door. I’ve worried all day about what to wear. I discovered my church shirt, tie, and pants are all too short on me. Somehow, I’ve grown several inches since the last time I dressed up. Mom is at work and won’t be home until long after I have left. She can’t help me. Or maybe she can. I head to my mother’s room to search through the closet she used to share with my dad.

Being in her space without her around feels weirdly criminal. I move like a cat burglar, trying not to disturb the still air around me as I tiptoe across the carpet. I notice the bed has been left unmade. This sends a mix of concern and relief through me. Mom is sleeping in the bed fully again, under the covers for the first time in a long while. But she has always taught me to make my bed every morning. It was one of her house rules. If she ever didn’t do it, my dad was sure to make the bed before leaving the house if he didn’t want mom to yell at him for being messy. So, I hope the blankets and comforter tossed around the mattress are a sign mom is moving toward being less sad. A step closer to her old self. In the closet, I’m surprised to find most of my father’s clothes have been removed and/or boxed up at the bottom of the floor. All that’s left of him, hanging across from the nice dresses my mom rarely gets to wear, is a single black suit with gray pinstripes and his plum-colored suede jacket covered by a clear plastic dry-cleaning bag. There is no clue to explain why these clothes have been left on hangers. I’ve never seen my dad in this suit. It’s not something he’d wear to church or a Ghanaian event. The jacket, he wore all the time. It would arrive on him every fall and he’d carry it through the winter. Every spring, when the warmer days would return, the jacket would be dry-cleaned and then put away.
for the season. I rip the plastic protecting the coat. Leaning into the closet, I raise one of
the sleeves to my nose and try to breathe the clean of my dad. It’s a smell that reminds me
of him even though it doesn’t belong to him. I do the same with the suit but all I get is the
sour, chemical stench of mothballs. A sharp pain stabs at my chest, a physical ache I
haven’t had in a while. I miss him.

I realize that I may have stolen something from my mother.

Maybe she had hoped to save a scent linked to my dad.

I scan behind me.

I’d rather ask my mother to forgive me for rummaging through her closet than resist
the urge to take this connection to my father. I snatch the suit and jacket and rush to my
room to try them on.

The suit fits okay. The waist is a little loose. It is tight on my shoulders and squeezes
my chest when buttoned up. How did I grow bigger than him in some places? In the mirror,
I see my dad frowning at me with my face. I resemble him in photo albums where he looks
young and cool with a version of mom under his arm. I try the suede jacket over the suit
coat, but it is way too hot. I peel it off and toss it on my twin-sized bed. I’ll wear the jacket
another day. Returning my attention to the mirror, I raise my arm and my reflection does
the same. I imagine Beth’s neck cradled by the crook of my elbow.

I throw my curved arm in an arc away from my body and yank it back. My other
arm joins the rotation as I rock side to side on my feet. I heard this called the cabbage patch.
It’s one of the few moves I know. I hate how awkward the dance looks on my reflection. I
stop and shoot myself a sarcastic thumbs up. I wish I was a better dancer, but part of the
problem is I think too much about how I might look to other people on the dance floor. It’s
why I prefer a punk show than a club. I’d rather slam into a mosh pit than join a choreographed slide. It doesn’t matter how I move when everyone around me is letting go in a wild pack.

I wish my dad was here to help me with all this.

Everyone thought he was a good dancer.

If he were here, he’d tease me and joke around, and then offer me tips to make sure the night goes well.

The doorbell rings through the house. I take a deep sigh, slide my damp hands down the thin lines of the suit. I hurry downstairs. Before answering, I race to grab a dryer sheet from the box tucked on top of our washer-dryer combination in the nook beside the kitchen. Rubbing the clean-linen scent over the fabric, I remember a time Beth and I were making out, and during a break to catch our breaths, she smiled and told me I smelled like “a hospital museum.” I laughed along with her while trying to sniff a hint of whatever about me reeked old and sterile. I never forgot it but have never found a way to ask her what she meant.

It’s dusk outside. Beth is turned away from the house and looking over the yard as I greet her. She’s shining in the last few minutes of daylight in a royal blue sequin dress that shows the blades of her shoulders. She spins to face me. The front of her outfit, cut like an upside-down A, plunging down past her collarbones and stopping at a point between her breasts, forces me to stutter, “H-hello, you look g-great.”

“Thank you!” she says. Twisting at the waist, the hem of her gown lightly brushes the large entrance step.
I start to join her outside. She slides down the squat stoop onto the brown trail that feet have cut to and from the gate. I pull the door shut behind me. I don’t bother to lock it.

Beth says, “You know, I’ve never seen the inside of your house?”

“There isn’t really much to see.”

“Not even your bedroom?” Her eyebrows bounce. “Just kidding. Maybe sometime?”

I nod and shrug, unsure where to move the conversation. Beth asks if my mother is home. If so, she’d like to say hi.

“No. She’s at work.”

“Really? Does she know you have a dance tonight?”

It was hard to ask mom for the money for homecoming. It was probably harder for her to agree to give it to me. Even if mom was the type to want to see me off to my first formal high school dance, she couldn’t afford to miss the hours working at the grocery store to cover the hundred dollars she had lent me—she made sure to call it a loan. That $100 got the two twenty-five-dollar dance tickets for Beth and me. I’ll have to make sure the rest will take care of dinner for the both of us and anything else that might pop up.

“My mom knows about homecoming. But she couldn’t get off work.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry. Hope she at least got a chance to see you in this suit. You look really good.”

It’s my turn to say thanks.

Maybe my mother had planned to save this suit for me, and I took it before it could be a gift. Beth runs her hands down the front of the jacket, tugs the collar and then turns
her fingers into a broom to sweep away a small row of fuzz left on my shoulder from the dryer sheet now tucked into my breast pocket.

“Are you ready?” Beth asks.

I pat my pockets: wad of cash, tickets, gum and student ID card. “Let’s go.”

We start to head to Beth’s car, parting the bronze overgrowth of the yard as we walk. We’ll still have to pick up Al before we meet Murry and Tommy for dinner. There’s an energy, the air around me shifting, making all the tiny hairs across my body tingle. It’s the feeling I get right as a band takes the stage and some people start howling before the crash of the first notes. It’s nerves and hopefulness. It’s worry and excitement about everything that could happen.

x.

We have dinner at the country club, party of five: Murry and Tommy, me and Beth, and Al, who has decided to be her own date for homecoming. Tommy’s dad made the reservation for us—he’s also a member. Our table overlooks the golf course. My attention drifts to the rolling hills and sand traps beyond the floor to ceiling windows. I wonder how much money and time it takes to keep the grounds green year-round. Beth is sure to nudge, poke, or say my name whenever my mind lingers too long mentally sketching the shadows and shapes made by the moonlight outside.

Al is doing most of the work keeping conversations going, making sure to fill any awkward silences. She’s talking about music and teasing Murry about her taste.

Al asks her, “How can you like Country?”

Murry carefully picks a single crouton from her Cesar salad and pops it into her mouth. While chewing she says, “I dunno. Just do. I like the melodies.”
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Al mocks plugging her ears with the complimentary bread rolls from the basket at the center of the table. She groans and says, “That stupid twang they always use. I can’t stand it.”

Al points a finger across the table at Murry, “You know Country music hates you, right?”

“Because I’m Asian and they’re rednecks? Please.” Her scoff is playful. “Not all Country is racist. Garth Brooks and the Dixie Chicks aren’t racist.”

“They’re called the Dixie Chicks,” I put in. “They’re celebrating the south that wanted to make me a slave. They may not be putting burning crosses on anyone’s lawns or hanging people, but their name definitely isn’t inviting me to be a fan.”

“Okay, but is it really any more intolerant than other genres of music like Rap? How often do rap songs put down women? How often do rappers call anyone they don’t like a fag? And, talking about racism, what about ‘Me So Horny,’ that was basically a hate crime.”

Al is quick to respond, “Wait, are you talking about 2 Live Crew? Jesus, have you been going through your parents’ old cassette tapes? Did you need a time machine for that reference? Rap and Hip-Hop has changed a lot.”

“This is why I listen to Classical,” Beth adds, stabbing a scallop off her plate. “Way less controversial.”

Like me, Tommy hasn’t spoken much but Beth’s comment makes him lay down his fork and steak knife. He says to her, “Dude, tell that to Wagner, Hitler’s fave.”

A chuckle sneaks past my clenched jaw.
Murry seizes an opportunity to bring us together. She says, “Tommy and Benny probably think everything that has more than three power chords sucks.”

I trade looks with Tommy. He’s almost directly across the table from me, on the other side of Beth and Murry. His expression says, do you want to handle this or me?

I half grin.

He starts, “Like everyone at this table wasn’t listening to, ‘All the Small Things,’ on repeat a few years ago? Or, bouncing to hits from Dookie in elementary school?”

Al jumps in, “That stuff’s different. It’s more Pop.”

“Yeah. Pop… punk,” I say and then sip my water.

Al says, “But that’s not the noise you two are into. I’m talking about those bands that sound like a race to get to the end of a song in the fastest, shittiest, way possible. Sounds like the lead singers are chewing on marbles while yelling into a megaphone.”

Beth points her thumb to me and says to the table, “I once asked him what he liked about harder punk. He said the emotion and the lyrics.”

“Bullshit,” Al exclaims. “It’s just angry thrashing.”

Al and Murry giggle with Beth.

Tommy raises his water glass to me. Picking mine up from the table too, we cheers each other in defense of the genre we love. Setting the glass down again, I remember my dad telling me it is bad luck to toast with water. Silently, I ask for forgiveness from whatever spirits that might be lurking around.

Al says, “Alright, we’re all just kidding around. Everybody listen to whatever makes you happy. Who cares? But, really though, I don’t know how you two never got
your asses kicked by roughnecks with mohawks going to those shows in the city. You look like a couple of narcs.”

Tommy nods to me.

It’s my turn to answer.

I explain to the table, “The crowds at most venues kind of just ignore us. Especially at the 9:30 Club. I mean, they do interact with us in the pit, but there’s kind of no way not to.”

Tommy joins in, “Everyone pushes up against everyone when the music is on and bodies are coming from all directions.”

“Even above because of stage divers,” I add. “But we never had any trouble with anyone.”

“That’s not true,” Murry says. “Remember the one time I went with you both to a concert and then you two decided to go to a house show you overheard these girls with safety-pin earrings talking about?”

Any skin Tommy has visible at the table flushes red as his hair. He’s laughing. I forgot how infectious the sound of his happiness is.

Murry volunteers herself to tell the story.

“So, we grabbed a road map from a gas station and found the address Benny eavesdropped. When we got there, it was a gutter-punk flop house. People were everywhere, some shooting up heroin, some smoking crack and who knows what else. I had to pee. There were no working toilets in the entire house. I had to go in a bush by the side of the building with Tommy and Benny standing by for cover.”

Al asks, “Why didn’t you all leave the minute you got there?”
Everyone at the table looks to Tommy.

“Nope,” he says. “It was Benny’s idea to go in the first place and he wanted to see at least one song before we left.”

“You never told me that,” Murry says.

I finish chewing a spiral of pasta, swallow and admit, “Yeah, I was the one that caught the address from the girls at the concert earlier that night and told Tommy I wanted to go. I asked if we could stay for a set.”

“Well how was the music? Was it worth it?” Al asks.

I explain how the band was set up in a corner of the basement. Murry mentions the sour and smoky funk of the place. The sound, trapped in such a cramped space was deafening. I tell the table, “I couldn’t really hear much over the ringing.”

The truth was I wasn’t at all interested in discovering a new band. I just didn’t want to sit drawing and crying alone in my room, worrying about my mother drinking away her grief. I didn’t want to go home to a house that felt lonelier without my dad in it. I wanted a distraction from my own sadness, and Tommy was great for that. He was always ready to lead or join me to places loud enough to drown out the past and my loss, and my fear and the future. He seemed to know when I needed someone to follow me into the kind of unquiet I could only find in the basement of a sketchy, drug house, punk show. He told Murry to stay with him at the back of the room, near the stairs while I pushed forward through the bouncing bodies to the band. I could hear nothing but screeching crunches slapping off the flat concrete all around me. I could feel the vibrations jolt through me, and they got stronger the closer I moved toward the amps and speakers. Whenever I felt like I’d almost slip on the sweaty wetness coating the floor, I’d grab a shoulder to catch myself
and glimpse back in Tommy’s direction and I’d know he was there even though I couldn’t see him. When I got as far as I could push, just close enough to see the dim gleam of chrome accents on the guitars and drums, I knew I could scream all I wanted and nothing would stop the waves of sound crashing over me. So, I shouted. I yelled everything I wanted to say to the person who killed my dad and to the universe that would let it happen in the country he loved so fucking much: *fuck you, you rotting piece of shit... if I ever get the chance, I will cut your fucking throat and scorch your earth... fuck off and die.*

“Thanks,” I say to Tommy across the dining table at the country club.

He grumbles, “For what?”

“That night was good until this huge bald guy with a spider web tattoo on the top of his skull told us to leave because no one knew us.”

He nods, says, “It’s whatever.”

I can see myself beginning to forgive him for the whole incident with Marcus. We lived. We’re here now, alive and doing alright. Maybe stealing that weed could become another interesting story we tell at dinners.

Murry laughs, “I’m just surprised no one kicked us out sooner. We obviously didn’t belong there. We look like shopping mall teen catalog models.”

The table chuckles together and there’s a satisfying, peaceful pause that follows. The conversation starts up again as we finish our plates. Waiting for the check, Tommy tells the table he brought a surprise for us. I smile along with everyone else, imagining whatever trouble he’s brought with him to distract us from everything that makes living so heavy.

x.
It is ten o’clock at night and we’re just walking into the homecoming dance. At the edge of the school parking lot, our group took turns chugging down a liter of vodka Tommy and Murry brought with them. I’m feeling good. My shoulders don’t feel as tight as they did an hour ago.

I can hear the pounding music outside of the building. We reach the entrance to the school gymnasium. Beth and I are first to the door. I hand our tickets over to the student government volunteers and then stroll inside. Then Beth and I flash our student ID at the two school resource officers. In the gym lobby we pass the watchful eyes of teacher-chaperones and administrators. We find a spot to stand and wait by the closed row of metal doors that open into the courts. Murry soon join us. The SROs stop Tommy and Al and ask for more than their student ID. I watch Tommy search through his wallet for his driver's license. I figure the SROs remember having to escort him off campus last spring for being caught with the retractable hunting knife he usually carried on him when we went to shows--he must have forgotten it in his pants pocket. The blade fell out while searching for a pen during History. To return tonight, Murry had to get special clearance from the principal and a signed statement from Tommy’s parents promising that he would respect the rules and boundaries set by the school.

We stand waiting underneath a banner that reads “The TIME of your life.” Tommy is cleared and comes to join us, but the SROs take a little longer to dismiss Al. They each take a turn reading and flipping over her license. When they finally dismiss her, she storms over to our group. Beth and Murry ask her if she’s okay. Al shrugs and says, “It’s a tough time to look like you’re from any country that ends with ‘istan.’” She pushes past us and pulls open the closest gym door. Beth grabs my hand, and we follow along with the others.
The five of us are covered in waves of pulsing lights and sound. Al’s shoulders start jumping, and for a moment, walking behind her, I worry she’s sobbing. But she stops to point past the dancing crowds to a large platform setup behind the DJ’s setup. There sits a nearly life-size cardboard and papier-mâché DeLorean time-machine. Al shouts, “They fucking did it! I have to admit, I respect the work that must have gone into that thing.”

Beth leans into me. She has to nearly yell in my ear to be heard over the speakers. “I’m ready to dance!”

I shake my head up and down to let her know I got what she said, but my feet don’t move. There’s a burst of motion and Beth is pulling me out onto the packed dance floor. If the rest of our group follows, I don’t notice. My eyes are studying the way overhead beams of spinning light cut through the mass of moving silhouettes and sparkle the thousands of tiny discs sewn across the fabric of Beth’s dress. She is glitter in motion, magic. When she seems to have found a place that pleases her, Beth halts and hops backwards into me. Her butt bumps into my crotch as her hips begin to swing. My heart speeds up. I hold her waist and together we find a shared rhythm in the beats around us. She spins to face me. Her fingers trail down the arms of my father’s suit as we dance. I’m not worried about who might be watching or how I look swaying and rocking, rolling my body against Beth’s. I dip my head to peck at her neck and she giggles. I don’t worry about where our friends are. We’ll catch up with them later, or maybe we won’t. I don’t worry about time and space beyond the bubble Beth and I have created on the dance floor. This is more than a distraction. I hope she feels that too. Together, right now, like this, we don’t need to worry about school or terror attacks or grades or racists or citizenship or robberies or death or death or death. We just keep dancing, song after song. When we get tired and hot, we
shuffle sweating to the refreshment table and dab at our skin with cocktail napkins beside the punch bowls. We breathe and chat with friends for a bit. At one point, we step out into the gym lobby and then just outside of the front doors. We goof about the steam rising from the tops of our heads as we try to cool down in the chilly night air. It's not long before we return to the music.

When the DJ ends the evening with a slow song, I pull Beth closer. She rests her head on my chest as we rock back and forth to the tempo. I’m waltzing on the inside.
The Monday after homecoming, I’m standing under a glass awning at the East exit of school. Above me, a flood of fat, grey, clouds streams across the sky. School has just ended and it is probably going to storm soon. It’s 2:30 in the afternoon but the light poles around the parking lot are on. Last year, I used to get rides home with Tommy. He’d come most days to pick up Murry, and I’d hop in too. Beth gives me a ride home sometimes, but today she’s busy doing Writing tutoring for middle schoolers. Al caught a ride with her ex-boyfriend Mike Chen-Edisto. I usually stay away from Mike. I’d never ask him for a ride. I’d never ask him for anything. I’m worried he knows his mother’s girlfriend calls me over to their home sometimes for sex.

Thunder cracks overhead.

I’m preparing myself mentally for the walk, thinking about how to keep my sketchbook dry in my backpack, debating leaving everything in my locker. Then Pat and his Liberian boy exit the building together. They stay several feet apart. I call over to Pat and sprint closer. Pat stops for me to catch up. The Liberian boy goes on without him, toward a green mid-90s Honda Accord at the far end of the parking lot.

“Hey, Pat!”

“Kumasi?”

“Do you think I could catch a ride with you guys?” Pat scowls at me. “I know, sorry. I wouldn’t ask but it’s going to rain. I don’t have a rain coat or an umbrella. I’m wearing canvas sneakers. My feet are going to get soaked.”

“I don’t know,” he says. “We can ask him.”
Pat starts walking and I follow. At the car, the Liberian boy is already inside running the engine. He’s spinning the radio dial when Pat taps on the window. The Liberian boy looks up at us curiously, leans forward and rolls down the driver’s side window.

“Selassie, can my friend get a ride.”

The Liberian boy eyes me, says, “Aren’t you that weed robber?”

I hate that this crime is now how some people will know me.

Pat intervenes, “He’s cool. I trust him.”

A couple seconds pass between them and the boy shrugs, “Okay.”

I get in the car and Pat walks around to the front passenger seat.

“Thank you, Selassie,” I say.

He sucks his teeth and says, “Hey, do me a favor and don’t call me that, especially in public. I don’t need my African name going around school. My teammates will start calling me ‘Sally’ or ‘Lassie’ or something else as lame.”

He looks over his shoulder to read my face. I nod to show I get it. Selassie doesn’t tell me what I should call him instead. He asks me where I live and I tell him the name of my neighborhood. Selassie says he knows the area. He’s been to a few parties there. He lists a few people and asks if I know them. I tell him I’ve seen them coming and going around where I stay, but I don’t know them. The car pulls out of the school parking lot.

Pat’s been thinking. He says to Selassie, “Why do you care so much about what Americans think of you? It’s the name your parents gave you. They didn't escape Samuel Doe's junta just for you to be scared to have white people trip over your name.” Pat picks a piece of lint trapped between Selassie's twisted locks.
I catch Selassie looking back at me in the rearview mirror, studying my reaction. Pat sees this too and reminds Selassie, “Kumasi is cool.” Selassie shifts in his seat and then reaches a nervous hand over to Pat. He rests his palm on Pat’s knee. Pat is smiling broader than I’ve ever seen. He’s been gloomy all day, frowning at his locker, in drawing class and during lunch, groaning every time someone around him mentioned how much fun they had at homecoming this past weekend. He didn’t ask me if I enjoyed the dance, and I didn’t bother telling him how the night went for me. I didn't tell him about how good it felt to have the sub-bass of Top-40 rap songs pound through my body while Beth grinded on me under orbiting party lights. I was scared of Pat’s resentment for not being able to go to the dance with the person he really wanted to.

Selassie speaks up, “You know, Patrick, you talk all about African pride but when I ask you about college you aren’t looking at schools in Lagos. You don’t tell any of your teachers or even kids in your Pan-African club to call you by the name your parents gave you.”

“You mean, the name Malomo? That’s because it’s my middle name, and it only means something for my family.”

“Same difference. And you’re right, my parents worked hard to get over here. They fought to get that refugee status and I was born here and didn't have to see that civil war. I’m American, technically, so why is it weird for me to care about what Americans think? In fact, all of us in this car had parents who fought like hell to get here and make us American. Why romanticize Africa like some of these Kwanza kids wearing kente and Ankh necklaces? Liberia was founded on the thought that if enough Black people over here returned to the continent, it would somehow fix things, and look how that turned out. My
life, our lives, are here. Why do I have to use a name I don’t want to? Why should we be expected to show loyalty to Liberia, or Nigeria, or Ghana just because we’re the American children of African immigrants?”

“I’m not American,” I say. “Not yet. My mom and I just got our naturalization notice.”

Pat turns around to look at me, “Whoa! That's big, Kumasi! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. Is it that big?”

“I mean, it kinda is,” Selassie says. “You’re going to be legit. They'll probably make you denounce your Ghanaian citizenship.”

My stomach gurgles at the sound of this, and I'm not sure why.

“Hey, did either of you feel any different?” I ask. “After your parents became American, did you notice a change or something?”

“I was too little to remember,” Selassie says.

Pat answers, “I was born here, but my parents became citizens when I was in elementary school. I remember being nervous at the time. I could sense how much it meant to my mother and father. I remember worrying, like the government had made some kind of mistake and would take back their approval. I remember praying a lot. Oh, and there was a singer at the induction.”

"Wait, like a performance?" Selassie asks.

"No, I think he was just a European guy who decided to start singing once everyone in the room became official. There was about two dozen people there from all over the
world. The singer was probably from Eastern Europe. I can't remember what he sang but it was from his old country, and it was loud. It sounded kind of like Russian."

I ask, “What did you all do?”

“Nothing. We all just waited for him to finish. He was crying and then my father was too.”

I slouch down in my seat. Selassie has turned onto an old county road. This isn’t the quickest way to my house. Maybe he’s enjoying the ride and the conversation, enjoying the moment to be more of himself. He’s not saying anything just nodding, smiling, left hand never leaving Pat’s thigh for too long. In the gap before someone starts speaking again, I notice the low radio. A commercial selling the state lottery is on. It’s a cash prize that could change a person’s life forever, their children’s lives forever, their children’s children’s lives forever. Sometimes I wonder if it’s dumb to play the lottery, to risk what is yours in hopes for a small chance at something better. The radio ad finishes by reminding us in the car that the lottery sales help fund schools. I think about Selassie’s parents and how they must have gambled what they had, just like Pat's mom and dad, and my mom and dad—all of them gamblers with hopes that support the improvement of things here in the USA.

"Ever since September people keep saying we whenever they talk about America, but I don’t see myself doing that. Not yet anyway.” I ask, “Is that weird?”

Selassie and Pat don't respond. Maybe they're thinking about what I’ve said. I hear a horn honk behind us, but I don’t look back. I’m spotting trees that have begun changing their color. The car honks again.

Selassie says, “I’m going seven over, why don’t they just fucking go around?”
Patrick says, “It’s a solid line, they can’t overtake. These roads barely have a shoulder. Go slower and really piss them off.”

“Pat, is that true?” I ask. "You can’t pass another car when the yellow lines are solid.”

“Lord, Kumasi! That’s basic. You've got to learn this stuff if you ever want to get your license.”

I tell him there is, “No need to be a jerk about it.”

“This guy is really riding my ass.” Selassie says.

And then the car behind cuts into the oncoming lane, speeds in front of us and stops suddenly. Selassie stamps on the brake. My head slams into the back of Pat’s seat. Selassie’s Honda skids but he regains control and steers the car to a stop, two tires on the thin shoulder of the road. The car in front of us is a black Mercedes with windows tinted so dark I can’t even see the silhouettes of passengers. The Benz pulls closer to the shoulder too. On this road we haven’t seen another car in several minutes.

The rear doors of the Mercedes open.

Marcus, and one of the guys I last saw him with, climb out onto the road.

They march over to us.

Both of them carry guns.

I shout to Selassie, “Drive!”

Marcus is pointing the barrel of his pistol to the windshield. In seconds, he smashes the window of the passenger seat across from me with the butt of his gun. Marcus reaches in, opens the door and punches me in the jaw. I’m dazed dizzy. He gets a grip on my
bookbag, still hooked around my arms, and he manages to drag me out of the car. Marcus’s partner is yelling for Pat to shut up.

“What’s good, Motherboy?” Marcus says to me. "I see you finally found some other midnight-colored boys to hang out with. Are they from the motherland too? Motherboys?"

“Marcus. I’m sor—"

He punches the wind out of my stomach and I can’t breathe.

I stumble onto one knee.

Marcus tucks his gun into his pants behind his waist.

His partner does the same and then shouts for Selassie to drive away, “Go!”

Pat yells back, “No!”

Selassie asks what they’re going to do to me.

Marcus’ partner tells them that their problem isn’t with them. “If you don’t peel away quick, there will be more drama.”

I’m close enough to the car for the engine’s vibrations to rumble through me. There’s a brief moment of silence. Maybe everyone is considering where we are and how we got here.

Selassie’s car speeds off, Pat screaming, “Stop!”

The sedan is gone in seconds.

“Get up,” Marcus barks at me. “Walk over to our car. We’re going to take a little ride.”

I shake my head, still a little breathless. I’m sobbing an apology but there are no tears.
Marcus leans forward and punches my temple. Stars. I actually see thin, stretched stars flash across my vision. Marcus claps his hands together. “You really thought you and that Conan-O’Brien-Lucky-Charms-Leprechaun-ass-looking punk were going to get away with this? You really thought I couldn’t find you, huh? We were just going to be, ‘oh well’ and just move on? For real, Motherboy?”

“What are you going to do?”

Marcus’ laugh blares across the quiet asphalt. “Yo, that’s up to you. Now get on your feet and walk over to the car.”

Doing as I’m told, I wobble up onto both of my feet.

Marcus turns to his partner.

I bolt into the woods.

I’m running, not to anywhere, just running, hoping to get lost in the forest. Newly fallen leaves are helping me slide around trunks. I can hear them close behind me. Marcus’ partner curses his sneakers damaged by wild brush and patches of wet ground. I’m wheezing tired.

My backpack hooks a low branch, rips, and I slip, tripping over a root, headfirst. My hands shoot in front of me and my wrists and elbows take the fall. I roll onto my side. The contents of my torn bookbag are scattered around me. I spot my sketchbook open and muddied by my feet.

Marcus and his partner have caught me.

“Quit crying,” Marcus says, kicking my ribs. He drops his heel into my stomach. I curl in pain, digging into the Earth like a worm. I have no strength to scream. I whisper, “help,” to no one.
“You fucked up, Motherboy. These punks out here really got you into some shit. Been watching that school for almost a week now, waiting for you to come out, trying to catch you riding home with your boy. Since it's just you, I need you to deliver a message to the red-head.” Marcus stands above me. I watch him thinking. "You know, no matter how much time you and those other two Motherboys spend out here with these bougie white folks, you’re not one of them?" I don’t know what he means. He seems to see the confusion in my eyes, and for a moment, Marcus looks sad for me. "You owe us ten grand. Until we get it paid, in full, we're going to keep showing up out here and things will get worse for you and everyone you care about here in the burbs. Do you hear me?"

I tell him yes.

Marcus signals for his friend to come closer.

Together, they stomp me into darkness.
Freedom from Want
Norman Rockwell
(c.1943)
Oil on Canvas
116.2 cm x 90.2 cm
One of my father's favorite Rockwell paintings is *Freedom from Want*. "The one with the white family with that big bird," he'd call it, always grinning and shaking his head in disbelief, remembering the size of the holiday turkey in the image. My family never had a turkey day. Like many immigrant households, ours adopted the traditions of our new nation whether we understood them or not. We celebrated Thanksgiving each year. We'd prepare a bunch of Ghanaian food. Crowding the kitchen together, my parents would sing along to the highlife records blaring in the living room, mostly E.T. Mensah and "Sweet Mother" by Prince Nico Mbarga on repeat. We'd add to the meal with dishes Americans put on their Thanksgiving tables. We made foods that we liked or were curious to try—cranberry sauce, macaroni and cheese, different kinds of casseroles and stuffing. But never turkey. My parents didn't like the taste, and one fall I had a slice with mashed potatoes served during lunch at my elementary school. The meat was so dry I had to soak it in the processed gravy the lunch lady dumped on my dining tray. It took forever to chew and swallow.

So, every Thanksgiving we'd bake a chicken instead or mom would bring home rotisserie from work. Dad would pray and we'd take turns saying what we were grateful for that season. Dad would always finish by saying, "Bless us, oh Lord, for this bounty we receive," he'd grin, wink at my mom and me, "It may not be like that white family with that big bird, but what more could we want?" Then we'd eat.

Over the table my mother and father would share stories about growing up as barefoot village kids.

"We'd eat with our dirty hands sometimes."

"We were warriors."
"Now we’ve taught our son the right way to eat with a fork and knife.”

“Continental style. We're civilized, eh?”

And we'd all laugh. It was kind of great. All of it.

Last year we broke the tradition. Dad was shot in the back of the head in the weeks before Thanksgiving, robbed in the city. Police think he was murdered by one of his fares. “People get desperate around that time of year,” one officer told my mother and me. Violent robberies spike in the months leading up to Christmas. They think my dad refused to surrender the cash he had collected driving people around the city that day. It's probably true. Dad had been increasingly worried about money in the weeks before his death. He stayed out driving later and later. It used to be that dad would come home weeknights and I'd be waiting for him at the dining table doing homework or sketching. I'd be waiting for him beside a plate of food my mom had made and left plastic-wrapped for dad to find. He'd come home, greet me, pick up the plate and take it to the kitchen to warm it up in the microwave. He'd heat his food, share crazy stories about his day or show me an art book he'd picked up from the library. With a tired smile he'd say, "What more could we want?"

I think he really meant what more could we need?

There was a change in the weeks before his death, after he asked me if I wanted to go to college. I told him I didn't know. He asked me why. I told him because I wasn't sure about being able to afford it. He said that's not something I should have to worry about. Dad said that it was a father's concern.

He started staying out later and later to get as many fares as he could, going to places he didn't like to drive. He’d come home after I’d gone to bed. Some mornings when
I caught him before school, he’d still say it, “What more could we want?” But there was no smile. It felt like he meant something else.

What more could we need?

Maybe.

What more is needed?

That's the question shooting through my skull sharp and dull when I wake up on the forest floor. My body is sore, bruised and aching. The area around me damp and reeking like urine.

x

I'm not sure how much time has passed, but there is still some daylight behind the clouds. The earth spins beneath me. I can feel it now. Everything is blurry and waves of nausea crash in my gut. I sit up slow. I'm alone. My shirt is soaked with sweat. My sketchbook and torn book-bag glisten. I groan rolling onto my hands and knees and crawl closer to investigate. Reaching for the sketchbook the heel of my palm scrapes through a tiny puddle in the soil. I raise the book, sniff it. Piss. Marcus or his partner, or both of them, have pissed on my stuff.

I wobble up onto my feet wondering if the wetness on my body is only my own. I hope it is. Standing, I can see artificial light shining through cracks between the acres of trees. A neighborhood. But I can't see where the woods end and the houses begin, how far I'll have to walk.
I bend over, collect my things into the ripped backpack. I shuffle toward the light. The shallow wheeze of my own breathing surprises me. Each step ricochets in my ribs. I want to cry for help, but there isn’t enough air in me.

After what feels like half a mile, I exit the woods into a backyard and startle a group of early grade school kids playing a game of tag. Their screams are shrill and bounce in my head. I bark, “Shut-up,” and they scream louder. They run away, each taking off in a different direction. I suddenly realize how I must look and decide to move faster. I don’t want to be seen by parents who must be close by. I go around the house and I reach a cul-de-sac. I can hear and then see a front door began to creak open. One of the children I’ve frightened is pointing me out to his mother. I start to run. Every stride feels like an incision into my side. The cool air stabs my aching lungs, but I don’t stop until I’m out of the neighborhood, across a four-lane road, and up a short grassy hill. I trip, going down the other side of the knoll, toppling over and landing on my ass at the edge of a strip mall parking lot.

I know this place.

Ahead of me is the grocery store where my mom works.

My body rises and starts to carry me across the expanse of black asphalt, cars and yellow lines. I avoid eye contact with patrons loading shopping bags of food into their vehicles. At the entrance of the market, I veer to the side of the building. Part of me wants to run to my mother, find her at her food prep station and tell her about the bad men who have scared me. Instead, I find myself at a payphone making a collect call. Between rings I press my thumping forehead against the cool stainless-steel blinders that border the phone.
When a voice speaks on the other end of the receiver a few hot tears escape my eyes and fall to the pavement.

“You look terrible, kiddo,” Katie says to me from the driver seat.

I sigh and sink a little, closing my eyes and gritting my teeth with every parking lot speed bump that rattles my flesh and bones.

“I feel terrible,” I say.

“I mean you’re covered in mud, and you reek. Did you piss yourself? I’m going to have to have this car detailed before Susan comes home next week.”

“The smell isn’t me. I mean, it is, but not me, just my things. Sorry. Thanks for picking me up. I didn’t know who else to call.”

Katie frowns, she seems to be trying to avoid looking over at me. “So, you want to explain what happened?”

I search for the words. Struggle with where to begin. A single name falls out of my mouth, “Marcus.”

“Who is Marcus?”

“He’s that guy I told you about a while ago. That story I told you about. Tommy and me and the gun and the weed?”

Katie’s eyes flash. She remembers. “You weren’t lying about all that?” Her eyebrows raise and then she turns to me. Her face scrunches thinking. “You were actually dumb enough to steal from a for real drug dealer?”

I stare down at my hands in my lap. Black crescents punctuate the tips of every finger: the forest dirt trapped under my nails. “No, I wasn’t lying.”
Katie’s attention is back on the road. Her expression returns to disinterest. I’m regretting my decision to call her. Maybe it would have been better to try to limp miles home than to be sitting in Susan Chen-Edisto’s sports-car worrying about what Katie thinks of me. The first few droplets of rain appear on the windshield. They plop against the glass but the storm the sky promised still hasn’t arrived. Katie doesn’t even have to bother to use the windshield wipers.

“Did they try to kill you?” she asks.

“No, but they threatened to hurt me more and hurt other people if Tommy and I don’t pay them.”

“How much?” Katie asks, pulling the stirring wheel left to make a turn.

“Ten-thousand dollars.”

“Jesus... What are you going to do?”

I stare down at the torn and urine-soaked bookbag on the car floor between my feet. I tell her I don’t know but I need to talk to Tommy. I ask her to drop me off at Calvin’s. I give her the address. She says she’s familiar with that neighborhood. “Katie, do you think you might be able to help?” My mouth tastes sour. “Like, Susan makes a lot of money, right?” My chest tightens and my limbs start tingling, all pins and needles.

“That’s really gross, kiddo.”

My face is hot with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry... Never mind.”

We’re quiet for a while, listening to the slaps of stray rain drops.

Katie clears her throat. “I might be able to get you a couple thousand, but that’s it, and you have to pay me back. I’m serious.”
I nod to show I understand.

“Come by the house in a couple days and I’ll have some cash.”

“Thank you,” I say and reach a nervous hand over resting it on her thigh.

She looks down at her leg, looks back at me. Katie grabs my wrist, lifts my palm from her jeans and guides my hand to my own knee.

x

Tommy announces my arrival in the basement as soon as I get off the stairs. Below the cone of light from the hanging bulb at the center of the space, he calls to me.

“Hey Benny, long time no see.”

Beneath a standing Tommy, Calvin is huddled over a bucket gutting a cigar.

Calvin looks up to me as I shuffle into the light. His face twists as he asks, “What happened to you?”

“You smell like piss,” Tommy adds.

I tighten my grip on the soiled backpack swinging from my fist. I respond with two hard syllables, “Mar-cus.”

Tommy shifts the weight of his body and then folds his arms. His eyebrows lower and his pupils focus on my mouth.

“Marcus found me, at school. He followed me.”

Calvin bounces upright, “How’d he find you? Shit, did he follow you here?”

New sweat beads all over my skin as I try to remember if I saw a black Mercedes in the shopping center parking lot. Did I spot Marcus in the Katie’s sideview mirror?

Tommy reads something only he can see on the ceiling and says, “They’ve been looking for us this whole time. They want their weed back?”
“They didn’t mention returning the bricks. Marcus wants ten-thousand dollars.”

Calvin shouts, “Holy fuck, that’s way too much. There’s no way that shit you all stole was worth 10-grand.”

Tommy rolls his eyes, says, “I’m not sure that guy cares about fair market value.” He shifts his gaze between me and Calvin. “If I were them and had to collect money from a bunch of teenagers or deal with the consequences from whoever my supplier is, I’d try to beat the shit out of us.”

"What the fuck, man?” Calvin yells. “I barely touched that stuff. I just sold a little bit of it.”

“That won’t matter,” I say.

“We’re fucked,” Calvin says, hanging his head. “It’s only a matter of time…”

Tommy cuts in, “Before they what... Kill us?” He laughs. “Let them come, we’ll be here. We can’t give them what we don’t have.”

I speak up, “I was thinking, maybe if you all sold what weed there is left and we all ask around, borrow some cash, maybe rake some yards, wash some cars, we could gather the money…”

Tommy laughs, “No. We can’t.” He reads my confusion and says, “I mean, we won’t pay, Benny. We have no reason to. They can’t kill us, or any of our friends or family. That would be more trouble than they want, right? This is the suburbs. We’re not hood thugs. Not to be insensitive or whatever, but if we were shot or killed the cops wouldn’t rest until they had Marcus in cuffs and he’d be looking at a lifetime in jail. Shit, in fact, even if he tried to hurt us again or even if he showed up, we could call the cops. Who are
the police going to believe, a bunch of kids from the suburbs or some drug dealer from the city?”

“He didn’t hurt us,” I say. “He hurt me.”

Tommy rests a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry this is happening. If we had stuck together this probably wouldn’t have gone down this way. I could have protected you.”

“Protected me?”

Tommy reaches behind his torso and beneath his shirt. He reveals a snub nose revolver tucked under the waist band of his jeans. He holds it up. Calvin takes a step backward. I don’t move. I keep glaring at Tommy waiting for him to notice my anger.

“Do you just carry that all the time now?” I ask.

But he doesn’t listen. Tommy just keeps talking.

“Come on, what are we supposed to do, run? Run where? We got to stand our ground.”

“This isn’t a joke,” I remind him. “Marcus is here. He’s serious. We need to find a way to pay him.”

“And how do we know he won’t just come back and ask for more?”

Tommy’s question stumps me. In my hesitation, I can sense Calvin begin to side with him.

“But really,” Calvin says, “couldn’t Marcus start to think we’re a bunch of pussies?”

Tommy says, “If he tries to show up again, if he tries to escalate, we’ll fire back.”

“I know Marcus,” I correct myself, “I knew him.” I’m not sure what I mean when I say this.
“Alright,” Tommy says, tucking the gun behind him again. “Pay him back your half, $5000. I can give you some of the weed we’ve got left and you can sell it, but it won’t nearly be enough. I’m not giving Marcus a fucking dime of whatever it is he thinks I owe.”

I turn to Calvin.

He rolls his shoulders.

“We need to do whatever we have to do to fix this,” I say. “I’m not about to go against some gang or whatever he’s got behind him.”

Tommy smirks. “And what are we?” he asks.

My vision shakes and it’s getting harder to stay standing.

I turn away to leave. I can’t do this anymore.

Over my shoulder I can hear Tommy ask Calvin if he is “soft too.” He says that there’s safety in numbers, and that everything will be okay if they keep looking out for one another. Climbing slowly up the stairs to the first floor, I hear him raise his voice to say, “We’ll even keep looking out for Benny!”

I have no words for his promise.

I wonder if Tommy believes his bullshit about protecting each other.

I exit Calvin’s house and head up the street toward my own. Outside, the wet wind reminds me of the damage done to my body. Each step home sends cracks rippling through me.

I push through the gate past the patches of browning grass in the yard. Once inside my house, I skulk through the darkness and cool, still, air toward the kitchen and to the fridge. I drop my damp book-bag. It hits the checkered vinyl flooring with a clop.
My chest is in a vice. I pull a freezer bag of goat meat and press it to my throbbing ribs. Shuffling over to the wall phone, I dial Pat's number. I haven't called his house since last spring when we planned a trip into the city to visit the National Museum of African Art, extra credit for Dr. Ambush. But my fingers on the keypad remember the digits that connect my voice to Pat.

His father answers.

I tell Pat's dad who I am and make up a reason why I'm calling, something about homework, a lie that slides out of my mouth as if spoken through me.

He tells me to hold for a moment and then silence, and then...

"Hello, Kumasi?"

"Pat."

"Are you okay?"

"Mostly."

Pat doesn't ask me anything else.

"That was scary," he says.

"Yeah."

My head is ringing.

"Selassie was pretty upset. You need to apologize to him. His window."

"I know."

I imagine the Liberian boy trying to explain the broken car window to his parents and my heart starts racing.
"Kumasi, I can't be around stuff like that. I'm not trying to be a part of this. My family has gone through a lot... They've done a lot for me... I can't..." he whispers, "get caught up."

Pat says we shouldn't talk for a while and then a dial tone. A dam breaks inside me and I can barely hang up the phone as I'm sliding down the side of the wall, collapsing in bellowing sobs, folding over the large cold package of frozen farm meat. The room is blurred and stretched by flowing tears.

I can't see past my own heaviness.

My breaths get stuck in my throat.

I choke and sputter, gasping for air.
Pat hasn’t spoken to me for days. Not a single word at our neighboring lockers. Not a syllable between us during drawing class. Pat stopped sitting with me at lunch and joined another table with some of the kids from his African club. I tried eating alone at the wooden picnic table only once. The following day a group of students had claimed it. After that, I asked Dr. Ambush if I could stay in the art room during my lunch. Luckily, she said it was okay. It’s also her planning period. So, I’ve started to skip eating. Instead, I hang around the studio drawing, working on homework, thinking of ways I might earn money to pay back Marcus, or helping Dr. Ambush while she preps for the next classes.

Sometimes we talk. I ask Dr. Ambush why she plays Portuguese music all the time. She tells me she’s from Brazil and says it reminds her of home.

“It also helps me create. I’m opposed to ritual. I never go about making my pieces in any specific way. I have friends, very successful artists who claim to reject prescriptivism but when they prepare to do the work, swear they need to use a particular kind of brush, or a certain kind of canvas or film. The light must be just right or they need to have just the right amount of coffee. They need to be facing just the right direction to begin. They have a list of steps they need to do before they work in order to conjure inspiration. They always cite famous creators as proof the constraints they put on their process are necessary. ‘It’s not for everyone,’ they say but it worked for Rivera or Botero or Clark.”

Dr. Ambush rolls her eyes, shooing an invisible fly a lot like my mother tends to do. Her mouth twists to the side. I’ve studied with Dr. Ambush every semester since coming to this school, but it’s like I'm looking at her for the first time. She has a wispy
mustache. The thin follicles above her lip match the fine black hairs covering her forearms. Her eyebrows almost touch like Frida Kahlo--one of her heroes she once told me during my first painting class with her. The hair makes Dr. Ambush look young, kind of like she was going through puberty, that and her short, bobbed hair. But she dresses in layered gowns and long vests and frocks like an older woman. Dr. Ambush was sort of ageless.

“Anyway,” she continued, “All that to say the only thing I need to produce is music playing. I can be anywhere, wherever, working with any medium, any material, and I can make something, but I have to have music. Jazz, Nana Vasconcelos, classical, Samba, anything, preferably the louder the better. I don’t trust a creative space that’s too quiet.”

“That makes sense,” I say, helping her cut the string on a stack of bound, old, magazines she collected from the local public library. Her next class is an intro art class for freshmen, and she has the students working on collages.

Dr. Ambush’s scissors slice through a parcel string keeping a fat tower of glamor magazines together. “Do you listen to music when you create?” she asks.

I watch the beauty mags fan out across the studio table. The glossy copies of cover girls stare up at me, telling me to learn about seasonal fashions and cosmetic fads.

“When I draw at home, I like to listen to punk on my parent’s giant, old disc changer. It’s hard to get all of the emotion, you know, the feeling. If that makes sense.”

Dr. Ambush smiles now, says she gets it. She thanks me again for helping her and then squats down to pick up another pile of discharged magazines off the floor. She rests the stack on the table.

“Why don’t you get a portable CD player or save up for that nice MP3 player that just came out?”
“An iPod? That thing is way too expensive.”

Dr. Ambush snaps another binding and the magazines slide into a pile with the others. “I can give you an old Walkman of mine, if you like.”

“Really.”

“Absolutely, I never use it. I do warn you. It skips a lot if you move around. You can’t go running with it.”

“That won’t be a problem,” I say. “I don’t run.”

Dr. Ambush stares confused. “Oh, I thought you did. A week ago, you came into class with some scratches and bruises and I thought you said you were sore from having a fall during a run.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I say. I turn to look elsewhere, avoiding eye contact. I scan the pile of magazines to find a subject to change the conversation, and I see the words *Saturday Evening Post*. I yank the issue out from under a copy of a national geography magazine with a photo of a Namibian desert. I hold the *Post* up to show Dr. Ambush and start flipping through before explaining to her my surprise. The issue is from November 1984, the year I was born. On the cover, a fat, orange, cartoon cat I recognize as a popular Sunday comics character named Garfield. In the cover image, Garfield replaces Norman Rockwell in his famous self-portrait. There are more images like this through the pages, part of a feature called “Garfield Gets in the Picture: Garfield visits the Norman Rockwell Museum.” There’s the grinning cartoon cat superimposed into some of the most iconic *Saturday Evening Post* covers. There’s Garfield the Monday-hating-feline seated and hungry at the Thanksgiving table in *Freedom from Want*. That fat cat alongside the white family with that big bird.
“My dad was really into Rockwell,” I say, and then I’m telling Dr. Ambush about my father and his clippings from the *Saturday Evening Post*. I’m describing to her the black leather-bound photo album and its yellowing pages decorated not with camera pictures of friends and family or landscapes my father might have loved, but cutouts of Rockwell illustrations. Dr. Ambush doesn’t interrupt me as I go on, unable to stop myself from talking about the album’s adhesive pages and protection sheets, and how dad carried the clipping with him across the Atlantic. I don’t tell her that I’ve kept it under my mattress in case my mother ever decides to go through my room and take it back. I also don’t tell her I’ve been looking through the album every night whenever I can feel myself starting to freak out about my life right now.

Dr. Ambush responds by saying she has a stack of *Posts* still in her car. She’ll bring them into the art room but keep them behind her desk for me to sort through. Maybe it’ll inspire a project in me. She tells me about the upcoming senior art competition.

“You can draw something or use another medium. The submissions are due in December by the end of the semester and the contest will be judged by one of the professors of Fine Arts at the community college. The first prize winner receives $1000, and the second and third place get a monetary prize as well, although I am not sure what it is yet.”

The cash prize reminds me of Marcus and the money I owe. Maybe I can make something that could win. I’d have $3000 then, along with the money Katie gave me. Still far off from the ten-thousand Marcus is threatening me for, but some progress. Until my naturalization I won’t be able to find immediate work, not legally. I’m nervous every time I leave my house. Scared of being followed. Scared Marcus might approach my mother or Beth or even Katie. My anxiety grows every day I don’t see him. I spend so much time
worrying about when and where he might appear again. He never gave me a date or time to have his money ready. No location.

“I can tell you’re already starting to come up with some ideas, right?”

“Yes, I’m thinking about it.”

“Good, I’m telling all students interested in participating that I will make myself available for one-on-one conferences or advice while they work on their contest submissions. I’m here if you want to bounce ideas.”

I nod to show I understand. I say thanks and return to studying the Garfield altered Rockwells.

“Ben, this is a nice opportunity. Try to follow up on it.”
3.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech William Faulkner said, “The Poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail,” and I agree.

At the age of 5 my fingers pecked the keys of my first word processor. I stuck with it, aspiring to be seen as more than the nervous daughter of a Palestinian refugee, or an artful faker who masks her social anxiety with overachievement. In writing I discovered a way for me to become something else entirely. As I grew, my need for validation was met by the compliments of, “Pretty good, Beth,” or “You sure do have a way with words.” Eventually, my inclination turned to passion and my passion lit a fire. Now, the click-clack of keys has turned into a blaring roar. The desire has been fanned and it has spread, minor aspects of everyday life are engulfed, daily decisions cross-checked against a single all-encompassing question—Does this get you any closer to being the person, the writer, I want to be?

I can say that my four-year volunteer experience at my high school’s media center has taken me a little further on my path to becoming a better writer. My time amongst the library stacks has nurtured my passion, and it was while shelving A Companion to William Faulkner that I finally decided to pursue my master’s degree in Creative Writing. Skimming through the book, past “Red Leaves” and “Dry September,” I found a quote taken from Faulkner’s Nobel Prize speech, and after reading it I was inspired. That day, I recognized that it was unfair to me, and to whatever it is that put this desire in my heart, not to do everything I could to become a better wordsmith. I was ready for more.
The first time I considered turning writing into a career was in fall of my sophomore year when I joined my school’s newspaper. I approached every assignment as an opportunity to learn and share with others. Although contributing articles often allowed me to be creative, I still longed to write something more expressive. I started writing short stories and submitting to literary journals for teen writing. I managed to place a few pieces and win a few online contests, but the amount of my rejection letters was also proof that I had yet to master my talent and still had room to grow.

Higher education is a way to improve my ability and evolve beyond the list of facts that define me. I became familiar with the English Department at Michigan College while reading an issue of the U.S. World and News Report that named its undergraduate writing program one of best in the country. I was immediately drawn to the collective experience of the faculty. Although I am not usually drawn to science-fiction, I enjoy the work of Professor Phillip Dawkins and greatly admire his ability to create an atmosphere around his characters that is realistic but a world all its own. I often struggle with settings and placing my characters in a space that says as much about them as the words they say. I could benefit from the guidance of faculty like Professor Dawkins.

My motivation for gaining admittance to Michigan College is simple; I want to become a professional writer. However, the scope of my vision is not. As Faulkner suggested, I write because I believe it fulfills my obligations to humanity. By welding words together, by tying lines as tight and strong as high-carbon steel, I might join the tradition of American writers helping humanity endure. I want to stamp a note on the sheet music of our collective history, a minor key change, glissando, heated screeching
as hard to miss as a fiddler on fire. At Michigan College, I could earn a better shot at making a dream more tangible. This institution would offer me the tools needed to forge something worthy of acclaim. I want to be better equipped to handle something incendiary and forever, the fiery fumes of the human heart at war with itself. I write because in doing so I become more than me, more than a series of random facts and truths. I become a part of the foundation, the pillars onto which the legacy of humanity has been rested.

"How is it?" Beth asks me across the kitchen island.

We’re at her house. It’s the afternoon. Her parents aren’t home. They’ve left Beth to watch her little brother. A television puppet’s honking voice in the living room lets us know Beth’s brother is okay playing with his toys and glancing up from time to time at the bouncing red-felt creature on the screen.

"Tell the truth. Is it shit? Oh, God! It's shit." Beth’s palms slap her cheeks and slide down her face. "Ugh, is it too much? It's too much. Are you ever going to say anything? Never mind. Don't."

I'm not sure what to tell her. I've never read a college entrance essay. I don't know what they should look like or what should be in them. I hand the pages back to her and just say, "It's good."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, I'm sure you'll get in. They'll probably appreciate that you know so much about one of their departments. It's cool how you mentioned a specific person you want to work with."
This seems to comfort her. She rolls her shoulders and straightens her back. She flips through the pages and grins. It’s good to see her happy, satisfied for a moment. But there’s a restlessness bloating in my gut, pushing up into my chest. I scan the clutter of papers, textbooks, and school supplies spread between us on the counter space where her parents will prep dinner in a few hours.

I think it’s nice how her parents work together on stuff around the house.

It’s cool how they know they have each other.

I like the idea of having a person.

"Michigan College? That's kind of far.”

"It's okay. I've got some family in the state, close but not too close, like two hours. Perfect distance if I need them in an emergency, but no worry about drop-ins."

"I mean, I won't be able to see you."

I pick up a notecard from a stack on the kitchen island. Beth uses them to study SAT/ACT vocabulary. The word in purple permanent marker on the card reads, *IN-TRAN-SI-GENT* (adj): *Unwilling to compromise on one’s opinion. Usually on an extreme position.*

"I'm not going to be gone forever. Our friendship is important to me. I plan to stay in touch. I'll probably be coming home for summers and winter breaks." Now she reaches for the rest of the flashcards and starts shuffling. "Hey, do you want to help quiz me?"

"Friendship?"

"Yes?" Beth studies me. Her eyes dart over my face, hands and body. She puts her vocab words back down on the island between us. “I'm kind of getting a weird vibe from you right now. What's that about?”
"We're just friends?"

"Yes, but I'm starting to figure out that you think something different."

"We make out. We've hooked-up."

"B, we're not dating."

"I asked you to homecoming."

"That's a dance. One event. That doesn't mean you and I are a couple."

Her breathing is getting louder. My ears focus on her heavy exhales and everything else is starting to fade away. "B, I thought we understood each other and that's why we never had to talk about it. We enjoy each other."

"I come over to your house and eat with your parents."

"Friends do that."

"Friends finger you? You blow friends?" I’m surprised by my own voice. The anger catches me off guard, makes me dizzy for a few seconds.

"Whoa." Beth pauses, twists her neck to listen for her brother. She lowers her voice. She's stern. Her usual bubbly tone vanishes, and I glimpse what she might look like as a mother scolding a child. "Your energy right now is trash. Don't talk to me like that or you can leave." She leans her elbows on the counter and clasps her hands. "Clearly, there's been some misunderstanding."

I'm hurt. I'm a hypocrite. But I press anyway. I match her volume, "Seriously, do you hook-up with other friends?"

She searches me. "I have. I do."

Sex with Katie a few weeks ago flashes across my mind, but I keep going.

“Like with who?”
“B, I literally don’t know where this is coming from. You have a tone like I’ve done something wrong, but I haven’t.”

“Because we aren’t and haven’t been dating, right? But you know how I feel about you.”

“Number one, I don’t know. We never really talk about it. You don’t often share how you’re feeling with me. I’ve got to push you to tell me anything. Number two, you’ve never asked me how I feel about you. You just assumed, and now we’re here.”

“Who else have you hooked up with?”

“Dude, that’s really none of your business.”

My brain sorts a list of mutual friends. “Someone other than me?” Behind my eyes I see visions of Beth kissing Tommy and Calvin. “Someone I know?” I see her entangled with Pat and Selassie. My brain goes wild. Katie flashes in my mind and for a quick second I wonder if there is a part of me that is attracted to girls who like other girls. “Al?”

“Why are you even doing this to yourself? What does it even matter?”

“You hooked up with Al?”

Beth rolls her eyes, stands up straight and pushes fingers through the dark roots under her bleached hair, shaking out her curly locks. Her eyebrows narrow. “Okay, Benny, you want to know the truth. I’ve made-out with Al. She and Mike Chen-Edisto were on a break. It didn’t mean anything.”

“So, you’re gay then?”

“Grow up, fooling around with a girl a couple times doesn’t make anyone anything.”
“But you’d want to do it again, right?” I can hear myself. My voice sounds like I’m accusing her of something, but I honestly don’t know what.”

“Oh, you want to know some more truth? Yeah, I might do it again.”

“Just whoever whenever huh? That’s pretty slutty.”

I wait for her to slap me or explode. Instead, she stares me in the eye for what feels like minutes and then she takes a seat again, shuffling her notecards. Her voice is barely above a whisper as she says, “Some more, more, truth, if you had ever told me how you really feel or asked me how I felt about dating you, you’d know that I’ve been ambivalent about being with you.” She doesn’t look up, but she continues. “You aren’t going anywhere. You’re running around getting into trouble with Tommy, you’re not thinking about what comes next. What are you going to do after high school? Like, what’s your plan? You don’t feel kind of ashamed? You don’t think about all your parents went through just to get you here, like, in this country, in this county, at our school? You just walk around aimless, teary-eyed, waiting for shit to happen to you. Don’t you want to make something, anything? What would your dad think?”

I have no response.

Maybe my life in America has been a disappointment.

I drop the flashcard from my hand onto the kitchen island. Beth and I fall deeper into a silence stretching beneath the occasional honks, squeaks and songs floating from the living room television. I’m waiting. Maybe for an apology. Maybe she’s waiting for the same thing. I can feel her presence slipping away. She’s there across the table, but her interest is vanishing. There’s a void in the space where she was sitting in front of me, and
the gap is getting bigger, swallowing the air around her. It continues like that, a deep, almost seeable quiet across the granite counters of the kitchen.

And then Beth’s mother arrives.

I greet her like nothing is wrong. I help her carry grocery bags into the house. Beth’s mom doesn’t get a chance to thank me.

I leave without saying goodbye.

I run home.

I cut across the golf course. Even though the sun is quickly fading into dusk, some grey-haired businessmen are still zooming around the greens trying to sink a few more holes while there’s still light. A few more swings before winter comes, the sun seems to disappear for weeks at a time and the grounds freeze over. I run home while there is still light to see one foot kicking out in front of the other. When I get there, in the last few minutes of daylight, I search my room for a dictionary to look up the word ambivalent, a word echoing in my ears in Beth’s voice. A word I thought I knew.
4.

At my age, Norman Rockwell had earned enough notoriety and influence to connect with the publishing tycoon Condé Montrose Nast, who got him started on illustrations for a popular children’s book series for the American Book Company. Rockwell also had a regular job providing artwork for Boy’s Life magazine. By 18, Rockwell was covering his own tuition for art school, at the Arts Student League in New York. Only a few years later, according to the books I’ve read, he found the courage to bring some paintings and sketches to the Curtis Publishing Company offices. They were a very big deal at the time, and the fact that he didn’t have a meeting scheduled is an even bigger deal. Rockwell sold his first cover to The Saturday Evening Post right then and there for $75—which I think was pretty good in 1916. This led to a 47-year relationship with the editors at the Post.

I can’t imagine myself making the same move or having the same commitment to anything right now. Without my dad, and now without Pat or Beth, I’m feeling more lost—more loss—than ever.

There’s something I should be doing, but I don’t know what. I keep doing art stuff, but when everything seems so messed up it’s hard for me to create and just go for it like Rockwell.

Really, I guess it’s not fair for me to assume. I have no idea how difficult things might have been for him as a new adult. I’m sure he had to have had heartbreaks and faced threats too. Maybe he had a best friend turn their back on him, or a girl he couldn’t get with.

Of course, there was the first World War, which broke out soon after his debut at the Post. He was quick to enlist, like many other young men. In the weeks since the attacks
in September, I’ve overheard a lot of guys at school talk about joining the armed forces. They talk a lot about defending the nation and loyalty and proving themselves. I keep wanting to break in and ask, “Defend the nation from who exactly? Loyalty to what exactly? Proving themselves where exactly?” I bet Rockwell sounded like these boys too. I haven’t considered signing up, even though it could maybe save me from Marcus, and even though it might speed up my citizenship, even though there really aren’t many reasons for me to keep going as things are here now. I guess I’m not as brave as the others or Rockwell. Just another way in which I’m nothing like the artist my dad idolized.

While in the Navy, Rockwell still worked at improving his skills as an illustrator. Casual drawings of other servicemen and a chief petty officer led a high-ranking commander to have Rockwell’s art supplies and materials to be delivered to the naval yard in Charleston, South Carolina, where Rockwell was stationed. He was soon recognized as the guy who did a cover for the Post and was given permission to continue painting contributions to the magazine while he was serving. His commitment made him a hero to the men of his base.

Could my art make me a hero? Braver?

I’m not sure how to take what I love doing and make it valuable for other people.

How do I draw myself into a better life?

I hope making a project for the school art contest Dr. Ambush mentioned will teach me. Maybe while searching through Rockwell magazine covers I might get an idea. I might learn how to better do whatever I need to do next.
I’m walking into school. I’m thinking hard about the adhesive note my mother left taped to the door for me to find this morning—*come see me at the grocery store today*. Murry surprises me by running up from behind and wrapping my torso in a tight hug. She shouts, “Happy Birthday!” into my ear. When I turn around to face her, she starts singing, loud and off-key. Kids walking by laugh, point and snicker, but Murry goes on, unfazed, raising her voice louder and louder until she’s finished two rounds of the birthday song.

I squirm a thanks.

She beams.

“If you weren’t so dark, I’d swear you’re blushing.”

Murry gestures to one of the large square planters that border the front entrance of the building. Its withering flowers and leaves of grass will soon disappear into a dry mound of brown and then snow-white before budding with color again next spring.

Next spring and then school will end, and then summer will come, and then I don’t know what these planters, or anything else, looks like after that.

Next year is hard to imagine.

“Come on,” Murry says, pinching my elbow. I follow her to a planter and we perch shoulder to shoulder on its squat ledge. I cross my legs and rest my books on my lap.

“Where’s your bookbag,” Murry asks.

“It got destroyed when Marcus beat me up. I need to get a new one.”

“Oh,” Murry pouts. “Well, I’ve got an old one you can have. It’s got an *NSYNC patch on it but I’m sure you can cover that up with duct tape of even black it out with a permanent marker.”
The urge to reject the offer is cut by a quick, sharp pain racing down my right arm to the hand clenching my books.


“Cool, I’ll bring it to school with me tomorrow.” Murry pulls off her book bag. “I got you something, I mean, for your birthday.” She unzips her backpack and removes a blue log tied with silver ribbon. It’s topped with a platinum bow. She holds it out to me. I lay my books on the ground and accept Murry’s package. Inspect it with my fingers before pulling off the bow and undoing the wrapping, returning the silver to her. She shrugs, collects them from my hand and shoves the ribbon and bow into her bookbag. The log unravels into a blue hoodie with For Us By Us spelled over the chest in white letters.

“Is this real or counterfeit?”

“I don’t know,” Murry says. “I picked it up at a thrift store and thought that you could use it, you know, with it getting cooler. Every fall you just go from tees and polos to your dad’s hand-me-down winter coats from the early 90s.

She’s right. I can feel the crisp air tingling my bare arms. I pull on the sweatshirt. It’s baggy, but I love it. I leave the hood down.

Murry rubs my head, says “Your hair is getting kind of shaggy. When was the last time you got it cut?”

“My mom used to do it, then I started buzzing it myself and she’d help with the edges whenever she could, but with everything else going on I’ve forgotten about it. I’m not sure I even combed my hair this morning.”
“Oh, you cut it yourself! I guess that’s why your hairline looks so janky sometimes.” Murry chuckles and gives me a nudge to let me know she’s joking. “What are you going to do today for your birthday?”

“I don’t know. You’re really the only friend I talk to lately.”

“We could walk somewhere after school, but I’ve got afternoon SAT prep today. So, I can’t hang out too long.”

“Tommy isn’t picking you up?”

Murry sighs so deep she shrinks.

“Tommy and I broke up.”

“But you two have been together since freshmen year.”

“He’s gotten way out of control. He’s got that gun on him all the time now and he’s so paranoid. He stays stoned and drunk all day, and he’s started hanging out with this creepy older dude named Tanner he met in night school.” She looks up to read the grey sky. “I love him, but it’s, like, too much, you know? I need to focus on where I’m going after high school’s over. Tommy’s clearly not going anywhere.”

“Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Not sure. Just felt like someone needed to.”

“It is what it is.” Murry’s eyes gloss over, sparkled with tears she won’t let fall. “He’s become a cliché.” I ask what she means. “He hasn’t told a lot of people. Well, he probably hasn’t told anyone but me, but his mom moved out this past summer. She got an apartment above her bakery in the city. Now, Tommy’s this sad, suburban kid lashing out for attention because his parents are splitting up.”
“They’re divorcing?”

Murry scrunches her face, “Yes. What did I just say? They’ve been fighting really bad for a year now.”

Despite all the trouble Tommy’s caused over the last couple months, a flash of guilt races through me. It’s a streak of disappointment in myself for not noticing, for not paying attention. I couldn’t see past my own grief in losing my dad to see Tommy had stuff going on too.

But soon I’m angry at him again. Pissed that he did not try harder to tell me and that he put his pain onto other people.

“Fuck Tommy,” I say finally. “His parents are separating. So what? They’re both alive. It doesn’t give him the right to do all the stuff he’s done.”

“Harsh, Benny.” Murry breathes deep. “Boys don’t know what to do with their emotions. They’re dumb like that.”

“Like me?”

“I heard about what you said to Beth. Kind of a dickhead move, Benny. You called her a slut?”

I look away, scanning other students walking past to try to avoid Murry’s gaze. “I said her hooking-up with Al was slutty.”

Murry stands and turns to me. Our eyes are level. “That’s really gross. I hope you’re not okay with yourself on that. You should apologize, seriously. You two weren’t exclusive or official. You never asked her out. You’re basically mad that she didn’t sit around waiting for you.”

I don’t respond because I know part of what Murry’s saying is right.
I am mad. Beth didn’t wait for me.

But for Murry I fake a grin like what she’s just said doesn’t bother me.

The school’s recorded bells ring reminding us there are ten minutes before classes start.

“Let’s go, Benny.”

I bend over, pick my books off the ground and run a straightening hand over creases in my new sweatshirt. Murry and I start moving toward the entrance.

“Hey Murry, since it is my birthday, do you think you could stop calling me Benny?”

“Why? That’s what your mom calls you.”

“Exactly.”

“But you call me Murry.”

“That’s how Tommy introduced you.”

Half of her smile drops. “He never told you why people started calling me that?” I shake my head reaching to pull open one of the heavy entrance doors for her to pass through first. “In middle school, Tommy heard how my father talks and thought it was funny. He’s got a thick accent, my dad. Tommy started doing an impression of him around school. It was really stupid. He’d lower his voice and let his jaw drop and call out to me in the hall like a Kung Fu movie. Mary turned to Murry, then it just stuck.”

“I’m sorry… I can call you Mary.”

“No, that would be kind of weird. I’ve been Murry so long now. It’s kind of a part of me.” she laughs but then looks serious for a moment. “Maybe I’ll try to be Mary again next year, in college. I don’t know.”
Last year on my birthday, Calvin told Tommy and me about this abandoned rock quarry. It was far out in the woods of a neighboring town. On the way, we stopped at a gas station for Calvin to run in and steal us a couple 40s by slipping them down his super baggy pants legs. In the car, we passed the bottles of malt liquor while Calvin gave Tommy directions and details about the place. The rock quarry was unguarded. Seniors from miles around liked to go up to the quarry to party and dive into the water below.

I asked how tall the cliffs were.

He said it varies, probably thirty to forty feet, maybe even fifty and sixty-foot drops.

The quarry covered more than three acres.

Tommy pointed out how crazy big that was.

I remember asking how deep the water was.

Calvin said maybe deep as 400 feet in some places.

I remember getting scared as we parked on a road shoulder and started trekking through the forest.

Tommy asked how Calvin knew about the quarry.

Calvin said he had been invited to a party at the quarry last weekend by a popular senior girl who went to our school. He told us she buys weed from him sometimes. She had given him a blowjob on the edge of one of the cliffs.

I said he was full of shit.

But he knew where he was going. He moved confidently and didn’t bother arguing with us about how true his story was. The quarry appeared, this giant chasm in the middle of the woods and when I saw it, I thought, it had to be more than just three acres.
Calvin said a kid had died diving into the water in 1978, so it was important to know just the right places to jump in.

I remember shuffling to the edge of a massive drop and peering over the rock cliff to the dark gulf below. They had already started stripping off their clothes to their underwear. Searching the soft ripples of the water, I remember asking what had been dug there.

Calvin said he didn’t know.

Tommy said it didn’t really matter.

I asked what might still be left beneath the water. I imagined the yellow, rust-spotted arm of an excavator suddenly breaking through the blue-green surface and then sinking below like the head of a lake monster.

Calvin said not to worry about it. He had jumped in at that spot once before. Then the two of them started racing to the edge of the cliff, pushing each other as they ran. I stopped breathing as their feet left the rock. They flew on one of my heart beats and then fell through the air. Their giggles ricocheted off the stony walls of the quarry. The boys crashed into the water. They disappeared for a moment. I didn’t breathe again until they bobbed up, sputtering, and laughing.

Tommy screamed that the impact hurt like shit. His voice was booming, cannoned by the rock faces. I shouted down at them that they were crazy and asked how they planned to climb the cliff. Calvin pointed to threads of vines and tree roots that led up from the water, past my feet, and into the forest behind me. I bent down to inspect it.

I asked if it could be poisonous.

One of them yelled up that I was being a pussy.
They swam over to the root and began pulling themselves up the side of the cliff. In a few minutes they had rejoined me. Calvin swaggered over. Beating the side of his head to shake the water out of his ears, he said I should jump in next.

“Take your clothes off.”

I told him I wasn’t diving off the cliff. I said I wasn’t a strong swimmer.

“It’s okay. I’ll dive in with you and help if I see you struggling.”

"No."

I saw Calvin glance over at Tommy who was standing next to me. I saw Calvin shake his head at him, as if to say, “Don’t.” But I wasn’t fast enough.

And then I was tumbling stories down, seeing the grey cliff spiral with the bluish water, spiraling with a pair of white legs, spiraling with a blond mop of hair raised and billowing. I tried yanking my arms and legs into a straightened dive position like I had seen the other boys do. I was too late. I hit the water with an explosive crack.

And then nothing.

I was nothing.

I wasn’t certain if my eyes were even open or not. I couldn’t feel my body. I had been slammed out of it and now suspended in a murky black soundlessness.

The sensation of cold returned first...

Then wetness, everywhere...

I had fingers, toes, arms legs and they were all working, reaching and pushing and kicking...

Then the sensation of heat. I had a chest. It was hot with pain. I had lungs and they were burning for oxygen. I was me again, and I was fighting not to be nothing again.
Through the darkness, floating strands of yellow and eyes that were blue and didn’t belong to me. There were a thousand shimmering bubbles and then arms around my waist tugging me upward like how my dad used to pick me up.

I burst through the surface of the water, reaching and wailing for the sky with Calvin squeezing me tightly. I was choking and splashing. Calvin hit me on the back trying to help me get the water out of my body. A quick stream of vomit spilled from my mouth. Calvin ignored it and paddled through the puke, pulling me along as I tried to swim to the water’s edge and grab a vein of tree roots leading up the cliff. I had lost one of my shoes. My wet clothes and my sore body made the thought of the climb heavier.

I remember screaming, no clear words just a wailing screech like a newborn. Calvin grabbed my mouth to stop me. I bit his hand and was about to curse him when he placed a finger over his lips instructing me to be quiet. There was fear in his eyes that I didn’t understand.

I remember hearing Tommy say. “It’s just us.”

I didn’t recognize the lower, grumbling voice that responded, but I knew it was an adult, and I knew they didn’t want us to be there. Calvin pointed upward and started to climb the quarry wall. I followed behind him slowly. My wet hands struggled to grip the network of forest vines and roots. I tried to keep my breathing low and quiet while the stranger continued to question Tommy.

Closer to the cliff drop, I remember the man’s voice asking where Tommy had come from, how he’d found the quarry. The area was off limits.

Tommy said he was just walking around and discovered it.

“Do I look like someone who’d believe that?”
“Do you really want me to answer that?”

Above me, Calvin started to chuckle. I managed to punch him in the ass.

“Are you a cop?”

The voice said no, “but maybe I should call them.”

Calvin whispered down to me, “Did he say he’s going to call the cops?”

I nodded. My head felt light and my fingers were getting tired.

“Yeah,” Tommy said. “You go on back through the woods and find a phone and call the police and I’ll wait right here for them to arrive.”

Calvin and I reached the edge of the drop-off and peered over to a thin, gray-haired man in navy coveralls glaring at Tommy.

“We got to do something,” Calvin whispered.

I looked around us. There were rocks straddling the cliff’s edge, one near Calvin was just a little smaller than a coconut. It would make a good splash. I tapped Calvin, motioned for him to push the rock into the water. Calvin nodded and reached over slowly to nudge the stone. He released a small grunt as he gave a shove and sent it tumbling down the rock face and plopped into the water. The splash bounced off the quarry wall. Calvin and I ducked before the man moved his gaze in our direction. I heard him moving closer to glance down at the water. He stood over Calvin and me. He smiled and shook his head. He said, “I knew there was more of you.” As he knelt to look at Calvin and me, I could see Tommy’s feet creeping behind him. Tommy dove toward the farmer and shoved him off the edge. Calvin and I sprang onto the ledge of the cliff. The others grabbed clothes and sprinted for the tree line, away from the quarry and man-sized Ker-Plunk.
We ran, through the woods, them barefoot, me with one soggy sneaker squeaking and sloshing. Dodging fallen logs and brush and zipping between tree trunks, we laughed and teased Tommy about being able to see his naked ass through his white underwear. We didn’t stop running until we reached the Jeep. I remember us all leaping in and the engine revving and skidding off the gravely shoulder of the country road. On the ride back, Tommy and Calvin wiggled back into their clothes and we finished what was left of the 40s, toasting ourselves.

x

This year on my birthday, I spend my school lunch period with Dr. Ambush, sniffling and sneezing over the dust-packed pages of old Saturday Evening Posts. Searching the copies for something I can turn into art I find a cover from June 4th, 1921. It shows three boys running away from what I guess must be some off-limits swimming hole. The illustration is like a snapshot. The boys, barefoot and wet, rush past a wood sign that reads, “NO SWIMMING.” There is no telling what or who is chasing them away from the water. It reminds me of last year and the quarry. I spent days searching local news for any mention of a body found. Kids still went out to the quarry. My life went on and now it’s a fun story I tell. But sometimes I think about that curious man. I hoped he survived his fall into the water. I hope he knew how to swim and that his grip was strong enough to climb the slick roots embedded in the rock.

x

After school I rush out of the building through an exit door below the auditorium, near the concert band’s practice rooms. I don’t stop to visit my locker. I avoid anyone who might
talk to me. I head to the nearest bust stop to catch a ride to the grocery store where my mother works.

It’s about thirty minutes with all the stops, but I get there. I cross the parking lot and enter the supermarket, greeted by a blast of cool air from a large vent above the automatic sliding doors. I head through the fresh produce to the long glass counter that warms and chills take-out meals. I’m always a little surprised by the variety: Chinese noodles, sushi, Italian meatball subs, microwaveable burritos, chicken wings, and more, and more. It’s hard for me to imagine my mom preparing these dishes so far from the foods she enjoys, so unlike the recipes of my grandparents.

I call over the counter to a woman using a deli slicer. I recognize her as someone my mother has mentioned at home—I think the person who gave my mom the small television that fills our quiet house with sound each night. The lady stops pushing and pulling the blade over a thick tube of salami. She raises a finger to tell me to wait, and then disappears through a pair of swing doors into the store’s large kitchen. My mom emerges a few moments later, pulling off her food-prep gloves and pointing for me to meet her at the end of the glass counter near the bread and pastries.

When we reach each other, she pulls me into a hug and pats my cheek. “My boy, happy birthday.” She runs her thumb along my jaw. “Ay, Benny, you need to start shaving. This looks wild. You need to reduce it.”

I brush her hand away. I say, “I’m fine.”

“Where did you get this sweatshirt? It’s too big for you. You look unkempt.”

“My friend Mary gave it to me for my birthday.”
She pinches one of the sleeves and rubs the fabric between her fingers, frowns and says, “Okay. She’s a good girl. Does she like you?”

“Not like that, Ma.”

“She should have found something smaller. This makes you look a bit fat.”

I shrug.

She lifts a hand to signal she’ll stop. Mom reaches behind her and pulls something from beneath her loose chef’s coat. My mother says surprise as she passes me a black, hardbound sketchbook. I lay my schoolbooks on the floor and accept the gift. I flip it over in my hands, sliding my fingers across the thousand tiny bumps like infinite brail that texture the front and back cover. Mom talks to me as I open it and fan the pages. She apologizes for not being able to do more. But, she says, the sketchbook is really nice. It was expensive, she adds in Twi. I bring the book up to my nose and sniff the pages. Mom asks me what I’m doing. Embarrassed, she looks around to see if any of her coworkers are watching me snort the pulpy air trapped between the spine—I love the scent of thick art paper and how it’s both stale and crisp.

“I really need this,” I finally say dropping the sketchbook from my face. “Thank you, Ma.”

“No problem. I love you.” She looks at our feet and then pinches my fuzzy chin. “I haven’t seen you drawing in the house in a while. Maybe we can find time someday soon to take a walk and find a place you can sit and draw. I can watch you work.”

I nod. “That would be cool.”

Mom grins. She repeats the word, “Cool,” trying it on like a new outfit, a hat or some shoes. “Cool, eh? Yeah, cool.” I cringe and she chuckles to herself. “I’m cool mom.”
“Ugh! Ma, stop!”

A hand grips my shoulder.

I turn to follow the fingers to the wrist and arm of Marcus.

My muscles freeze and my mouth falls open, but nothing comes out.

He speaks to my mother first.

“Hello, Auntie Kumasi.”

My mother squints trying to remember him. She searches my eyes for a clue.

“Ma, this is Marcus.”

Mom slaps her palms together. “Yes, you were Benny’s friend at the apartments. A nice boy, but you were always getting into trouble.”

Marcus chuckles, “Right. That’s me. I did get into a little trouble from time to time. Sometimes trying to help out your good son.” He squeezes my shoulder, hard.

A fearful shake rolls through me.

My mother seems to notice the shift in my mood. She asks him what he’s doing in the area so far from the apartments in city.

“Auntie, I don’t spend all of my time in those housing projects. I go other places, lots of places for work. Your son and I reconnected recently, and I promised to come out here to visit.”

“That’s nice,” my mom says. “Well, if you give us more warning maybe we can have you over to eat one night. Maybe.”

“That sounds great, Auntie.”
“I have to get back to work.” She glares at me. “Don’t stay out tonight with Marcus here, or that Tommy boy. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you coming home later and later. You are not yet grown.”

“Yes, Ma,” I say.

Marcus releases his grip.

I reach down to collect my schoolbooks from the floor. Sweat drips down my sides underneath my shirt and hoodie. “I love you, Ma.”

Mom starts to walk away and Marcus shouts, “Bye!”

She scowls at him one last time before she returns to the kitchen area behind the glass counter and vanishes through the swinging doors.

“This is a real good grocery store, Motherboy. It’s got lots of stuff like those Spanish markets in the city. I saw some avocados.”

“Hey, I’m working on getting you the money. I can get you some of it. I’ve got about $2000 right now.”

“Do I look like I work for a credit loan place? There ain’t no payment plans. Give me what you owe me, in full.”

“I will.”

Marcus bites his lip. One of his eyebrows rises higher than the other. “You... You just... The way I see it, you both need to pay me. Gotdamn. Why are you standing here talking about you paying? Just you? What do you think I’ve been doing out here?” He shakes his head. “That freckled kid’s house is huge. I’ve seen where his dad works. His mom owns a business in the Northwest part of the city. She’s got a condo down there too. They all got a car. A ride for each of them, Motherboy. You think Tommy can’t get a hold
of ten-thousand to bail himself out? He probably has a college fund.” Marcus sucks his teeth. “I almost feel sad for you, you know? Almost. Look, I’m going to show up again and again until you have all of my money. I’m going to be like President Dubya Bush out here, bombing your shit like a B-52—I won’t make distinctions between you, that red-headed coward, and the folks that harbor you.” His eyes linger to the glass counter and then steady on the doors to the kitchen where my mother is working. He eyes the new sketchbook gripped in my hands so tightly my knuckles are turning white. Marcus shakes his head again. “You still on that drawing shit, huh. I looked through your last book before I had my homie piss on it. Your doodling’s gotten better since we were kids and I had you sketch them Dragon-Ball dudes for me to glue on my binders.”

I say, “I remember that.”

He nods. “You need to get your priorities straight, for real. I’ll fucking kill you.”

Marcus heads in the direction of the cereal aisle.

Before he disappears, he smirks and wishes me a happy birthday.
Dr. Ambush keeps asking me what I plan to do with all the images I’ve been cutting from the *Saturday Evening Post*. She gave me an accordion folder to keep the clippings organized and I’ve packed it with classic print advertisements and Rockwell illustrations. Hunting through the magazines during my lunch period, blaring some of Tommy’s old punk mixes through the headphones of the hand-me-down portable disc player I got from Dr. Ambush, I can ignore the panic rising every day. I haven’t talked to Tommy after my last sighting of Marcus. I haven’t found any way of making enough money to pay Marcus. Thinking about it makes my body go numb and I have to struggle to get back into myself. I feel alone and out of time, like I’m in the wrong timeline, a crooked nightmare version of my actual reality.

But the nerves go away when I press a precision knife to a glossy page and collect a picture that I find interesting. The job of harvesting the images makes me feel in control of something, like I know what I’m doing. I need to be working on an art project that might win the contest Dr. Ambush told me about. I think the clippings can be a part of something, but I’m not sure yet. Maybe they’re just a distraction from my life.

My mind wanders when I’m cutting out the images.

I think about my dad doing something similar once, to paste pictures into his own collection of clippings. During every cut, he and I are close for a second. I imagine his hands being traced over mine, together again in the same space in time.

When I’m collecting clippings I also I think a lot about the word migrate. Not like birds. It’s a word I first heard used by my dad explaining to me reasons that he moved us from *there* to *here*. 
“America called to me in Ghana, and so I came. I migrated.”

When I look at the images in the Saturday Evening Post, I think why wouldn’t my dad want to be here, in wherever these pictures are taken, staring into a hyper-colored fully-stocked Kelvinator Foodarama ‘57? As my eyes move left to right over the huge 16 cubic-foot capacity, sliding up from an unrefrigerated space for bananas to the dispenser rack for frozen juices and soups, the handy ice chest, and then the super shelves large enough to hold a couple turkeys, I think why wouldn’t dad consider everything that is missing in his own life? Studying the inner door of the Foodarama ‘57, its breakfast bar for bacon and eggs. the tilting crisper filled with a bunch of fresh fruits and veggies, why wouldn’t he realize he’d never been so starving? That he was dying of thirst.

Of course, he’d need more. More good and goods.

Why wouldn’t he want opportunity to have more, like the pig-tailed, buck-toothed, child in a red dress, glancing up with a grin from the glossy page in front of me. She has a hand removing a plump orange from the refrigerator while the other clutches another fat citrus behind her. The little girl invites me to join her beside the Kelvinator or die from a hunger eating into my chest.

Because why would anyone want to be anywhere else than in a position to need more space.

Is this a naturally American across magazine pages?

Invisible arrows point me to a picture of a man holding darts. He looks neat and clean in starched slacks and a pressed, plaid Oxford shirt from Arrow Casual Wear. He’s sharp as the thin line of scalp parting his hard-slicked hair. Pinned to a wood-paneled wall there’s a dartboard. The man smiles at the narrowing circles, determined. Soon he’ll aim,
and I know he’ll hit his target. Bullseye. He’ll send each dart flying to the center of the board because he looks like a dude who never fails. Through his hard work he must have succeeded in a way me and my dad could never know. He can afford space, a home big enough to have a spare room that serves no purpose but to play darts. He can afford time to spare for darts and buy clothes tailored specifically to wear in his game room. Who wouldn’t want to be able to afford something like a game room? Like the man pictured here, who wouldn’t my dad have liked to be in a better position to take care of himself and those he loved and have room left for games? The man here looks unaffected by poverty in mineral-rich countries in West Africa, great depressions in far-away coasts that once glittered with gold. His vision is not limited by the kind of financial stress that has shaped my life. Why wouldn’t dad have wanted to be like him, or her, or all of them here with so much in these images? This is a place that gives greater chance for happiness, right? Richness my dad might otherwise never have dreamed of: luxury items, fine tools, accessories, and shining property.

He may never have known of the Buick Roadmaster, if not confronted by an ad with the car rolling past a line of ivory houses. Its sharp lines, sloping roof, red accents and whitewall tires saying that the driver has nothing more to prove to anyone. Ownership of the Roadmaster says that this person understands some names are better than others. Might that car here have brought my dad more self-satisfaction?

He was willing to work for all of this. He wasn’t asking for anything free. All he wanted--all he thought he needed--was a chance to get here and show his worth. He was ready to be a part of the stories around these ads--to share and give to this idea. He followed his hunger and thirst to wherever he thought he could build something worthy.
On another page, the grayscale close-up of the giant iron wheels of a coal-powered train might have reminded him of the strength people say defines what it means to live _here_. _Here_, with real effort, anything can happen for anyone. Even for my dad. Even for me. Of course. There is more! According to these images, any village boy like my father could have a good life with some things of value, if they just left _there_ behind. Why wouldn’t my father have wished he were _here_; in a place where he might finally earn some things he could keep.
Aunt Ami and Aunt Abla have invited my mom and me to a multi-church Thanksgiving gathering at a community recreation center in a neighboring town. It’s sponsored by a branch of the Mid-Atlantic Volta Club Association. I’m surprised mom said yes. Now, I’m seated at a large, circle banquet table with a bunch of folks I don’t know, nodding along to conversations about Jerry Rawlings and politics in Ghana, pretending I understand what’s going on. Mom is smiling, big and broad, laughing for the first time in forever, joking about growing up in the village and watching boys throw stones at each other for fun. She’s laughing, really laughing, from her belly, like I haven’t seen her do in a long time. So, that’s why I’m trying hard to act like I’m having a good time and not space-out starring up at the basketball hoops at opposing ends of the room. I’m trying not to study the court lines etched on the hardwood floor.

I’ve made three trips to the buffet line. I’m not that hungry but cutting through the other party tables keeps me from getting too bored. I cross the dance floor toward the stretch of chaffing dishes lining half a row of retractable bleachers folded into a wall. The DJ is probably in his late forties. He’s playing a mix of modern highlife hits and older stuff. I avoid the dedicated few gyrating to the loud tunes.

I eavesdrop on conversations as I make my way through the room. The majority of the chatting is about the food and the decorations, how great everything is but how much better it all would be if the organizers had more seating for unexpected arrivals and more Ghana salad, more jollof, more punch, more everything. At the buffet line, the women working to keep the spread stocked can’t seem to make enough fried plantain and a few guests are grumbling about not being able to get enough seconds, if they weren’t so full.
On one of my trips to the food tables I was approached by the reverend at the church my family used to go to. I said, “Hello, Osofo.” He remembered me. I still appreciate his sermon during my father’s funeral. The reverend had met my mom and me at the hospital when dad finally let go in the ICU. Osofo told me the church missed me and my mother. He asked how things are going and about the trip home to Ghana this past summer.

I was about to try to explain to him how the visit didn’t feel like returning home. I was going to try to say how I never feel fully anything and how it isn’t like being subtracted or even divided.

Not African – American.

Not African / American.

Not even African + American, it was more complicated than that.

Like African x American = ?

But before I could unload on my old reverend, he scanned me with a pointed finger. I followed his hand, squinting at the shining bands of light bouncing off his gold rings, wrist watch and bracelets. He directed my attention to the white tube socks in the gaps between my shoes and the ends of my pant legs. He shook his head, looking playful he said I should talk to my mom about getting me appropriate socks for a church function, and maybe new dress clothes. After that, he sighted someone else he needed to speak to. Osofo told me to come see him soon, reminded me not to forget my church family, and sped in a new direction.

I’ve spent the rest of the night seeing how far I can lower my pant legs without my shirt coming untucked. And I don’t go too long without noticing how tight my shirt feels when I bend my elbows. I’m eyeing a kid about my age across the table where I’m seated.
He’s in a kente shirt with a round collar that dips deep down the front. It fits him like a bell. I’d never wear something like it to school or around my friends, but right now I’m jealous and I want it. I’m staring at him so hard it takes me several seconds to realize that Aunts Ami and Abla have said something to me and the rest of the table is waiting for my response.

“I’m sorry, what?” I ask.

Aunts Ami and Abla laugh, “We asked if you remember riding our backs when you were little. You were so small when you first came to this country with your mother. We’d watch you while your parents worked. We’d wrap you to us with a cloth while we moved around the house, and every time you’d try to pull away, grabbing our shoulders and standing on our behinds, oh!”

My mom wipes tears from her eyes but I can’t tell if her eyes are wet from quiet laughter or the thought of how time passes. Mom rests a hand on my hand on the table. We smile at each other.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t remember.”

Aunt Ami and Aunt Abla both grin like they knew my response before I did.

“Why would you remember? It’s okay. You’ve grown up. Too tall to ride our backs now. God bless-ed. Still more growing to do.”

Another lady at the table says something to me in a familiar language, but I can’t interpret it. I can tell it’s a question by her tone. I shake my head and tell her, “I’m sorry, I can’t understand.”

My mother pulls her hand from mine and says, “He doesn’t speak Ga.” She translates for me, “Sister Brenda asked what you plan to do next year after school.”
“Oh,” Sister Brenda exclaims. And then two quick exasperations, “Ah. Ah.” She waves a hand over me and addresses the table. “You see, so many of these young people don’t know their own languages. It is really sad.”

“Why would he need to know anything but English?” my mom says. “His life is here, not there.”

“What if he needs to go home, huh? What if something were to happen to you and the boy would need to return to Ghana? What would he do then? How will he communicate?”

“Well,” my mother says, her voice growing tense, “it is a good thing Ghana has made English the national language. He’d be fine. He’s American. We just received notification of our naturalization.”

The table gives a chorus of approving grunts and nods. Aunts Ami and Abla congratulate my mom and me. Sister Brenda reminds my mother that we are all lucky we made it to the States when we did. “It’ll be so harder to get a visa now, since September,” Sister Brenda says. “That’s why I encouraged my son to enlist in the Navy.” She motions to the boy sitting next to her, the kid my age in the kente shirt. He’s cutting into a piece of baked chicken. “The U.S. will remove his Permanent Residence status and make him a full citizen for serving in the military. They’ll pay for his school too, when he returns. They’ll take good care of him for the rest of his life. It is a good path.”

I can feel my mother’s leg bouncing beside mine, “Are you sure you want your son going to war?”

Sister Brenda sucks her teeth. “Ha!” she says, “What war? Against who, those men digging around in caves? What can they do? This country is wealthy. They have so many
weapons—all the strength. War? Will they shoot at American planes and ships with slingshots?” She laughs to herself and a few other people at the table begin to nod. “This isn’t David against Goliath. The Lord will protect my son because he is with God.”

Aunts Ami and Abla nod and say, “Amen.”

“We all know that in all things God works for those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose. The scripture says, for those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. Who will our Father favor, a nation who embraces his son, Jesus, as savior, or some wild group of Muslims? There won’t be a real war and my boy will be made a real American.”

I’m watching her son as she speaks. Raising tiny shreds of meat to his mouth with his fork, he looks uninterested with the conversation around him. But a few beads of sweat at his temple show his discomfort.

Words fire from my mouth, aimed at the future naval recruit, “Dude, you aren’t scared of dying for this country?”

My mom slaps my arm and the rest of the table shuffles awkwardly in their seats.

Sister Brenda is glaring at me, wishing I’d burst into flames.

The kente shirt kid finally looks up from his plate. He finishes chewing and swallowing a hunk of meat. Calm, he says, “You heard my mother. This country will probably just bomb Afghanistan off the map. By the time I get deployed, Operation Enduring Freedom will be over and there won’t be anyone left to fight. Besides, it’s the navy. I’m on a ship. I’m not going to see anybody getting shot or whatever.” He sounds confident. His chest swells with certainty. But he dabs his damp forehead with the corner of his paper dinner napkin.
“Ah, and what is it you plan to do when you finish school? You never told us?” The question is for me, but Sister Brenda is looking at my mother.

I study the fold lines of the vinyl tablecloth for several seconds looking for an answer. I want to shrink and fall into those tiny folds. I want to hide and vanish from this present and its future. I wish there were something, anything else to say but, “I don’t know.” I can feel the table’s collective disappointment. Aunts Ami and Abla lose their ever-present smile. It’s replaced by soft, concerned grimaces. My mom sighs deep and her hand finds mine again, resting on the table between our plates.

Sister Brenda does not relent. “No, that won’t do. You need to know, eh? How will you take care of yourself and your mother? She works too hard already—when was the last time she came to church. You need to contribute. You are grown,” she looks to Aunt Ami and Aunt Abla,” he is grown, right?” She stares at my mother. “Your son needs to contribute.”

In desperation, I say, “I was thinking about maybe going to college for Art.”

Sister Brenda repeats the word as if tasting a new food. “Art? Art? Like, scribbling? For what? How do you make money with that? How do you provide for yourself or a family with scribbles? You will bring your mother debt for you to go off to learn how to scribble?”

Others at the table are nodding.

“There are scholarships for Art,” I say louder than I mean to. I adjust my voice to make sure I’m not becoming too disrespectful. “I’m competing in a contest at my school right now for some scholarship money.” I catch a flash of my mother’s smile. “There are people who care about Art. There are people who make a living with Art. I could become an Art teacher one day.”
It’s the first time I’ve ever thought about the idea of becoming someone like my teacher, Dr. Ambush. My belly gets warm as I start to imagine a future where I can become someone I admire.

“A teacher,” Aunts Ami and Abla say. “That would be a good path.”

Sister Brenda replies, “Okay. I guess we will see.”

Someone else at the table seizes the chance to change the subject. They ask if anyone has heard the gossip about how the evening’s DJ got hired for the event. Folks trade rumors about the DJ’s relationship with the wife of one of the pastors heading the event.

I trade a final look with the kente shirt kid across the table. I tip my head in his direction. I hope he recognizes my gesture as a wish for his good health. I hope he is right and that the war is over fast, and that he’ll come back and that this country will take care of him. Maybe he would be safe on an open ocean, on a battleship or in a submarine hidden below the surface. Maybe he’s less likely to be killed fighting abroad than here, like me.

He shrugs his shoulders—*we’ll see*, he says without speaking—and returns to his plate.

I can feel my mother’s eyes on me. I turn to her and give a short smirk that says, *I’m okay.*

*We’ll see,* I repeat to myself, searching the room now for something else to carry my attention away from the party until it’s time to go.
There is now a loop driving my body every second of every day: *do something; make something, win; make money*. I need to win that contest. I need that prize to get closer to paying back Marcus. I clip this work advertisement from *The Saturday Evening Post*, volume 204, number 26, December 26, 1931...

**YOUNG MEN WANTED**

We wish to hear from young men who are anxious to earn money during spare hours.

Like Mr. Edward Turner Jr., pictured here, some of these men will be employed or in school and able to devote only a part of their spare time. Others may be able to devote full time.

Whether spare time or full time is given, you may earn up to $2 an hour, right from the start.

For full information, send in the coupon below. There is no cost or obligation.

(Pictured) MR. EDWARD TURNER, JR.,

Ohio, who has made good just using his spare time.
I study the ad for a couple of days, unsure what to do with it. The cutout doesn’t seem to belong with the other clippings packing my accordion folder in Dr. Ambush’s classroom. I tuck it into the new sketchbook my mom gave me. To make sure it doesn’t get lost, I decide to glue it to the center of one of the blank pages. It looks kind of naked. I draw a silhouette of a head around the work ad. The head is like mine, squared with a flat nose. In the white space between the clipping and the thin border of the silhouette, I shade the page with a charcoal pencil. Now the black head surrounds the white ad stripped with black words.

It needs more. More color. More shape.

I open up the accordion folder. I pull out some of the brightest clippings. With a paper cutter and a hobby knife I make thin strips of still life and stack and paste them around the grey head. I fill the whole page. When I’m done there is no blank space but the white beneath the font of the old work ad. The paper is heavy and wet with craft glue.

It looks like a failed decoupage project.

It looks like a queer flag.

It looks raw and unfinished.

It looks like me.
When I have an arty idea, I usually bring it to Pat before showing Dr. Ambush. But Pat and I still aren’t speaking. I’ve been coating the pages of my new sketchbook with mixes of cutouts, drawings, and other stuff. I got this idea for making a collage of dozens of smiling, clean-cut, slick-haired white dudes from the *Saturday Evening Post*, and then painting over them with something black, like really black, like shoe polish. So black no one would even know the smiling white guys are there but me. I’m not sure if this would make sense, or if it would be a good idea for this sketchbook thing I’m doing, whatever it is.

Katie once told me about her favorite piece of art by a guy named Robert Rauschenberg—an almost blank piece of paper in a nice frame. If you look carefully, you can see faint lines of what used to be a drawing by another famous artist, Willem de Kooning, before Rauschenberg erased it. I remember getting really excited about the idea. Katie told me no photos of de Kooning’s original drawing exist. Only de Kooning and Rauschenberg really know what’s been erased, and that, Katie said, is what makes it art. She told me, capital-A-art is the gap between the thing we’re looking at and what we know about its creation. I’m not sure I totally agree, there are some pieces of art I loved before I learned anything about them, like the first time Dr. Ambush showed me stuff by Kerry James Marshall—I think I loved seeing figures as dark as me. There are songs I can listen to forever and I know nothing about how they were recorded. There are movies I’ve watched a bunch of times and still don’t fully understand, but I know the way I look at the world around me changes every time I see them.

Whether or not I agree with the way she sees art as a gap, Katie’s probably the best person to try to talk all this through with me. I haven’t seen Katie since she gave me a few
thousand dollars to help me payback the drug money I owe to Marcus. She invited me over twice last week while Mike Chen-Edisto was out and Susan wasn’t home. Both times I said I’d come over but never did. I told myself I was staying away in order to protect her.

But when I come home from school to find her sitting on the short squat steps leading up to the gate of my house, my surprise is mixed with embarrassment. I realize I didn’t want to see her because I’m not sure how to act around her after seeing me so low.

“How did you know where I live?”

She smirks, “There aren’t a lot of Kumasi’s listed in the county phonebook.”

“What if my mom had come home?”

Katie’s face winces.

We both nervously shift the weight of our body.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I guess I might just have pretended to be a Jehovah’s Witness or something.” She drags her top teeth along her bottom lip. “I’ve been trying to call you,” she says. “I wanted to talk to you. I called the house a bunch of times. One time your mom even answered, so I hung-up.” Part of me is happy to see Katie seem eager. “She sounds nice, your mom. Is that weird to say? I don’t know, I guess I just never pictured what your life is like at home.”

“Oh…”

“I really wanted to talk to you.”

“I’m sorry.” I look down at my hands. My damp palms sparkle. “Why are you here?”
Katie’s arms hang straight at her sides. I notice her fingernails have been bitten down to nubs. She frowns and I’m scared I’ve said the wrong thing. I say, “I think I really wanted to talk to you too.” I go on when she doesn’t respond, “I’ve got this idea for this art thing I’m working on.”

Katie sighs and seems to focus on a greying patch on the knees of my black jeans. “Look, before you get into all that, I need to tell you something right now, okay? It’s important. I’m kind of scared about it. I know it’s not fair to ask you for anything, because that’s not how you and I work, but I’m going to ask you to keep it together and just listen so I can say what I need to say.”

“Okay.”

She’s breathing heavier now. Despite the distant sound of cars, leaf blowers, and kids playing in yards all around the neighborhood, I imagine I can make out the soft, moist clicks of her lips parting and closing, her tongue searching her mouth for whatever she needs to tell me.

Katie says, “I’m pregnant,” and all the artful words erase from my head. Raschenberg and de Kooning are rubbed out. A blank hum rises between my ears and blankets everything. “Did you hear what I said, kiddo?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Are you sure?”

Her laugh is nervous and fearful. “Yeah, B, I’m sure. I’ve taken, like, eight pregnancy tests.”

“Are you sure you did it right?”
“You mean, am I sure I know how to pee on a stick?"

“You know what I’m trying to say.”

“No, I don’t.”

We’re quiet after that. If the noise of the neighborhood returns, I can’t hear it.

We’re silent together, outside in a windless space.

We share the windlessness until one of us asks the other, “What do you want to do?”
Freedom of Worship
Norman Rockwell
(c.1943)
Oil on Canvas
116.2 cm x 90.2 cm
My father loved so much about America, but he had complaints about the country too. These didn’t come out of his mouth as direct complaints. He’d package them as observations that surprised him. He would say something like, “It is funny, being Ghanaian here sometimes.” as if he had not noticed the many ways living in this country was different than the one he left behind, as if he had not felt all the ways living here might force him to forget parts of himself. Dad would come home, and he and I would be chatting at the dining table while he ate and I finished my homework, and he’d be telling me a story about his day and during a lull in the conversation he’d say something like, “It is funny how quiet all the neighborhoods are here during the day.” My dad never expanded on these observations. He’d just return to whatever he had been talking about before the comment.

As if he hadn’t said it.

As if the thought hadn’t followed him for days, or weeks, or months, or even years.

As if it wasn’t an observation he had made to me dozens of times earlier.

My mother and I knew that when he said, “It is funny...,” my father didn’t mean that holding onto his Ghanian culture in America was ha-ha-funny. He didn’t mean he could laugh at how suburbs emptied during the day and how the silent cul-de-sacs were nothing like the lively villages where he grew up, where people spoke and stood outside and stayed awhile under the sun on their way to errands and elsewhere. What dad meant by “It is funny...,” is the hardest part of America is the loneliness.

My father had friends. Tucked between the pages of the scrapbook of Saturday Evening Post clippings he left behind, there are also about a dozen photographs. In most of the photos my dad looks impossibly young and he’s never alone. There are pictures of
him lounging in packed living rooms, drinking beer, smiling with all his teeth. I can’t tell if the pictures were taken in Ghana or during my dad’s early, hungry years in the States. The paper memories feature familiar faces: my father’s friends I call my uncles. They had all made it to America. Most were in the area, a few in New Jersey, while one had landed all the way in Taos, New Mexico, after marrying a hippie white lady for a green-card—or at least that’s how it was gossiped about between my mom and Aunts Ami and Abla.

Dad only spent time with his friends on special occasions: a wedding, a homecoming, a graduation, a christening or outdooring. Many of my dad’s friends attended the same church. Dad could have seen them there each week, but he often opted to stay home Sunday mornings while my mom and I went to join the congregation. Every Sunday, dad’s peers would ask, “Where’s your father?” Every Sunday. It annoyed me, but never enough to dare suggest they call dad up at home and ask him themselves. I don’t know why my father stopped going to church. I remember him, my mom and me going once a week when I was little. Gradually, he started only joining us for holidays: a New Year’s midnight service, Christmas, Easter, and Mother’s Day. And then, he didn’t come at all. It was the only thing my mother and father ever fought about in front of me, a reoccurring argument that roared through the house once a year threatening to shatter plates, wooden spoons and drinking glasses. I started one of these fights once when I was thirteen. I said I didn’t want to go with my mom, and I wasn’t sure I even believed in God. Mom slapped me so hard I stumbled. Dad tried to intercede on my behalf. He said, “If the boy doesn’t want to go why must he? This is America, eh heh? Free country.” My mother reminded me and my father that this was “a nation under God.” It was silently understood after that day that I dare not ask if I might skip Sunday service like my heretical father. So, I never got to know what
dad did at home alone. After dad died, my mom and I attended church a few more times. We quit going and mom took more shifts at the grocery store. Now, I miss my father’s friends asking me where my dad is.

Dad would tell stories about when he and his pals were all living in crowded apartments in the city. They’d have weekly football matches at different parks around the metropolitan area. “There were days we’d play against some of the other immigrants,” he’d laugh, “We played against a regular group of Nigerians. No problems. Sometimes even with Jamaicans. But never with the Europeans. If you saw them on the pitch, you’d do best to just leave or there might be fighting.” Then dad would look up at nothing, an invisible mark on the ceiling, and chuckle to himself remembering. “We’d drink and cook after. Ah, good days, even during hard times. It is funny.”

When I would ask dad why he didn’t try to meet up with my uncles more, he’d shoo me away with his hands and sputter his lips. “We are all busy. I must work. So, do they. We all have children to raise up first.” Then he’d tell me to get back to my homework or study the art books he borrowed from the library. “Grow big,” he’d say. “Become a famous artist and make enough money for me to stop driving taxi all day. Maybe then I can enjoy my friends.” He’d laugh while he said this, but I understood he was serious. It was in how his eyes narrowed when he’d say things like this. I could feel myself shrink under the weight of his gaze falling on me whenever he’d point out a “funny” fact about our lives.

If I have a kid, I wonder if they will find a similar eagerness in my eyes when I look at them. I hope they know I’d only want them to be happy, that when I speak about how hard things are and were, I don’t expect them to owe me for any of the decisions I made bringing them here.
2.

I’ve wandered the neighborhood for hours barely noticing the sun fall behind the roofs of my suburb. I’m not sure when the streetlights flickered on but I’m standing on a storm drain and I’m under a cone of light beaming down from a grey power company pole. The toe of my shoe slides across the embossed text on a manhole cover, a warning—Don’t Dump Chesapeake Bay Drainage. Don’t Dump—circling a raised steal profile of a fish. The fish looks like a bullseye at the center of a target. I imagine myself melting into a puddle, getting washed away with rainwater, following the miles of hidden pipes until I join the fish in the bay and eventually blend out into the ocean.

I hear shouting and I return to my body. I look up from my feet. I find myself in front of Calvin’s house. Tommy, Calvin and an older white guy are sitting on the short steps of the walkway leading up to the front door. Each has a can of beer in hand. Tommy has a cigarette and the red tip of it waves wildly as he speaks with his hands. There are two more people. I can’t see their faces, only the backs of them. They are standing, confronting Tommy’s group. I recognize Al’s silhouette. Her hands are flailing too, inches from Tommy’s face. The person next to her is Mike Chen-Edisto. His hands keep reaching toward Al, ready to pull her away to his two-door black sports car, parked and still running with the passenger side door left open. I recognize Mike’s car--parked right behind Tommy’s Jeep at the edge of the property--as an older model of his mother’s vehicle, the one Katie picked me up in when Marcus roughed me up—the car I watched speed away some hours ago after Katie told me she is pregnant.

I’m close enough to hear more now.
Al shouts, clapping her hands in Tommy’s face as she speaks, “I know you are the ones who robbed and trashed the pharmacy at my father’s vet clinic!” She switches her attention to the older guy. Al says, “I know it was you fuckers because you assholes bragged about it to someone Mike knows in night school. Fuck that’s pathetic. How old are you anyway? Like, you look thirty. What are you doing hanging out with high school boys? Get a fucking life.”

The older guy hocks phlegm and spits close to Al’s feet. He stands. He’s larger than I had guessed seeing him hunched next to Tommy on one of the lower steps. He looms over Al and Mike when he says, “This is America, bitch. I don’t know how it works in whatever shit-hole sandpit you came from, but here we’re innocent until proven guilty.”

The older guy sips from his beer and even in the low light stolen from Mike’s car beams and the spaced-out streetlamps overhead, I can see his eyes don’t blink on Al.

But she doesn’t shrink away. Al steps forward as if she might try to pass through him, “You must have been the one who spray-painted ‘Go Home Osama’ across the side of my dad’s building.”

I’m shuffling awkwardly by Mike’s car trying to make myself known but not wanting to get involved. I don’t know what is the right thing to do. I’m not even sure why I’m here. But I say, “Hey,” anyway, and I’m surprised when Tommy calls out to me, waving me to move closer like he’d been expecting me, like we haven’t stopped talking. A part of me is grateful. It feels good to be welcomed anywhere right now. I tell myself, Tommy and others appreciate me being here as a new distraction, a way to exit their anger without something bad happening that they can’t run from, hide, or pretend away.
Mike takes the moment as a chance to escape, grabbing Al and guiding her to his car. Mike doesn’t speak and barely acknowledges I’m even there accept to walk around me with Al. For a moment I wonder if he knows about me and Katie, but I don’t dwell on it. Even if he did know I had impregnated his mother’s girlfriend, it wouldn’t change anything or make things any worse.

The large older guy shouts after Al and Mike, “This is America! You got no proof, bitch.”

“Fuck all of you,” Al yells back as she slips into the passenger seat and Mike takes his place behind the wheel of his car. Before slamming her door shut, Al yells to me, “Benny, please, seriously, don’t waste time with these fucking dickheads.”

I ignore her. I’m surprised by my own anger at her. Whatever romantic stuff Beth did with Al feels like a betrayal.

Mike revs the engine of his sports car and the pair speed off.

The large older guy says to Tommy, “Dude, I don’t believe in hitting women but that bitch was about to get smacked.” He laughs and the others do too. Tommy asks me if I want a beer. He points a thumb behind him to a case resting on a higher step beside Calvin’s legs. Calvin reaches into the box to offer me a can.

“Go ahead,” Calvin says, leaning and stretching the beer past the top of Tommy’s head, out toward me. “It’s dark enough out here no one really knows what we’re drinking. And besides, you’re black enough if cops roll up you could just take that big blue hoodie off and just disappear.” He chuckles to let me know he’s only joking. I look around to see if any adult neighbors might be peering outside from the windows of their home at that moment. I wonder for a few seconds, what it must be like to have so much confidence in
your rights as a citizen that you could break the law so casually. I’ve seen Tommy and Calvin worry about getting caught whenever we have done something stupid, but I always notice I worry more. Murry and Al, they worry a lot like me, but my worries often seem more severe. I figure it has to do with my skin, and how America often treats Black people. When I was younger my dad would talk about the promise of equality in the U.S. My mom would tell me to be careful. She told me about Rodney King and people like him who were abused by the police. She reminded me to be good so there might never be a reason for anyone to call the police, because the police can, and might, hurt me. Maybe it is also because I’m not a citizen, not yet. Maybe I’ll feel differently and have fewer worries after my naturalization. Maybe then I’d take one of these beers at any age and chug it down outside on the front steps leading up to a suburban townhouse.

Calvin tells the older guy I’m cool as he returns the beer he offered to its case, but the man still seems nervous around me. Tommy introduces the large guy standing as Tanner. Tanner is in Tommy’s evening Math class at the high school, which they’re skipping tonight. The older guy might be in his late twenties, Katie’s age. Tanner has a buzzed haircut and the thin blonde bristles of his scalp sparkle a little, catching stray rays of light as the night gets darker around us. He pulls a folded fitted athletic cap from his back pocket and tugs it onto his head. Above the curved bill is an embroidered Native American mascot.

“So, what’s up?” Tommy asks me, taking a pull from his cigarette. A cloud of smoke swallows his face as he exhales and says, “Haven’t seen or heard from you in a while. Something we can help you with?”
I admit, “I don’t know. I’m not sure why I’m here. I don’t know what I’m doing.” I breathe deep and accidently take in some of Tommy’s smoke. “I guess I didn’t know where else to go.”

Something about this makes Tanner relax his shoulders. I hadn’t noticed he was puffing his chest before. He asks for a cigarette and Tommy passes him a lighter. Tanner asks me about myself: Who else I know? What I’m into? Where I’m from? When I moved to the area? How I came to be standing there with them at that moment? After a while, Calvin leans back on the steps, less tense than before. Tommy stands up and gestures for me to take his spot on the steps and I do. The three of them keep chatting, with Tommy next to Tanner, and Calvin on the higher steps, most of the conversation literally moves over my head. I follow along, glad to have something to focus on, besides Katie and a baby. When someone says something funny, I laugh. When someone says something stupid or fucked up, I shake my head, but I’m still grinning. Mostly the conversation revolves around what they think the U.S. should do in Afghanistan. I lose count of the number of bomb-em's and nuke-em's uttered. Tanner makes new language, turning Hiroshima into a verb as a potential response to Al-Qaeda. I want to ask if any of them plan to enlist like the kid in the kente cloth shirt who was at the Thanksgiving event I went to with my mom just a few weeks ago. My mind can replace Tanner’s sports cap with a helmet. I can imagine all four of them in Army fatigues avenging the country they claim to love so much. I can see Tanner with his buzzed head shouting commands to Tommy and Calvin, fellow soldiers in battle. But I don’t ask if any of them plan to go to war. Maybe, in their mind, they already have joined the fight by saying WE every time they refer to the American military, and that this is enough to prove they are patriots.
When they are all full of beer and the night gets too cold, Tommy says he’s leaving. He asks if I want a ride home and I say, “Yes.” No one points out that I live close enough to walk. Together, Tommy and I say goodbye to the others. I slap hands with Calvin and raise my chin to Tanner.

Walking to Tommy’s Jeep, he tells me he made a new mix CD a few days ago.

“It’s got a lot of West Coast Bay Area stuff on there. Some Rancid, Tsunami Bomb, some older AFI, No Use for a Name, and early Green Day.”

“That’s cool,” I say. “But you know the D.C. scene is better.”

He pretends to be in disbelief and then laughs and calls me a poser.

In his Jeep, he asks if I’d like to ride around a bit and listen to music.

For about an hour we make a large loop on country roads circling our neighborhoods. Tommy has no slow songs on his latest mix. Nothing breaks the thrashing waves of sound beating over us as the Jeep dips and rises on the hills. Everything is so loud. I can’t think. I don’t want to. We don’t bother speaking.

I open my mouth only once to shout over to him, “I got Mike Chen-Edisto's mom’s girlfriend pregnant.”

And Tommy nods to show he heard me before gripping the wheel tighter to speed into another turn.
3.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the night I first met Katie, and how that story is totally unlike the one about how my parents came together. The story of Katie starts with me sitting alone in my room, in the dark, listening to my mother’s pillow-muffled wails float through the house in search of my father’s ghost. Then I heard taps against my window. I flipped on my desk lamp and then peaked out past my blinds. I looked down to find Tommy, Mary and Al tossing pebbles up at me like some kind of teen movie. They were dressed in their homecoming outfits, waving up to me from the yard. I didn’t debate whether to go join them, which is weird because I’m always debating things in my head. But no, in a move that was very unlike me at the time, I raised the blinds and waved down to my friends. I put a finger up to let them know I’d join them in a moment. And I felt a warm something bloom in my gut as I watched them mime cheers.

I crept downstairs, past the room my parents used to share. I grabbed my house key, my only coat, I remember it was getting tight in the arms. I headed outside, quietly pulling and locking the front door shut behind me.

Just outside my gate, my friends hurried me to Tommy’s Jeep. He cranked the engine and raised the dial on the stereo to a blaring airy roar. The tires squealed as he skidded us out of my neighborhood. Everyone started laughing, even me, at the way Tommy made the whole idea of sneaking me out a kind of joke. Yelling over the crunch and croon of “Last Caress,” by the Misfits, I asked where they were taking me. Al, seated next to me in the backseat, said her boyfriend, Mike Chen-Edisto, was throwing a party. His mom was out of town.

“You’re coming,” she told me.
I didn’t argue. I had no reason to.

The next track on Tommy’s Misfits mix was “Where Eagles Dare.” Murry screamed from the front passenger seat that she knew this one. She turned the volume up even louder. The booming buzz threatened to blow the speakers and my ears, but we all shouted along to the chorus, “I ain’t no goddamn son of a bitch!”

We listed to the song on repeat until we reached Mike’s neighborhood.

Tommy drove past the party first and then parked several houses down the street; in case the cops show up or he didn’t like the crowd. “I don’t want to get stuck and unable to leave because some preppy fucker parked their Saab behind me,” he said.

Before we exited the car, Al reached into her purse and pulled out a small breath mint tin. Inside were a few pills. She offered some to the car. Murry declined but Tommy and I each took one. I didn’t ask any questions like I usually would. There was a part of me looking to escape from myself. I could taste the pill as I tried to generate enough saliva in my mouth to swallow it. The bitter-chemicals on my tongue reminded me of ant and roach killer spray that was always present in my family’s old apartment in the city. A sort of sour-sweet-tang that hung everywhere, hugged everything, in the small one-bedroom-one-bath we used to share. The living room was divided by a curtain that separated where I would sleep from where we would gather.

“Let’s go,” Al said.

My friends and I moved toward the party, following the rising thump of music and chatter. The driveway to Mike’s large house was packed with cars and the parked vehicles wrapped around to the front of the property. I was surprised no one was in the yard.
We fell in-line behind Al as she marched up confidently to the front door and pushed her way inside. Here were the crowds of formal-dressed people, the first floor littered with folks my age sipping from red plastic cups. To the left was a dark living room. I could see coats piled up on the couches facing a fireplace. Al split-away from me, Tommy and Murry, to go find Mike. The rest of us pushed through toward the kitchen where we figured there would be alcohol. We were right. There were two kegs chilling in large washtubs of ice. Tommy, Marry and I joined the cue to grab a plastic cup of foamy beer. Once we had our drinks, I stood with my friends for a while listening to Tommy complain about how everyone but us were phonies and fakes.

Eventually, I got bored.

I chugged my beer and decided to go exploring on my own. I saw some kids flowing downstairs and followed them down to a big open basement where some groups were dancing to Outkast on Mike's family's fancy stereo system. I remember spotting the Liberian boy, Selassie, grinding on a platinum blonde cheerleader.

I saw that the basement led out to spacious backyard and patio.

I kept walking, through the crowds, out and further from the ruckus until I was at the edge of the backyard. It was quieter and dark at the edge of the property. I turned to face the house and let the branches of the tall privacy hedges tickle my shoulders.

Everything was starting to feel dream-like. My reflexes were slowing down, like I was moving through invisible gelatin. I looked to my right and realized someone had set up a massive camping tent. I stepped closer to and then peeked inside. The only brightness in the tent was from a lantern with a black-light. I couldn’t see faces,
just collections of bodies laid out and writhing over soft-blankets and comforters. I leaned out of the tent.

A tiny blinking ember floating against the black wall of hedges caught my eye. I decided to move toward it. And then a female voice like a growling cat asked me, “What the hell are you doing?” It was a woman hidden by the shadows of the yard’s large trees. She was watching the house.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t realize you were a person.”

This made her laugh, although at the time I didn’t understand why.

“Well, yeah. I’m a person. It looked like you were about to reach out and grab my cigarette for a second.”

I didn’t have anything to say that might prove to her I wasn’t, so I just stood there silently, listening to the soft moans and whispered breaths escaping the tent, the hum of the house behind me, and the deep exhales from the woman I’d come to know as Katie.

After a while she seemed to ignore my silence and began talking to herself aloud about how pathetic it is that she had nowhere else to be that night. She did admit that she was enjoying watching kids be kids. I nodded as if I understood, but I didn’t. I was having trouble concentrating, and I wanted to move closer to try to see what this shadow woman looked like. I was fighting the urge to reach out and touch her, to feel how real she was.

She asked me about myself, “So, what’s your story?”

I didn’t know what she meant by this exactly. But, I could feel the words rising in my throat and then vomit out past my lips before I could stop them. I told her my dad had been killed recently in the city while driving his taxi.

“Some asshole shot him in the back of the head,” I said.
I could not see her face, but by her silence I could tell she must have felt unsure of what to say. Finally, she muttered, “I’m sorry.”

I started sobbing uncontrollably. The tears felt hot and unending.

The shadow woman squatted. She snuffed out her cigarette in the grass. Then she pulled me into a hug. I squeezed her tighter and tighter, weeping into her neck and then…

I was kissing her collarbone.

Licking the salt of her skin.

I remember the texture of her goosebumps against the tiny ridges of my tongue. She didn’t pull back. I couldn’t stop myself. She rubbed my arms and guided my hands down the sides of her, down her pelvis, past the elastic waistband of her tracksuit bottoms, velvet. I felt the prickle of her pubic hair on my fingertips and pushed lower until my hand was warm and damp. She jumped back for a moment, like she was shocked by herself.

The three-dimensional silhouette looked around to see if anyone was watching us. I didn’t care. I guided her to the tent.

We got lost among the bodies. I noticed how my dark skin made me purple in the light. She was green with yellow freckles, and I wanted to trace every one of them like a constellation. I could finally see her face.

We kissed.

I dashed my fingers into her until she began to hum and swoon.

I didn’t know how long we were there tangled up together with others.

But, eventually we were just holding one another until we fell asleep.
The chill of the early morning dew seeped through the tent and woke me. The woman was breathing softly on my chest. My head felt full of bees. Perhaps she heard the thump of my heart rise as I slipped more into consciousness. She spoke, said, “Hey, kiddo.” Her hair was matted. Eyes streaked with red veins. I thought she was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. I struggled to figure out what to say. She watched me for a bit and then rose to a sit. We were the only two people left in the tent. “My name is Katie,” she said. “I’m dating Mike’s mom. Let’s try not to make a big thing out of this.”

I’m not sure this story will be one I’ll share if Katie’s baby grows up and asks how I met their mother. It is messy and embarrassing, but not like the way I’ve seen people come together in movies. I’d probably lie. I’d make up something sweet and easy to imagine and repeat. A cute story, like the one my parents offered me: both reaching for the same yam in the Kejetia market. Whether it’s true or not, I love the real way the story makes me appreciate where I came from and the people who made me. Maybe I’d want to give my kid a story better than the truth.
Sometimes I start thinking about baby names. If Katie decides to have a baby, would she want to name the kid after me?

I have an unusual name...

No.

My name is common to me. I’ve known it as long as I can remember. But I’m told my name is unusual. On both sides of the Atlantic my name gets curious stares.

Some recognize my last name, Kumasi, as an alternative spelling for Ghana’s second largest city. Coo-mah-see. Like a bird. Like a mother. Like eyes. It’s a place known for wealth and culture. “Rich town. Those Ashantis have money,” my dad used to say. But my father’s roots are not Ashanti, he’s Ewe, a minority in the region. Our last name was just as mysterious to him. Dad did grow up in a small village outside of Kumasi and was familiar with the local lore surrounding that city’s name. He once explained the parts to me: “asi in Twi is like below or underneath, and kum is gum tree.” At the end of the 1600’s, the same period in which art and music in Europe was becoming more extravagant, the Chief of the Ashanti empire was searching for a new capital. The Chief consulted oracles. He chose three possible locations and mandated that a gum tree be planted at each site to see which land was most fertile. In one spot surveyed, the tree did not grow, and the branches rotted. At another site, the gum tree didn’t get much bigger, but it did survive and produce a few smaller trees. The last gum tree flourished and grew into a giant where the Chief could often gather with his people.
Having the last name Kumasi might mean my genealogy begins with a baroque tree. Maybe it also means my lineage evaded the influence of early colonization. I can only guess.

Many Ghanaian citizens have three names: a first name that has a tribal significance, a middle name that might relate to the weekday they were born, and a surname. My mother wanted to name me Edem, meaning delivered by God in Ewe. Mom and dad had lost a son a few years before me. They never talked to me about it but my aunts did. I know he was born on a Thursday like me, but he died just a few short days after he was delivered into the world. He never got a name. He would have been called Yaovi. Yao, meaning Thursday, vi, is like little or junior, I guess. Basically, a Thursday-born born of a Thursday-born. So, my deceased baby brother’s name was made my middle name.

On long-distance phone calls between my mother’s family house in Accra and Washington D.C. where my dad started taxi driving, my parents debated what to call me for months. Dad wanted a Western first name, something that would make it easier for me to navigate America. Something easier for white people to say. He said he wanted a name that wouldn’t work against me once my mother and I were able to join him in the USA. Eventually, they settled on Benjamin, abbreviated to Benny by my mother whose native voice trips over the stress and inflection on the second syllable, overextending the quick “ji” to “jah.” I share the name with one of America’s founding fathers, but my dad was not inspired by the invention of bifocals or flying kites with keys. He said he named me after Benjamin Banneker, the son of a freed slave who joined Major Andrew Ellicott’s team to survey the original borders of D.C. According to my father, Banneker designed the streets of the nation’s capital. “A man much like us,” my dad would say on rides to school in his
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cab, back when our family shared a one-bedroom apartment in the southeast corner of the city. “A man much like you brought all of this together, the streets I drive every day. You’re in a country where a self-educated Black man can rise and do something great. Don’t forget that.” In History class I’d discover that my father exaggerated Benjamin Banneker’s role in the construction of the capital. After my father’s death, my mother, drunk and angry one night, revealed to me that my name had nothing to do with the only Black surveyor on the team of Quakers who drew up the borders of D.C. “You were named after the white man on the one-hundred-dollar bill,” she said. My dad’s largest taxi fare. As mom’s story goes, the week my parents were searching for my name, dad had picked up a young African American man with thick gold chains and links hanging from his neck and wrists. Dad drove the guy twenty-seven miles, from the National Gallery to Dulles airport. The dude had no luggage and didn’t say a single word to my father. The passenger's eyes were hidden behind large sunglasses with gold streaks along their arms. Beneath the shades, the man’s long face led to a pointed chin. His skin was as black as coal, apparently. Dad told my mother the man smelled clean. “Astringent,” he had said. Like witch hazel. At the airport, the gold man gave my father a single $100 bank note for the ride. The man didn’t ask for change. Dad had never received so much from a single passenger. Studying Franklin’s pudgy profile, my father considered the name Benjamin for the first time. At least that’s what my mother told me.

Read like a metaphor, no matter what stories I choose to believe about my naming, what I’m called expresses my parents’ hope for me.

My name is a kind of blessing.
My name is a prayer, that I might have wealth and safety from what has grown from my roots.
I’ve been thinking about my father a lot lately, wondering about what it might be like to become a dad myself. Katie hasn’t told me what she might do yet. Whatever she chooses, I know I need money to take care of it. I need money to pay off Marcus so that nobody gets hurt. I remember my dad worrying about money a lot. He never tried to hide that stuff from my mom and me. If a bright colored envelope with a past due utility bill showed up in the mail, dad would open it in front of me and read it aloud. He’d read the amount owed really slow, sometimes repeat it before sucking his teeth and exclaiming, “Oh chale!” I guess he wanted me to know what he was working for, the cost of being an adult. If dad hadn’t driven a taxi, I’m curious what else he might have been willing to do to keep us out of the cold. What would my father have been able to convince himself was necessary to make money? I’m sure he’d never do something that might hurt someone else. Dad had a lot of pride, and it rolled into everything he did, in every choice and interaction. The way he spoke about driving his cab every day, he made it sound noble. He’d do almost anything for my mom and me, I’m sure of it, but never something he couldn’t speak about with some pride.

He’d never sell drugs, like me.

I’ve started selling for Tommy.

All the weed we stole from Marcus is gone but Tommy has a supplier now about an hour north in farmland, nowhere. Tanner made the connection. “Homegrown here in the U.S.,” Tommy said. “Sour Diesel. Hydroponic. You can look at it and tell it was once an actual fucking flower. Real nuggets, smells amazing. Not that skunk-ass, foreign, brick weed we got off your old homeboy.” The supplier up north, Tommy just refers to as
“Yellow-Pants,” also has access to ecstasy. I’ve found steady customers among the students that spend a lot of time in Dr. Ambush’s art room. I only had to ask around my senior Drawing class and people started to find me. I worked out a system. They slide an envelope with money and a note with the first letter and amount of what they want through the slits in my hall locker. For example, cash wrapped in a piece of college-ruled that only has W-Q written on it in big letters. I meet up with Tommy at Calvin’s house after school to get a quarter of weed and then I deliver it to the person before school in the woods right outside the cafeteria. Weed is popular, but when someone finds out I’ve got pills they return more often, and they always buy more each time. I get requests for Adderall and Ritalin a few times from kids I recognize from Beth’s Advance Placement classes. They say they need help studying. They look so disappointed when I tell them, no. I don’t know how medications needed by people with Attention Disorders became related to substances in Anti-drug campaigns. People also ask me for ketamine. Tommy tells me he has a few dozen small tinctures.

By the last week of classes before school breaks for winter holidays, I’ve sold ketamine a couple of times.

And this is when Pat decides to follow me into the art room supply closet after our class ends to ask me, “So you’re a drug dealer now?”

I spin around to find him standing in the doorway. He hasn’t said anything to me in over a month and I’m surprised by how casual he sounds speaking to me. I try to peer past him to see if anyone else might be close enough to have overheard him. My fist tightens around the watercolor paint brushes I had entered the closet to grab. I grumble, “I’m not a drug dealer.”
“Some kids in our class seem to think so,” Pat says. He leans a shoulder against the door frame and folds his arms. “You’ve sold to them, right?”

I step closer. I ask why he cares to know. “It doesn’t involve you. You haven’t said shit to me in weeks and the first thing you do is judge me. No thanks.”

My body threatens to shove past him, and Pat holds his palm up facing me.

“Easy, Kumasi. Easy. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to get you mad. I actually need your help.

I fold my arms and wait for him to go on.

Pat lowers his voice, “I want to buy some K from you.”

“Ketamine.”

He coughs, straightens his stance, and says, “Yes.”

Why?”

I watch Pat roll his neck and blink several times as he finds the nerve to say, “For the Ethiopian boy. Selassie. He hasn’t spoken to me since you got us pulled over with your gang crap...”

“...I’m not in a gang.”

Pat scoffs, “And what would you call it then? You’re in a group that steals and sells drugs. I heard you all even robbed Al’s father’s veterinary clinic.”

“I wasn’t a part of that, and I’m not even sure it was Tommy and the other guys.”

Pat frowns. “Guys? Lord, you have a boss with guys.”

“He’s not my boss.”

“Okay, cool down. I just figured I’d ask and thought if the rumors were true, you could get me some.”
I’ve tried not to think about how Tommy got his small stock of K. This made it easier to sell. Now, Pat has forced me to think about where Tommy would get a bunch of tiny medical bottles. I have to admit to myself that they probably did not come from Yellow-Pants. Confronted by a truth I’ve known but refused to see, a wave of self-hate crashes over me as I tell Pat, “Yeah, I think I could get you something.”

He says thanks but doesn’t seem to be able to look at me for a few seconds.

“Pat, let me just ask, you’re so straight-edged and careful. You hate doing anything that might be illegal. Why are you doing this for some boy?”

He searches the closet around me and then shrugs, “Because I love him.”

I’ve got no argument for that, nothing to add. I show Pat a half-grin to let him know I might understand. He smiles back and quickly changes the subject.

“Hey, I took a look at that book thing you’re working on. Is that what you’ve been doing during our lunch period?”

I bite my bottom lip trying not to show how nervous and excited I am that someone has noticed the messy sketchbook on a large drafting table in the corner of Dr. Ambush’s art room. I’ve covered the table with stacks of old magazines, multiple pairs of scissors, glue, a precision knife and a now fat accordion folder. I move past Pat and exit the closet. I head over to my project and he follows. I pull a studio stool out from beneath the flattened drafting table and I take a seat. Pat stands over me and reaches for my sketchbook. I prattle as he flips through it gently, lingering over each image I’ve constructed from charcoal drawings, acrylic paints, markers, and collages of Saturday Evening Posts clippings.

“I’m not sure exactly what I’m doing. Dr. Ambush said it’s assemblage. I don’t know. I’m not sure what to call it.”
Pat closes the sketchbook, runs his hand along the back cover and turns the book over in his hands.

“This is for the contest?” he asks. “I assume you could use the cash prize if you win.”

“Yeah, I need that money, for more reasons than you know.”

He sucks air in past clenched teeth and says, “Yikes.” He returns to my sketchbook project.

“So, you don’t have a name for it yet?”

“No.”

Pat sighs deep in that way that he does when he thinks he’s about to educate me.

“Kumasi, this is really cool. But I doubt the judges will get it. I’m not sure I even understand this.” I nod and he goes on. “Look, these are community college Art teachers, right? They’ll probably be well-meaning white people. They’ll want something about culture but it will have to have a simple message they can understand and feel good about.”

Pat leans closer and lowers his voice. “I’ve seen some of the competition. There are three kids doing watercolor landscapes. Okay, that takes skill, but so what? It doesn’t mean anything besides looking pretty. A few folks are going to be submitting photography, but again, if the image doesn’t have a story it won’t likely win. I heard that girl Gloria in our class, the one from Ecuador, is making a clay sculpture but I haven’t had a chance to see her progress.”

I run my palms along my jeans and crack my knuckles. I ask Pat, “Are you submitting something for the contest?”
He’s quiet, debating an answer. “I am,” he says. “It’s a family portrait, a drawing of a photograph of us dressed in full Nigerian formal wear but I’ve made the color of the outfits red, white and blue. You know, showing our experience is American too and all that. White people are really patriotic right now.”

“That’s smart,” I tell him, glancing down at my sketchbook creation a little less impressed with the work I’ve done.

My face must show how much I’m pitying myself because Pat nudges me with his elbow, “Like I said, this book thing is really awesome, Kumasi. You just need a good artist statement to sell it to the judges.” He pauses, twists his mouth and says, “I can help if you want, with figuring out what you want this project to say. I can ask Dr. Ambush if I can bring my lunch back here too and we can talk about all this art stuff. Besides our old picnic table has been overrun by a group of scuzzy freshmen.”

“What about your friends in the Pan-African club. Haven’t you been sitting with some of them at lunch?”

Pat shrugs. “I have, but they’ll be okay. They can discuss ways to uplift the continent without me for a day.”

I stand up from my stool and we bump fists.

“Thanks,” I say.

"No sweat... Hey, does this entitle me to a drug discount?"

I pretend to shove him.

He laughs and I realize how much I’ve missed the sound.
There are no windows in the small community college auditorium. Most days the room probably hosts lectures in History or large Public Speaking classes, but today it is reserved for our naturalization ceremony. A group of older women calling themselves the Daughters of the American Revolution hand out tiny American flags before the ceremony. We nervously fiddle with the pencil-length pole. Some of us roll the small polyester stars and stripes into something like a candy cane. The youngest of us and the happiest adults, like mom, wave their miniature flags in the excitement blowing through the room.

We start with the national anthem. Many of us mumble through the words. There is about fifty of us, immigrants. We are from over thirteen countries. We’re instructed to stand as a U.S. Magistrate reads from a list of nations, recognizing the places we come from: Brazil, Columbia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, France, India, Norway, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Laos, Burkina Faso, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Turkey and Ghana. We clap for those told to stand after each nation is called.

The Magistrate tells us, “Today you will be denying allegiance to the government of another nation, but this does not mean you must give up your love for that country you are from.” Many of rise and drop our heads to this in agreement. “You are bringing all of your traditions and culture to the U.S.A., and we need that.” After this, the Magistrate exits and is replaced by a District Judge.

The District Judge seems more serious. He’s older than the Magistrate and keeps checking the time on his wrist. He tells us that we are all about to take an oath of citizenship and that afterwards we will be legal Americans with, “all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto.” He tells us that the word *oath* can be replaced with “solemnly affirm,”
if that makes us more comfortable, and those of us who aren’t religious can omit repeating the direct references to God as we recite. When he’s done explaining all of this, he tells us to stand and raise our right hand.

We repeat after him.... *I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen;* Somewhere in the rear of the small auditorium a fussy baby whines on the verge of a full tantrum. That I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; Some of us study the tiny flag in our hands. We consider the red, white and blue. Each of us has memorized the symbolism of these colors. We know that these hues are meant to convey the blood of America, its hardiness and valor, the country’s consciousness, pure as fresh fallen snow, and commitment, as deep as an ocean trench, to vigilance, perseverance and justice. that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; But each of us can’t help but see more than images intended by America’s founders. Looking at our tiny copies of the American flag, many of us can’t help but think about how its colors and patterns reflect the national symbols we’ve left behind; how one of those crimson bars could be like the blood spilled for our former country’s independence; how removing forty-nine of those stars and painting the remaining one black could turn it into a symbol of a different kind of freedom. What if lines were removed, painted new colors, maybe yellow or green? *that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law;* A woman coughs loudly on
the south side of the room. If she missed reciting a section of the oath, will she still get her citizenship like the rest of us? *and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.* Although we have been told that we could avoid the “so help me God”, this is the part mom repeats the loudest, a few stray tears streaking from the corners of her eyes. She pulls her palms together and brings the steeple of her hands to her lips. The small flag is locked between her fingers. She prays, no one else can hear the details of it, what she says to God is covered by the soft shush of other people’s whispers.

“You are now citizens,” the District Judge says, “I invite you all to put your right hand over your heart for you first pledge of allegiance as true Americans.”

We recite the pledge with the Judge. Some of us start to speak too fast, ahead of the rhythm we’ve created together, but quickly return to the pace of the group. I’m surprised how well we all know it. Maybe others have learned the pledge in school when they were younger here in the U.S., stumbling through it every morning at their desk, wondering if they’d ever be able to hold the awkward-sounding words and their foreign meaning in their brains and mouths as effortless as their classmates.

The pledge ends. We’re almost finished, but before a brief recorded congratulations message from the President, the Judge wants to offer advice to us as new Americans.

“Make sure you register to vote and never forget to do it whenever possible. Don’t get jaded by the political process, keep the excitement and faith in this country you have now. Remember that your voice can make a difference here.”

We nod in agreement or to show we are still listening.
“Many of you have come here for better opportunities,” the Judge reminds us. “Make wise choices for yourself and your family. As many of you already know, perhaps too well, freedom isn’t free. It takes great sacrifice. If you work hard, even when things get tough, you will win. When you give your love and loyalty to America, this nation will repay that love and loyalty.”

This confuses some of us who think of freedom as an end to having to make major sacrifices, the types that are heavy on one’s soul. And what will we win? This makes America a game, but the real struggles of our lives here have never not felt real.

“Find a way to give back to America as new citizens,” the Judge says. “It will now be part of your responsibility to help assimilate other new Americans to our way of life.”

After the naturalization ceremony, some chose to gather in the hall outside the auditorium. A line forms to have pictures taken with the Magistrate and District Court Judge. Folks grin broadly holding up their certificate for family to snap photographs. My mom and I watch this for a bit, standing in an alcove by two water fountains, not sure what to do next. We’ve got about half an hour before the bus we need to catch to go home arrives at the corner of the college campus.

“This moment would have meant so much for your father,” mom says.

“I know. I was thinking about how all of us in there together probably looked like that Norman Rockwell painting with all the people from all over the world. You know, the one that says, ‘Do Unto Others,’ at the bottom.”

Mom’s face sparkles. She bounces and points at me with her little American flag, “Oh! Eh, heh, he loved that painting, serious. It’s called The Golden Rule. Ah, he showed
it to me when we were young. He said that it represented America, a place where everyone was welcome and could live in peace.”

“Ma, did he ever regret saying that,” I smirk

“Your father?” She sucked her teeth. “No. He was blind to this country. Even when he was frustrated with America, he still believed in it.”

I swallow hard and roll my shoulders. I inhale and ask, “Do you believe in this place.”

She let her gaze scan over the new citizens standing in line for a photo opportunity with the legal representatives that led the ceremony.

Mom clears something from her throat. “I heard one of the women in the line before the naturalization say she had been in this country for seventeen years. She’s worked for this for seventeen years. She worried about this so very long. Your father would have arrived in this country sometime even before that woman,” mom puts a finger to her ear and leans toward me, a gesture she often does to make sure the listener understands and is following along with what she’s saying. I nod. “So, I choose to believe in this country too. It is where I am. Your father, that woman, all of these people here have faith that America is a place worth all of this struggling, ah. I trust it is, but also, I think we can make it worth it. We came to America. There were a lot of sacrifices. Your father made a lot of sacrifices. We must make it worth it. That is what he would want, right?”

I tell her yes. My stomach lurches and a nervous bubble of gas floats up and gets stuck in my throat. Mom returns to watching the people taking pictures. I keep watching her. Her posture seems to have transformed within the last hour. Could the change in
resident status have led to a noticeable change in who she is? Already she seems to be holding her chin a little higher. I have noticed fewer liquor bottles when I take out the trash.

Do I look different now as a citizen?

Could I become someone different?

I’m in the land of opportunity. I now have legal rights to the pursuit of happiness. Maybe there is hope to liberate my life from all that’s holding me down.

While my mom is focused on her fellow new Americans, I make a silent prayer.

*Dear God, please allow me to keep my mother from finding out how far I have strayed from my parents’ vision for my success in the U.S.A.*
Leading into the second Christmas without my father, my first as an American citizen, my mom and I decide to celebrate the holiday. Mom asks Aunt Ami and Auntie Abla to drive us to a tree yard where we pick out a pine that almost fits totally inside the trunk of their four-door sedan. Aunt Ami drives slow as the top of the evergreen pokes out past the right rear taillight. Decorating the tree becomes a small debate with my mother. I suggest tinsel, like dad would, but mom hates the stuff. She never told my father how much she disliked the clumps of thin foil, the way the threads would get everywhere and often look like some kind of invasive species climbing the tree. I find out she hates tinsel almost as much as glitter. Glitter we both agree is terrible no matter the holiday. Mom and dad had voted sometime during our first Christmas in the States against ornaments. They had no interest in the colorful glass balls or the endless variety of fragile figurines they could hang on branches. I’ve always admired ornaments, especially the shiny ones. I can get lost staring into the weird perspectives and wonky angles reflected in those holiday orbs. I convince mom to get a box of twelve silver chrome balls to put on the tree. I tell her they are plastic, but I’m not sure. Whatever they’re made from, they feel pretty thin. Part of me likes the fact that they could break so easily, it makes me more careful when I slide the loop of the ornaments’ ribbon over a thin but sturdy limb of the tree. The process is so delicate. It’s like I’m doing something important. Mom donates my father’s box of tangled tree lights to Aunts Ami and Abla for church decoration. She comes home from one of her shifts with several feet of electrical cords with tiny white and blue bulbs. My mother says she got them from the discount bin at the grocery store. She really likes the simpleness of the look, not
a mixing of red, green and half a dozen other colors. She says it’ll look great with the ornaments I picked out. When I examine the lights, I break out laughing.

I say, “Mom, you didn’t notice some of these bulbs are shaped like little stars of David? They’re for Hannukah.”

“How was I to tell?”

“The wall plug is shaped like a Menorah.”

“Well, I still like them. They are pretty. Jesus, our lord, was Jewish. He’ll love it. Hang them on the tree, Benny.”

They do look great on the tree with the ornaments. It makes me smile every time I pass the living room.

Mom and I take the bus to the mall on a Saturday. It’s packed and people are rushing in a panic but mom and I just take our time. Neither of us wants anything in particular. Mom comments more than once about how, looking around the crowded shops, one could forget there was a major attack on America only a few months ago.

“Amerci ans are relentless,” she says, eyeing a buy-three-get-one-free display on underwear.

I respond watching a horde of people ruffle through the piles of bras and panties. “I think you mean resilient.”

She switches her gaze to a group huddled around a small robot dog barking in front of a Radio Shack. “Yes, that is what I mean. Life goes on. Even with war and this anthrax foolishness in the mail, people here can still try to make a good Christmas.”

“Is all of this making you feel patriotic?”

Mom seems to think seriously on my joke, but she doesn’t respond.
The robot dog leans on its hind legs, raises its ears and cocks its head to the side. Its audience claps. We keep walking.

We never adopted Santa but have taken the habit of hiding gifts to reveal to each other on Christmas Day. Mom hands me $25 and tells me to find her something nice. Something she can really use. We split up. I get her a knitted scarf I saw her notice earlier in the day. We meet up again half an hour later at a cinnamon bun vendor in the food court. I try to ignore the craft store shopping bag in her hand. A few weeks ago, I’d mentioned wanting to do more with color pencils and I guess she found me a nice set. Mom has grabbed some wrapping paper and she will bring home some empty boxes from work we can use for packaging the gifts.

There is a kiosk at the edge of the food court selling Norman Rockwell collector plates. One stands out. The porcelain is decorated with an image I recognize from a clipping in my father’s scrapbook. It’s called “Christmas Homecoming.” We learn from the eager salesman at the kiosk that the illustration originally appeared on the cover of the December 25, 1948, issue of The Saturday Evening Post. It is the only one of Rockwell’s works to have the likeness of all of his immediate family. In the picture a son has arrived home for the holidays with Christmas presents and bags tucked under his arms. Over a dozen of the son’s loved ones are gathered in the frame to welcome him home, and he’s been pulled in a tight embrace by who I’d guess is his mother. My mom says the scene reminds her of what it was like whenever dad would come home to Ghana, how both of their families would come together to see him arrive. I remember returning to Accra this past summer with dad’s ashes, it feels forever ago. I was picked up at the airport and brought to a villa filled with folks calling themselves family, lining up to hug me and say
hello and give condolences and their love before I even had a chance to put my bags down.

It was overwhelming, like the image on the Rockwell collector’s plate, but it was good.

Mom and I decide to get the plate. We’ll buy it for my father. We’ll wrap it up in a box and we’ll place it under the tree for him. On Christmas Day, we’ll fight through the tears of opening his present without him and we’ll hang the collector plate somewhere we can walk by and admire it and think of him from time to time. Of course, we don’t need to buy the plate. This gift is not something we can use. We’ll never eat off it or use it to serve food. The plate will be a token of love, something to remind us to be relentless when we have to, and resilient when we can.
8.

I’m outside pacing the parking lot of an under eighteen nightclub. I can’t make out the songs people are dancing to inside but the trembling bass rolls past the walls, over the asphalt, and up my legs and stomach to rattle my chest. Inside people are grinding on partners, friends and strangers under black lights, strobes, disco lamps and lasers, waiting to countdown with TV images of the ball-drop in Times Square. At home, I’ve left mom falling asleep to an Andy Griffith marathon. She loves the simple life of the characters, how their biggest conflicts come from the smallest misunderstandings cleared up neatly with no scars. When she first saw Tommy, she giggled her sides sore at how much he looked like Opie.

Tommy’s watching me from the driver’s seat of his Jeep, parked at the corner of the nightclub’s lot under a light pole that doesn’t work. For the last few weeks, Tommy, Tanner, Calvin and I have come to this teen club to sell to its customers. We always park in the spot others avoid because it is so far from the security cameras posted on the sides of the building, and there’s little light. We don’t have to worry about the car being robbed. Tanner is too old to enter the building. He always waits in the Jeep. Tommy hangs with him most of the time while Calvin and I go in and meet people. We bring folks outside to buy whatever drugs we’ve brought with us.

In the club, Calvin is a lot bolder than me. He’ll walk up to kids on the dance floor and ask if they’re looking for stuff to make their evening more fun. I hang by the bar sipping mocktails or I linger in the bathroom waiting to observe someone who looks stoned or drunk mention they’re looking for more. When they exit with me, I’m sure the bouncers must know what I am doing. I come here so often now, and I walk past them more than
half a dozen times a night with different people. But I think the bouncers let me pass through because I’m not sloppy and it’s clear I’m not bringing anything into the place that might bring them serious trouble.

Right now, I’m taking a break, making slow circles around Tommy’s vehicle and trying to calm down after running into Al moments earlier. She had charged up to me at the bar.

She shouted over the booming club speakers, “Benny, what are you doing?”

I turned away to remind her we haven’t been speaking. I pretended to scan the dance floor behind her.

Al grabbed my shoulder and shook me, refusing to be ignored. “I saw Calvin in here. You came with him and Tommy and that creepy older dude, right? You’re selling with those guys, are you serious?”

I gritted through my teeth, “Say that a little louder.”

“How can you do this shit? How could you stick around, sell their drugs when you know they robbed my family?”

“I don’t know that.”

Al studied me a while. Her skin flashed red, blue, and green under the LED lights. Her hair shinned like glossy plastic. She smelled like good cologne. “Wow. You gave Tommy so much crap when this all started. You’re a fucking hypocrite.”

“I’ve got reasons.”

“Oh yeah? So does everybody! You’re not special. You know, I’m from a house of immigrants busting their ass so I can go to our fancy public school too.” She looked away for a moment, staring at my feet for a few beats of the song around us. “Tommy and them
don’t care about you or me or anybody that doesn’t look like them. Not really. They’ll only be loyal to you as long as they think they need something from you.”

“Funny to hear you talk about loyalty.”

Al pursed her lips and clapped her hands together. “Yes, good, glad you’re finally ready to talk about this. Look, I considered apologizing to you at first about Beth, but you know what, I’m not sorry. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You knew I liked her!”

No one turned to investigate why I was yelling. My voice wasn’t loud enough to break through the music, so I kept shouting, “You knew I liked Beth and you hooked-up with her. What kind of friend are you?”

Al didn’t shrink or bow her head. She shouted into my face, “You weren’t dating! You didn’t make a move! If you liked her, go get her. Benny, you can’t call dibs on a girl! She’s not a can of soda or something. She’s a person.”

My top teeth had dug deep in my chapped bottom lip. I could taste a hint of blood mix with the coconut sweetness left over from my virgin Sex on the Beach.

“And if Beth and I got together, so what? If you like her and you wanted to really be with her, why does it matter that we hooked up? Grow up, Benny.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Then man-up! And quit this shit with Tommy. Get your life right.”

She didn’t stand around to let me respond. Al shook her head, raised a flat palm, and then swooped it away at me like she was dropping a plate full of truth. She melted into the moving crowds as suddenly as she had appeared.
I pull in a mouth full of bitter-crisp air and then there are bees swarming my rib cage. I hold the stinging in my lungs before releasing the hive into a cloud of winter vapor. In less than an hour this terrible year will end. There is no way for me to predict how the next twelve months will go, but part of me feels the new year will have to be different. I’m getting closer to paying back Marcus and maybe I’ll be able to save enough money to help Katie with a baby.

Someone calls out to me across the parking lot, asks me what I am doing. It occurs to me suddenly how suspect I must look starring at my own reflection in the rear window of a fancy sport hatchback. Calvin blinks in front of me. There are two girls about my age standing on either side of him. Both Black, one with locked hair down to her shoulders and her arms folded, looking impatient. The other’s hair is relaxed and everything seems funny to her. She’s swaying gently like she’s standing on a canoe on a pond.

Calvin repeats himself, “What are you doing?”

I tell him nothing. I pull my father’s old, plum suede jacket tighter around my blue hoodie.

“I just needed to get out of the club for a second and think.”

The straight-haired girl laughs out, “It’s too cold for that shit.” She tugs on Calvin’s arm. “Where are you parked?”

They don’t invite me but I walk with them the short feet to Tommy’s SUV. Calvin knocks on the front passenger side window. Tanner lowers the glass and waits for the girls to tell him what they want.

The giggly one asks for some joints.
Tanner smiles, leans his head out past the thin clear barrier that shielded him from the cold just seconds earlier. His neck hovers inches over the glass as he says, “We can roll you a couple, if you want to get in, give you a few hits. Call it a free sample.” He tugs at the bill of his sports cap and grins wider than I’ve ever seen him do.

I want to punch him. I want to pull Tanner through the window and pound his face into the snow-salt-stained asphalt. I hate him. I hate being here. I glimpse at Tommy who’s approving smile feels like a betrayal. I don’t see why he finds Tanner so interesting. I can’t understand what they see in each other. I’ve noticed an easiness between Tommy and Calvin and Tanner, when they are together and they forget I’m with them. They enjoy cruelty, slapping each other’s nuts, embarrassing each other in public, punching, twisting, bruising, leaving scars of friendship. I can’t join in because I don’t get the fun in making life harder on purpose, especially for someone I care about.

I realize the Black girls are both looking at me now, checking with me to confirm these white boys are safe.

I shrug and say, “They’re okay.”

The girl with the locks warns us, “My brother works over in Langley. I’ve got a cellphone. If y’all try anything, believe you will end up on some terrorist watch list.”

With that Tommy unlocks the doors to the backseat. The girls climb in and Calvin motions for he and I to move around to the rear to crawl into the bed of the Jeep. As we settle across from each other in the space with our legs crossed, he taps his knee to mine and asks, “You good?”

“I’m cool,” I mumble. “You see Al in there tonight?”
Tanner passes weed and some rolling papers between the girls. Calvin grabs them and says to me, “Yeah, I saw that bitch in there tonight.”

“Really? What did she say to you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he mutters, crushing and sprinkling tiny leaves into the paper folds.

At the front, the group makes awkward introductions. The girls are Dominique and Shawna. Tanner tells Dominique she’s beautiful and looks like Beyoncé from Destiny’s Child. He says Shawna is cute too; he thinks her hair is cool. He reaches a hand back and runs his fingers along one of her locks. She jerks her head away.

Tommy, maybe picking up on the girl’s discomfort, says to them, “It must have been kind of lame in the club tonight if you both are out here, right?”

“It’s alright,” Dominique says through a laugh. “The DJ has had a few bad streaks tonight. He tried to play some Junkyard and Rare Essence but we’re way too far out of the city for the crowd in there to be into Go-Go. He played some 90s throwbacks, some Quad City and Tag Team, come-on-ride-the-train-whoop-there-it-is-type trash. I’m like, what am I, back at in middle school?”

Shawna snorts, “Please, stop. You kept dancing though.”

“I’ll dance to anything!”

Tanner, has been switching between looking to the backseat and scanning the parking lot like he’s been elected to keep watch. He speaks again, this time without turning away from the fogging windshield, “What’s next? Bring back “The Macarena?”

The car hums with our collective chuckles. It’s all funny, us crowded in a vehicle about to share some joints, steaming everything around us talking about the Macarena on
New Year’s Eve, all of us strangers if not to each other than to ourselves. I think about the last time I listened to new music. Usually it was with Beth, studying or making out with a radio or music television network on. I realize it was the only way I stayed up-to-date on popular stuff. She’d share what she was listening to lately and I’d pretend I hated the peppiness of her new favorite tunes. But I didn’t hate them. I never did. Sometimes I’d even catch myself humming along whenever I’d overhear those top-40 song’s somewhere else.

Dominique continues, “The DJ needs to play something from this millennium so I might be able to dance with somebody.”

“I’d dance with you anywhere,” Tanner adds.

“Damn, you’re hungry,” Shawna sneers at him.

And the car hums again with laughter.

Calvin passes his work to the girls, a joint for each of them to start. Tanner pulls a Zippo from his pocket and sparks a tiny flame for Dominique. Tommy carefully hands the red-hot car cigar lighter to Shawna. Soon the girls have covered us in their haze. Tanner asks if they’d want to do shotguns. Dominique agrees. Although I can’t see her face sitting behind her, I can feel Shawna roll her eyes. But then she turns to look at me. Shawna smiles and says, “You want a shotgun?” Before I’ve answered she is already flipping the joint so the lit end is in her mouth, resting gently between her teeth. I raise up on my knees, grip the back of the row seat and lean into her. Our noses are inches from each other when her cheeks swell and a tunnel of smoke steams past her lips. I suck. My lungs fill with fill Shawna’s breath. There’s a taste to it like a mix of earth, rainwater, mint and burnt toast.
The others cheer as we keep going; her blowing out, me pulling in until I can’t anymore. I drop away, hacking, and they cheer louder.

Almost everything sucks right now, but not this.

Calvin slaps an approving palm on my shoulder. “Hey dude, great job, but you want to try not to die or whatever?”

“I’m not...” cough, “trying to,” cough.

*I’m not trying to die* I tell myself again, sputtering for new air at the end of a tired year.
Rockwell believed he inherited his artistic ability. His dad was an amateur sketcher, and Rockwell’s maternal grandfather, who emigrated to America from England, made a living as an artist. He’d get commissioned to do portraits of wealthy people’s pets. Studying the way his grandfather’s paintings captured how a hair or feather might fall uniquely to each subject, must have taught a young Rockwell an attention to detail. It helped him learn how to reflect the realness of everyday American life. In the details he put into illustrating the common, Rockwell shows his care and respect for regular people. “He understands us,” my dad once said about him. That us is what my dad appreciated most, how Rockwell scenes capture a country made of real people, not movie stars or super models or angels. Real people who have seen hard times and small victories, who have known hunger and fullness too, who believe in the importance of a single voice, speaking their minds, believing in their rights and their faith in their country.

But as real as Rockwell gets, I still see gaps between his paintings and what I’ve seen in America. There aren’t a lot of people who look like my dad or me in Rockwell’s stuff. And, when figures that look us do show up, it’s usually in a reflection to white faces. Like in the painting “New Kids in the Neighborhood,” the one where two groups of children are staring at each across a driveway where a moving truck is being emptied into a house. One group is made up of a Black boy, and his little sister who’s holding a long-haired cat. The other children, there’s three of them, are white, two lean forward as they gawk to get a better look at their new African American neighbors. The white kids have a small dog, ears-pointed-to-the-sky-alert, sitting at their feet. The Black Americans aren’t the focus, not really. The message is about tolerance during the desegregation of
neighborhoods across the U.S. in the 1960s. Rockwell is speaking to his fellow Americans, that are white like him.

I thought about that painting a lot on the day we moved out of the city and into the suburbs. When we arrived, no curious white children were there to greet our rental truck. There were no cautious stares from our neighbors. In fact, a few of them came over to help my dad, mom, and me carry our heavier stuff into the house. I remember how our neighbors seemed to have something to say about every item they helped us take inside: “Isn’t this neat?” “How cool is that?” “This looks fun?” Our furniture seemed exotic and interesting to them. One of the white neighbors was really wowed by a thick wooden stool we had with us. He let us know that he knew stools like ours held a special significance in West Africa. He knew some folks like us called these stools, “asesedwa.” They were often used by chieftains and tribal leaders, he told us. My father smiled, nodding and affirming everything the guy said. Dad never mentioned that the stool was carved by my grandfather. Dad’s dad made a living with carpentry, but his passion was wood carving. He did several stools for some important people in Ghana, but he made the one we had for himself and his family. To give us a tradition, I think. Something to be passed down. My dad didn’t tell the neighbor any of this. There was no mention of the process: how my grandfather searched for a specific tree to call out to him in the forests surrounding his village. How he cut it down into logs himself, dried one perfect log for weeks before carving the rectangular base leading up to a fat wooden ring with a straight column run through the center up to the curved bench. The stool was shaped into an O with an I inside of it, an adinkra symbol, wawa aba, which means hardness, toughness and perseverance. The neighbors left us that moving day having learned none of the story behind the stool or other items they helped us
with. We didn’t really see them much after that. They kept to themselves, and we did the same.

We might have even forgot we had neighbors until a letter with a signed petition came to our mailbox. The papers informed my dad that many of our neighbors were “uncomfortable” with him parking his taxi in the community’s shared parking area. The letter was a friendly reminder that even though the parking spot was reserved for our house, the space was not meant for commercial vehicles. The neighbors that had welcomed us didn’t want to have to pursue legal action.

My mother called the letter, “Damned foolishness.” It was the first time I heard her curse. My father was quiet, but his disappointment and frustration was obvious. I could see him silently debating what to do for a couple of days. He decided to buy a canvas tarp to cover his cab every night when he came home—a compromise that didn’t benefit my father in any real way but to avoid trouble. Sometimes he’d clomp into the house, soaked after having to wrestle the fabric car cover in the rain. He never complained about this. He never suggested that our family might be treated differently than neighbors who aren’t Black immigrants and working-class. What was so offensive about having to park next to my father’s taxi? I wondered why the sight of how dad made a living would make anyone upset enough to sign their name to a threat—legal meant the law and that could mean cops and that could mean deportation, or something worse for people like us. As I heard and saw on the news, interacting with the police could get us beaten or shot.

My dad never talked to me about all the things that made life in America different for us. I’ve inherited a lot from my father. Family agrees I look more like him than I resemble my mother. But I didn’t get much of his personality, his ability to ignore, or
forgive, all the things he hates about a place. I don’t have his optimism for America. I’m not sure it won’t always feel like a nation built on an us for a them.

Also, I must have inherited my art skills from my grandfather. Even though dad appreciated art he was never really creative in that way, a fact he admitted often. He supported my drawing ever since I was little, proud that I carried some link to his dad.

Maybe the kid I might have with Katie may have some traits of my father.

Maybe they’ll share dad’s perseverance, toughness, and heart…

I guess that old wooden stool is mine to pass on now.
It takes me most of our Drawing class and part of our lunch period in Dr. Ambush’s room for me to find the strength to congratulate Pat. He placed second in the school Art contest. We’re sitting on stools at one of the worktables about to eat the separate foods we brought from home.

“Oh finally,” he says pulling a meat pie from his insulated lunch bag, “I was worried we were never going to talk about it. Thanks, Kumasi. And well done on the honorable mention.”

“Everyone got an honorable mention.” I say, my voice still a little hoarse from screaming into my pillow the night before. From a recycled paper sack from mom’s grocery store, I remove a sandwich wrapped in foil.

Pat grimaces. “Peanut butter and jelly on wheat bread again, Kumasi? Lord. Do you want to trade?”

I eye his patty and my mouth waters. “Yes, please.” We slide our food to each other across the table. I bite into the pie while Pat wraps up the PB&J, folds his arms and keeps talking.

“You saw the winner, right? A black and white photo of a broke-down barn and the caption, ‘American Decay.’ White people are so predictable. They love that loss of the dream type stuff.”

“Yeah, I saw it,” grumbling through chews. “I know.”

Pat apologizes. I tell him not to feel bad about almost winning. Him having guilt about placing higher than me in the contest isn’t going to make me less upset.
“I get it. You could have used that money for paying back that Marcus guy. I understand.”

I shove the last bit of the meat patty into my mouth and with swollen cheeks let him know, “No. You don’t know what I’m going through.” I swallow. “You really don’t.”

Between the cash Katie has given me and dealing, I’ve saved a little more than four thousand dollars, nowhere near the ten grand Marcus is demanding. And I haven’t told Pat about Katie’s pregnancy. Some days I wake up under an invisible load so heavy my chest might crack and fold me in half. My vision gets blurry sometimes and my legs quake. Pat doesn’t understand because he couldn’t. But I guess I can’t understand whatever pressures he must be under with his family’s ideas about who he should be and having to hide such a big part of himself from them and others at school.

“Fair,” he says. “I’m just trying to say I think your project was one of the best there. It deserved to at least place in the contest. If we had different judges, it would have.”

When I found out I didn’t win, I was disappointed, but my first thought wasn’t about the prize money I’d never see. I read the feedback from the judge, a professor at the community college. He had scribbled responses to every contestant’s submission on index cards paper-clipped or taped beside our work in the high school gym. The space had been converted into a gallery to exhibit the contest submissions for families and other interested students. On the card laid on the podium beside my collage book the professor wrote:

*A thoughtful assemblage, but ultimately these disparate elements do not come together to offer a clear statement about identity.*
When I was able to collect my project and the index card after the exhibition, I brought them back to Dr. Ambush’s art room. I studied the judge's words over and over.

Clear?

What was clear about being anything?

I grabbed some packing tape from the supply closet. I slapped the notecard to the back cover of my collage book and tapped it there. Like one of those quotes they put on published books to try to get people to buy them, I thought.

Pat tucks my former sandwich into his lunch bag, and then stares at the altered sketchbook. It sits a few inches away from me on the table.

"What are you going to do with that work now? There might be other contests in the area for you to enter."

"How much did you win anyway?" I ask.

“Wow. One of the worst things about you is that it isn’t enough for you to hurt yourself, you ask other people to hurt you too.”

“Whatever, how much?”

Pat pulls off his glasses and cleans the lenses with the bottom of his button-up shirt.

“I got half of first place. $500.”

“That’s not that great. What was third place, $250?”

“That’s right. Still more than you received, so don’t be critical.”

I raise my palms out in front of me to say I surrender.

Pat returns his specs to his face. He gives me a grin to let me know we’re okay and it’s time to change the subject. Dr. Ambush has gone out to her car to fetch some materials for the students in her first year Art class in the afternoon. Pat and I are the only people in
the room, but he leans in and lowers his voice to ask if he could buy more ketamine from me.

“This is for Selassie again?” Pat nods. “Are you doing it with him?”

His eyes flare. He shakes his head, “No. No. I mean, yes, I’m with him when he does it sometimes, but I don’t take that stuff. To be honest, I don’t like him when he’s on it because he gets in this headspace like nothing matters.”

“So why get it for him?”

Pat rolls his eyes and shrugs his shoulders. “I want him to be happy.”

“Fine.” I don’t bother to push him to explain anymore, and I could use the money.

“I’ll bring some to you soon.”

We don’t sit in the silent shame between us for long. Dr. Ambush knocks at the entrance of the room. Pat and I stand and rush over. He holds the door open while I help her maneuver a two-tier roll cart carrying a blender, sponges, felt towels, buckets, an iron, stacks yellowing newspaper, and wire screens bordered by wooden frames. Dr. Ambush, red from the cold outside and shiny with sweat, points me over to the stainless-steel sinks beside the supply closet while she heads to her office to remove her scarf and coat.

“What is this stuff,” I yell after her.

“Can you both unload it on the counters beside the faucet?” she calls to Pat and I.

We take everything off the cart by the time Dr. Ambush joins us by the sinks.

“Great! Thank you both so much,” she says. “I’m teaching my students this afternoon how to make paper.”

I rest a hand on the stack of old newspapers. She must notice my eyebrows furrow with confusion. Pat seems skeptical too.
“You make paper with paper?” he asks.

“Yes,” Dr. Ambush says. “You can make paper out of recycled paper. It’s one way. Another way is to use cotton but that’s more difficult to do and a bit too complicated to do here in this room. I’ll have my students shred these old papers down to make pulp and then we’ll turn it into fancy craft paper. How cool is that?”

“Very cool,” I say. My gaze lingers over each of the materials. “Do you think you could show me how to do this too? Will you be around after school today?”

Dr. Ambush claps her hands together and beams. “Yes, absolutely. It’ll be fun. Pat, you’re more than welcome to join us too if you like.”

Pat declines. He tells her he already has study plans after school. I figure this is what he often tells people when he really is somewhere alone with Selassie.

“Alright, another time maybe. While I have you both here would you mind helping me set up for this afternoon?”

Dr. Ambush gives us instructions and we go about shuffling chairs and worktables. As we work, I think about how I never saw the art room at my old high school. But I’m sure it wasn’t as nice as this. Here, the large space is really two classrooms divided by a wall of reinforced glass with two sliding doors at the center. There is the walk-in supply closet and a storage room that holds the drawing horses, half a dozen pottery wheels and a bunch of lighting equipment. Down the hall on this floor is a dark room for photography and a kiln. I don’t often stop to appreciate how my father’s decision to move us out of the city to this suburb offered me a chance to see and try so much art. I hate that I’ll never get a chance to thank him for this.
“You okay,” Pat asks. “You look like you’re about to rush to the bathroom. Was the meat pie too spicy for you?”

“No, I’m okay. I’m just thinking. You ever just stop to think about where we are?” He looks down at his shoes for a moment and then up at me again. “Do you mean like to be here in this moment?”

“Yeah, kind of. Like, we’re here in this place right now and it’s pretty good.”

“Of course. A lot of stuff had to happen for us to be here in a room like this. There was a lot of struggle, and there are lots of people who’ll never be here. I think about that all the time. My parents never let me forget it.”

Dr. Ambush shouts to us from the sinks where she is filling the tubs she brought with water. “Yes,” she says. “It is good to be here. Your parents sound like mine, Patrick.” She laughs. “Whenever I call home to Brazil, they tell me, Remember Racquel, you’re one of the lucky ones, even when you aren’t.”

“The lucky ones,” I repeat, trying the weight of those words in my mouth. “Right.”
I let myself into Calvin’s house and head downstairs to the basement. I’m here to pick up some weed for a marching band kid who was referred to me by one of his friends. When I come off the steps I’m surprised by the quiet. I move around the corner and follow the light. I usually find a group of guys chatting and rousing each other up, talking shit, but today instead I find Mary perched on the edge of the ratty loveseat. She’s crying. Calvin is on the upturned bucket that sometimes acts as a TV stand. He’s directly in front of her. They’re alone and neither of them are speaking. I step into the cone of light from the naked bulb hanging above their heads. Their bodies jolt, startled.

“Hey, where is everyone? Where’s Tommy and Tanner?”

Mary cries harder. I ask if she’s okay. She doesn’t answer with her words, shaking her head, no.

Calvin begins to speak and his voice cracks with phlegm. He clears his throat and tries again.

“Tommy was shot.”

I can feel my knees shake and I move to sit down on the squat couch beside Mary. The three of us form a V now. The question escapes me and I know the answer by the time I’ve finished speaking it, “Calvin, who shot Tommy?”

Marcus.

Mary leans into me, and I adjust to wrap an arm around her.

“He was in the ICU,” she says. “His parents called me. They hoped I might know something. He’s been drifting in and out of sleep. He won’t tell them anything.”

I can feel the back of my neck get hot.
“Did you tell them anything?” I ask.

“What do I know?” She sniffles. “We broke up. He hasn’t spoken to me in months.”

“So, you didn’t mention him selling or anything, right?”

Mary whips away from me. She raises an eyebrow in my direction. “Ben, if you’re more worried I snitched on you, rest easy.”

I fumble to clarify but I can’t find the right words to explain my concern for Tommy doesn’t mean I’m also not scared for myself.

“Whatever,” she says. “I get it. He made this mess he’s in. He forced you into it and you don’t want to have to fall with him.”

I turn to Calvin. He’s been sliding his palms together slowly. Looking at the floor.

I ask him what happened.

Calvin looks up from the spider cracks below his feet and speaks.

Tommy was shot while on a regular pick-up from Tanner’s drug supplier. It was supposed to be a quick there-and-back. They got to the guy’s farmhouse a little after the sun had gone down. Tommy and Tanner went inside and left Calvin out in the Jeep Cherokee.

“Tanner had been acting funny the whole ride. He was quiet, man. I should have known something was up,” Calvin says.

Out in the car, a few minutes passed and then there were gun shots and screaming. Lucky the keys had been left in the ignition. Calvin jumped into the driver’s seat. Tommy came stumbling out from behind the house. He was holding the side of his head, his gun in the other hand dangling by his side.
“I didn’t notice how much blood there was until he reached the passenger side and jumped in the backseat. Then four Black dudes popped out of the front door and onto the porch guns drawn. One raised his gat, aimed it at us in the car and fired. Then the others did too. Dude, I saw the flashes blast from the barrels, ripping through the dark like lighting. Bullets were hitting the car. One shot blew out the back window. Tommy raised his gun and started shooting back.”

Calvin screeched them out the driveway and headed for help but the closest hospital he knew was here in town. Tommy was groaning and moaning the whole way. He told Tommy to take off his shirt and press it to his head to try and stop the bleeding. They made it to the medical center.

“I basically had to carry Tommy out of the Jeep. He was so pale and babbling like he was about to go unconscious. I laid him on the sidewalk leading into the emergency entrance. And then I just drove back here.”

“Where’s the Jeep now?” Mary asks.

“I parked it at the edge of the woods where we hangout. I took the tags off it and the registration out the glovebox. I just left it there and walked home.”

My brain stumbles through what happens next and what it means for all of us and me. Then I hear myself say “Tanner?” It’s a question but I’m not sure to whom.

Both Calvin and Mary nod slowly.

Calvin rubs a hand over his face.

“I think he set Tommy up, dude. I think those shooters were Marcus’ boys.”
A gurgle rolls through my stomach, loud enough for Mary and Calvin to hear. I say sorry, but neither of them acknowledges it. I turn to Mary and ask if she’s been to the hospital.

“Yes. He was actually shot twice.” New tears well in her eyes as she continues. “He’s out of the ICU now. They said there’s a large gash in the side of his head at his left temple. The other is at the left side of his abdomen. I was standing on the right side of him and his head was wrapped in gauze, so I’m glad I didn’t get to see how bad it must look.”

“Did he say anything to you.”

The tears slip down her cheeks. “His eyes opened. He looked at me. And then just turned away. His nurse had said he might not be too talky. Moving his jaw up and down tugs on the stitches. But he barely gave me any sign he knew I was there. He just ignored me until I got tired and left.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no reason for you to apologize. Tommy is in that bed because of Tommy. I’m sorry I ever asked you to look out for him, like it was your responsibility. Now all this garbage is happening. If Tanner really set a trap for Tommy, and if those guys waiting were really with Marcus, this is going to get a lot worse for you.”

Calvin stands and begins to pace. “Hey, I was telling Murry this before you got here but I think I’m going to get out of town for a while, stay at my grandma’s place outside of Philadelphia. My mom’s got her boyfriend to take care of her, so she should be alright.”

Mary grabs my hand. “Ben, maybe it’s time to go talk to the police. I know you might get in trouble, but people could get killed.”
Calvin hovers over us. “Hey Benny, if you do go to the cops, I don’t think there’s a reason to mention me, right? I’m like barely a factor in all this. I wasn’t with you when you and Tommy stole from Marcus. Like, at least give me a chance to leave the area first.”

“I don’t know what I want to do,” I say.

Mary reminds me that there might not be much time left to be uncertain. She gives us a warning. If the police come to her looking for answers about what happened to Tommy, she will tell them everything.

Calvin and I nod silently to show we understand.

x

I return home from Calvin’s house and climb through the dark to my room. I take a seat on the floor thinking about Tommy and imaging when Marcus might appear and what he could do to me. Counting breaths, I lean back against a wall and name what I see in the space. It’s a thing Beth once taught me to do when a wave of panic rolled me down the day I returned to school after my dad died. I just look around me and name things and eventually I’m settled. Twin-size bed with black comforter. Chipped wood desk. My father’s scrapbook. Green and gold banker’s lamp. Bookshelf. Books. Aqua blue portable CD player Dr. Ambush gave me. Cheap headphones from a 99-cent store. Beige carpet. I run my hands over the dry, wool-like fibers of the floor and then crawl over to the bookshelf to grab the Discman. I press play and pull the foam speakers over my ears.

My mother appears in the doorway of my bedroom rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She has to raise her voice over the clamoring of Jimmy Eat World. I glance up at her, but I’m not prepared to reduce the volume. Sitting cross-legged, I have the liner notes from
Bleed American open on my lap. Mary loaned me the album last week. I want to memorize all the words to “A Praise Chorus.”

My mother lingers. She says something I miss. Sliding a finger over the dial on the side of the CD player, I apologize for not hearing her.

She says a name I recognize, and I ask, “What about him?”

She wonders if I know him, he goes to my high school.

The band hits the bridge, my favorite part: crimson and clover, over and over.

“He died,” she says, “This afternoon in a car crash on Midcounty Highway. It was on the news in the breakroom at work. He was 18, like you. Another boy was driving, speeding recklessly. Eh, I need you to be careful. I don’t know how that Tommy drives. Don’t get into his car if he is being unsafe.”

I look down at the lyrics printed in the thick matte pamphlet. I respond, “Okay.”

“Let’s talk this weekend. I’m off on Sunday. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Mom says she’ll pray for the deceased. She exits and continues to the bathroom.

The pointer finger hovering above the volume dial slips raising the sound again. But the name my mother mentioned echoes over the chorus of the song “Your House.”

On the bookcase shelf above my head I spot my high school yearbooks. I reach for the most recent one and pull it down. I search the index. The page number leads me to a familiar face. “Patrick,” escapes my lips. I flip back to the index and search desperately for an alternative, other names my mother might have mispronounced, and other names I might have misheard. I find himself praying for the death of someone else, wishing tragedy on some stranger.
The album arrives at track six, “Hear You Me.” I’ve never noticed the significant shift in tempo. This song feels more personal and sobering, opposite to the rush of the album's opening title or the frenzy of “Sweetness,” opposite to the optimistic fun of “The Middle.” As lead vocalist and guitarist Jim Adkins sings about what sounds like a death, memories of Pat confront me.

I must have seen him earlier today.

I must have nodded to him as we passed in the hall.

“We got to do better, Kumasi,” he said.

Was Selassie, the Liberian boy, high when Pat was killed?

Is this my fault?

The album has reached the creepy introduction to “Get It Faster.” It sounds like a haunted factory: faint scratches and sounds like clanging, drippy, industrial pipes lead to an explosion of drums and crunchy power chords. This isn’t what I’m looking for right now. I close the yearbook and return it to the shelf. I hit the arrows pointing right to skip forward.

I settle on the last song, “My Sundown.”

I close my eyes and hang my head.

Growing instrument feedback, and noise like a vinyl record pulled in reverse, ease into the lull of Adkins lyrics and quick, gentle, strums on an acoustic guitar. The song builds, adding layers—finger snaps, fast taps on hi-hats. A guest singer, listed as Rachel Haden, backs Adkins vocals with her own, and then a second layer of her soft singing.

And then I see Pat. It's the first day we met.

“So, I guess you're new?”
“Yeah.”

He smiled, “I figured by the way your eyes are stretching, trying to take everything in.” Pat examined me. “Are you African?”

I asked how he knew.

“I just have a sense of these things.” He introduced himself and said, “Welcome! Where’s your first period?”

With my thumb I pointed in the direction of my classroom and said, “It’s E 101, Mr. Orsega.”

“Mr. Orsega, that’s a Spanish class, right?” I nodded. “I got Math first period in room E 102. It’s right next door. Come on, I’ll walk with you.” He led the way through the crowded hallway, confident and purposeful. As I trailed behind him, I noticed the way he never went too long without glimpsing over his shoulder to check on me. He spoke with his hands. His limbs never seemed to stay still. When we reached my class, Pat shook my hand. When I tried to pull my hand away, he tightened his grip.

“So, I’ll catch up with you later then?”

“Yeah,” I said sliding my palm off of his.

“Hey, look, this whole high school thing will probably go a lot better if we, Black-African students, look out for each other.” I nodded, even though I wasn’t totally sure what he meant. “I look out for you, you look out for me,” he said and then turned to cross the hall. I watched him as he vanished through the stream of kids flooding the corridor.

The bars of music are suddenly stripped.
No one cares, Adkins says. No one cares.

But things rise again during the second verse, rebuilding now familiar levels, stronger than before. Underneath it all, the steady drumming, the simple bass and snare—\textit{boom-bap-boom-boom-bap}—driving to a single cymbal crash and simple pokes to the keys of a piano.

Now feeling full, the voices become conversation.

\textit{I want to be so much more than this}, says Haden

No one cares, Adkins responds.

"Is there any point in trying for better?" I ask no one.

Over and over again, until the drums vanish with most of the orchestration, a quick dive off a skyscraper, a fast fall and then a sudden pause, leaving me to float upwards through the record studio effect that sounds like infinitely expanding space.

“I could be so much more than this.”

I cry for Pat as I sing along softly.

\textit{Good good bye}

\textit{I'll be fine.}

\textit{Good good bye}

\textit{Good good night.}
Freedom of Speech
Norman Rockwell
(c.1943)
Oil on Canvas
116.2 cm x 90.2 cm
My favorite Norman Rockwell is his *Freedom of Speech*. It is not one I think most people are attracted to. It’s kind of boring, not much is happening in the picture. But there is a story, and it is dramatic. A man, farmer-thin, looking kind of like Lincoln, standing among a seated crowd, his chin raised ready to say whatever he needs to. There must be someone beyond the frame, an invisible authority the standing man is trying to make listen. The folks seated around him look up waiting for his words. What makes the painting great to me are the small details, like the folded teal cover of a pamphlet in his pocket. In a row closer to the front of the room, a guy twists to look over his shoulder at the standing man. In that sitting man’s hand is the same pamphlet with the words “annual report” and “town” just barely visible. It’s the details, like, the standing man’s fat-knuckled digits, crooked, wrinkled and tanned, gripping the back of the pew in front of him. Those hands show a little bit of nervousness, and the guy’s Adam’s apple looks like it’s about to bounce as he swallows any fears about being heard. Besides being on his feet in a room where everyone around him is sitting, he has no suit and tie like the fellows looking up at him. The standing man wears dust-colored pants and a loose-fitting sandy jacket unbuttoned to show a royal blue flannel shirt. That blue is my favorite color, and in the picture that color helps give the man standing a sense of importance against the overall grayness of his surroundings.

I want to be the standing man.

I don’t mean I wish to be white or live in small-town Vermont. I don’t care about living in a simpler time or whatever. I want to be someone ready to speak out even when it’s hard. If I had stood up and said no to Tommy in Marcus’s apartment, Tommy wouldn’t
be laying in a hospital bed. If I said no to Pat, maybe he wouldn’t have been with Selassie, and Pat would still be here.

I want to be someone others could turn to, like my father. Dad would joke that the best thing about being a taxi driver was that he didn’t have a boss or coworkers to quarrel with. He never hesitated to say what he felt, and his friends and family all respected him for this, even when he frustrated them. Ironically, dad didn’t like Rockwell’s *Freedom of Speech*. He said it was, “Static.” Of all the freedoms granted to Americans, my dad considered the right to speech his favorite. Perhaps that’s why my father was never too impressed with Rockwell’s representation of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

By the time he was my age, dad had witnessed Ghana’s first freely elected black government move away from democracy as Kwame Nkrumah declared himself president for life. Nkrumah was then overthrown and replaced by a series of military leaders. Dad grew up through the National Liberation Council and then the National Redemption Council and then the Supreme Military Council. Saying the wrong thing in Ghana could lead to time in jail or worse. Whenever I tried to ask him or my mother about these events, they never gave me any real details. My first semester at my new school I found black and white pictures of Kwame Nkrumah in the fancy textbook for my World History class. In one image the Ghanaian president chats with JFK. In the other, Nkrumah shakes hands with Chairman Mao. When I showed it to my dad he said, “They made the coup to kick him out because they feared he’d go communist.” One of the books my father liked to read over and over again was Nkrumah’s *Dark Days in Ghana*. Dad said it was written while Nkrumah was exiled in Guinea. Nkrumah writes about how the American media encouraged public support for the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency to get
involved is his nation’s total liberation. I wondered then how my dad accepted this: African and American. How did he have so much love for the United States and the freedom of speech given to its citizens when he also believed America played a role in limiting that same freedom in his homeland?

I’m sad I’ll never get to ask him this now.

I’m not sure he’d have been able to give me a clear answer anyway.
Dr. Ambush says that art always fails. No matter how much a piece might be praised or appreciated, there will also be those who get nothing out of that same work. In my first Art class with her, I remember her saying, “It is impossible for an artist to establish a connection with every viewer. We make art for ourselves, but also for others, for those who might never have known they needed our voice.” She went on to tell my sophomore drawing class, “There’s no pressure to try to make something everyone will like because no matter what we try to do, to some part of the population, it will be a failure.” Dr. Ambush started the class with this, before she even went around the room asking us to introduce ourselves. She said she believes in the words of some guy named Beckett, “We should always try to fail better.”

I’m failing a lot lately, at more than art.

I’m pretty sure I haven’t been trying my best.

I don’t seem any better for it.

Lately, I’m always wet, beads of nervousness falling from my pores all day every day as I worry about when Marcus might appear. During the funeral it was hard for me to stay focused on the eulogies because I kept searching the doors, windows, and pews for Marcus. I’m still checking for him in the passenger side mirror of Dr. Ambush’s late-nineties coupe. I pull off my clip-on tie. The metal clasp that rested against my neck is shiny with sweat. The same saltwater rolling down my spine has glued my dress shirt to my back. Now the fabric feels like it might fuse to the polyester lining of my dad’s plum suede jacket. Dr. Ambush has been speaking to me, trying to have a conversation. I thought
she might have been trying to do this for me, to give me a chance to talk about Pat, but now I realize she might be the one who needs to talk.

I roll my tie and tuck it into my jacket pocket, say, “I’m very sorry. I zoned out a little. I haven’t been sleeping much.” It’s true. When I do fall asleep, I’m shocked awake by nightmares of being shot like Tommy. If Marcus doesn’t invade my dreams, I stare at the ceiling wondering about Katie and what kind of father I could be. Or, sometimes my open eyes wander in the dark, imagining Pat’s death, what his body looked like at the car accident as his soul faded away.

Dr. Ambush turns down the car radio and repeats something I hear for the first time.

“I was thinking aloud really. There was so much I didn’t know about Patrick outside of my classroom.” I don’t hear a question in Dr. Ambush’s voice, so I look down into my hands and wait for her to continue. She goes on about how much Pat contributed to the school through his participation in student organizations and how often she saw him offer help to other students.

“Yeah, he helped me out a lot.”

“Were you a member of his Pan-African Club?”

“No. It was cool to see them all show up today though. I didn’t realize how many kids at our school were African.” Twenty people I go to school with, Black like me, many of them decked out in colorful tribal patterns, lining two rows of pews at the front of the church right behind Pat’s immediate family. I’ve passed so many of those dark faces in the hall but never stopped to realize we shared a connection. I didn’t see Selassie with them.

“Yes, the size of the Pan-African Club surprised me too. I know our school talks a lot about diversity, but that isn’t reflected by most of the student body.”
“You mean most of the kids are white.”

Dr. Ambush grins, “Yes. You know, it makes this loss a little harder. His parents came here, thought they’d provide a better life for their kids and...” Her voice gets caught in her throat, but she pushes through. “He was so bright and productive.”

These words hang awkwardly in the air of the car, filling the space between our seats and sucking up the oxygen. I want to break out. I can’t breathe.

“I’m sorry, but could I lower my window a bit.”

Her eyes leave the road passing in front of us. She scans me quickly, smiles softly and nods. “Yes, of course.”

Pushing the automated button on my door drops the glass an inch. An icy February gust whistles inside the car. The perspiration covering my skin flash freezes and my teeth clench. The cold numbs me. I catch Dr. Ambush’s face twist into a grimace, but she doesn’t complain about the chill or the thumping sound of the breeze slapping against the rear window of the car and our ear drums. I send the glass on my passenger side door up again and thank Dr. Ambush for offering me a ride to Pat’s funeral.

The family chose a western style ceremony, nothing like my father’s homegoing. There was no sense of celebration, no joyful reminders that Pat was moving on to somewhere better without pain. In the closed casket beside the pulpit, Pat was pale and still and nothing in the pastor’s sermon managed to bring him to life for me, even for a moment. There was no invitation to a large party after the mourning where people could gather, eat, cry, drink and dance.

“I didn’t know he had an older sister in college.”
I hadn’t known about Pat’s sibling either. When she spoke at the funeral, I caught glimpses of my friend’s voice. “He never talked about her,” I say. I never asked. Most of my conversations with Pat were about me.

Beyond the trees lining the streets to the subdivision of my neighborhood, the sky above says it might snow. Dr. Ambush calls attention to the wall of grey clouds overhead. She’s been living in the Mid-Atlantic for almost fifteen years, but she says she’s still not used to this season’s Northeasterly winds. I tell her about my first winter in the States, how I lost one of my snow boots climbing a white dune at a park near my family’s old apartment in the city. The shoe didn’t reappear again until spring arrived months later.

“Spring can’t come fast enough,” Dr. Ambush says and then a thought seems to spark behind her eyes. “I haven’t asked you at all about your plans. I apologize.”

“Plans?”

“You’re graduating this year. Have you been applying for colleges? You haven’t asked me for a recommendation letter, but please know I’m definitely willing to speak to your talents.”

I squirm in my seat. “I haven’t really thought about college.”

“Do you mind me asking if it’s a money issue?”

“I don’t mind. Money is a part of it.”

“Maybe you might apply for the scholarship Pat’s parents are founding. In lieu of flowers, they asked for people to contribute donations to the scholarship fund they established.”

Falling out of my mouth, “That money would have gone to Pat’s college?”
“I suppose so,” Dr. Ambush replies, air wheezing out of her into a deep sigh. “His parents told me they received his early acceptance letter to Cornell.”

She turns on to my street.

I've been biting my bottom lip but didn’t notice. Now it throbs.

“That scholarships probably wouldn’t be enough, right, for me? College is expensive and I didn’t do enough to get offered a full-ride anywhere. I didn’t start a club or make honor roll every semester like Pat. I’m not as good as he is... Was... Was.”

“There are other options, Ben. The community college is a possibility, and there is a program where if you complete two years of credits locally you can transfer to the state university to finish your bachelor’s degree. It would make going to school a lot cheaper.”

Dr. Ambush stops the car in front of my yard.

I was waiting for her outside when she picked me up. I didn’t invite her to meet my mother because she was at work. Mom might be home now, but I’m ready to get away from this car and this conversation. I don’t want to sit and think about the future and what could happen. I’m ready to be alone in my room.

“Thank you, Dr. Ambush,” I say reaching for the handle to open my door.

I check the rearview and side mirrors for any reflection of a black Mercedes like the one Marcus was in when he attacked Selassie’s car. I crack the passenger side but before I step out, I turn back to Dr. Ambush.

“Why is college so important? Why do I need to make plans when anything can happen? Pat had plans and he’ll never get to see them.”

She removes her hands from the wheel, breathes deep and rests a palm on my shoulder. This contact must make her uncomfortable because she pulls back quick, and
then leans her weight away from me. “You’re one of my favorite students because you’re curious and I can see you really enjoy learning about art. I don’t believe college is necessary to be successful or happy. I mention college to you because you’re graduating soon, and I think you could learn a lot more. You are right, anything can happen, and nothing is a sure thing, but that’s why we’ve got to dedicate the time we do have to the things we love. What better use of our lives is there? So, when we talk about plans that might not be the right word for it. Pat had hopes and goals for the future. We should have hopes and goals too because they give life meaning. Does that make sense?”

I nod. I like the way she uses We. For a moment it makes me feel less alone. I thank Dr. Ambush one more time and then push to exit the car. As I slide out into the cold, she reminds me I’m still welcome to spend my lunches in her classroom. She says she wants to work more closely, and we should chat about some ideas I might have for projects.

“That would be cool,” I say.

I swing her car door shut and then head to my front gate.
Two bus transfers to make sure I wasn’t followed and I’m standing at the edge of Susan Chen-Edisto’s yard scanning the front of the house for signs Katie might be home. Dusk is fading and even though I cup my hands and blow heat into them every few seconds, the cold stabs my knuckles. A woman’s silhouette appears at one of the living room windows. I’m not sure if it’s Katie. I rush behind the fat trunk of a white oak.

I’ve admired this tree several times from Katie’s bedroom. Its thick branches resemble giant crooked fingers reaching for the second story. In the fall, the oak’s heavy leaves shade the entire front lawn in darkness. Once, while holding Katie after sex, I remember telling her how weird it was that in the middle of the day her house still looked like it would in the evening from the street.

She corrected me, “Susan’s house,” and then she agreed. “Yes, like Magritte’s *L’Empire des lumières.*” I nodded along, pretending to know what she was talking about. The next day I asked Dr. Ambush if she knew anything about Magritte and something about an empire. René Magritte, she explained to me had a series of paintings called *The Empire of Light.* She had a book on Magritte in her office which she let me flip though. In the pages I found pictures of what Katie was talking about. Pleasant, normal-looking homes dim and shady as if it were nighttime, but overhead was a bright blue sky with small clouds. The images gave me a strange sense of panic, as if something awful were about to take place in the paintings.

A flood of light crosses the yard, but I’m still hidden by in the shadow of the tree.

A feminine voice that’s not Katie’s calls out from the porch. “Hey! Can we help you with something?”
I consider diving through a wall of hedges a few feet away. Maybe I could escape onto the neighbor’s property.

“Listen,” the woman shouts over to me and the oak. “Come out or don’t. I’m going to call the police.”

I step around the bark and into the beams coming from the yard lights. Susan Chen-Edisto watches me with a cordless phone clenched at her side. I put my hands in front of me and move closer. She isn’t what I imagined, although I don’t think I ever tried to imagine her. I don’t think I ever wanted to know. She’s short, not much more than five feet tall, boyish and serious, with horn-rimmed glasses and covered in black denim. If it weren’t for her voice, the silver hairs sparkling on top of her head and how much wider her hips are than her waist, I might have mistaken her for Mike’s younger brother.

Still inching toward her, I say, “I’m sorry. Please, you don’t have to call the police. I’m a friend of Katie’s. I was just wondering if she was home.”

Susan frowns and her eyebrows narrow. “A friend of Katie?” she repeats with skepticism. “How do you know Katie? You’re not a friend of Mike?”

“I know Mike too.” I stay vague. “I’ve known Katie for a little more than a year now. Mike introduced us.”

“Where?”

I lower my hands. “I’m sorry, Ma’am.” Her face scrunches as if she’s tasted a lemon. “Sorry, Susan, right? I hate to disturb you, but I was really hoping to talk to Katie about something very important.”

Katie materializes in the doorway behind Susan to tell her dinner is ready. I’ve never seen Katie look so mature. She’s wearing a neat, mint-colored, knee-length dress
with no prints on it and her hair is flat and straightened, totally unlike the usual bird’s nest I’ve seen her try to rope in with a rolled bandana. Around her waist I don’t see any bump to her belly.

Katie sees me. Her jaw drops open, but snaps shut when she notices Susan studying her. Katie taps Susan on the shoulder. She seems to understand Katie is asking for some privacy and goes back inside. Susan closes the front door behind her. Katie and I stare at each other across the lawn for a moment. She’s haloed by the porch light behind her head. I make a step to close the gap between us, but she raises her palms to me. Katie moves closer until we’re arms-length apart. I look down at her bare feet curling and uncurling, trapping blades of grass between her toes and releasing them.

She asks me impatiently, “What are you doing here?”

“I needed to see you.”

“I haven’t seen you in months.”

“I know. I’m sorry. A lot has happened. I was trying to get money, and I didn’t want you to get hurt by the guys that are after me. Tommy was in the hospital. They shot him.”

She nods. “Why are you here now, without calling? You can’t just show up here like this. that’s not okay.”

“You showed up at my house.”

“It’s different.” Katie looks over her shoulder.

Susan is watching us from a window into the living room.

“Your stomach doesn’t look much different.”

“What?”
“I’ve been thinking about the future and making plans.” I lose access to my thoughts and my mouth begins to say words and ideas I don’t recognize. “You and I could leave this place, together. We could go somewhere. I can get a job. You could become an Art teacher or something. We could raise the baby. I love you.”

I reach for Katie’s hand, but she swats me away.

“You don’t know what you’re saying, kiddo. You aren’t thinking. What about your mom?”

I lower my head and read the dry rock-salt patterns on my thrift store boots. They used to belong to my father.

“My mom, maybe... She could...”

Katie interrupts me. She says, “There is no baby.”

“You said you were pregnant? You said you were sure.”

“I ended the pregnancy.”

Her breathing gets heavy. In the light shining around her, I can see waves of heat escape her body. I tell her I don’t understand. We didn’t have a conversation about what we’d do.

Katie reminds me, “I hadn’t heard from you in months.”

“I didn’t get a vote?”

“No.”

"Why?"

"Because you can’t actually vote. You’re 17.”

“I’m 18 now.”
"You can barely vote. You can’t drink or rent a car..." She shakes her head. "And I don’t act much older than you. Jesus."

"Katie." I say her name, but nothing follows.

"Look, you might be angry with me right now, but this isn’t a decision anyone wants to make, especially at your age. One day, someday, you’ll be thankful you didn’t have to."

"I don't know what to do."

It's dark outside now, but I can see worried lines form around her mouth and eyes.

"Kiddo, please, you need to go now, okay? For me, please. This is already going to be hard enough to try to explain to Susan. I don't want to lie to her more than I have to."

"But you don't love her," I say.

"You don't know that."

She twists to return to the house. I lean forward to grab her but stop myself.

"Katie? Can I call you and maybe we can talk more about it?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," she says, looking back at me without breaking her forward stride to the porch. "Please, don't come back here again."

I watch her enter the home. Susan leaves her post at the window. I pull my jacket tighter around me and take the first steps to the nearest bus stop. The cold slips past my lips and rests on my sour tongue. Among all the things I feel--some kind of pebble in my boot, soreness where the straps of my bookbag tugs at my shoulders--there is something icy hot rising from my guts. I eventually recognize the feeling as relief.
Mary is working hard to push me into a boy’s bathroom at school. Inside, a white skater kid in giant pants is pissing at one of the urinals. He twists his neck to eye us: me hunched over, hyperventilating, gripping the sides of a sink, Mary behind me, rubbing my spine and telling me to “Calm down. Breathe.”

In the wall mirror in front of me, the skater flushes and turns to face us. He stares unsure of what to do. Mary snaps at him, “Wash your hands and go, please.”

Skaterboi follows her instructions, wets his palms at the farthest sink from mine and then exits.

Mary pretends to retch, “Not all the men's restrooms have soap? And they’re always running around here slapping hands. Gross.”

The bell rings for first period but neither of us make a move to leave. Mary removes her hand from my back.

“So,” she says, “You want to tell me why I just caught you trying to fight the only Black guy on the lacrosse team? Trying to sucker punch someone on crutches who just survived a lethal accident is not a good look.”

I’m still dizzy with adrenaline. The moments before are bits and flashes.

I was at my locker getting stuff for my morning classes. Selassie was on the other side of the hallway. His right foot was in a medical boot and he had a pair of crutches tucked under each arm. No one had seen him at school since the crash. He was missing at Pat’s funeral. I had searched the pews for his face. Now Selassie was a few feet away from me chatting with some of his teammates helping to carry his textbooks.
I don’t remember pushing through the stream of students flowing to their classrooms. Selassie’s collar was in my fists, one of his crutches was under my foot and I had pinned him to a wall. I was screaming “Where were you?” and he shouted for me to get off him. I pulled back to punch him but before I could send my knuckles into his nose, a member of the lacrosse team had hooked and yanked me away from Selassie. I fell backwards on to the ground, scrambled on my feet and prepared to charge again. I can’t remember how many of the teammates were bearing down on me, threatening to end me if I tried attacking again. I didn’t care. A crowd had gathered around. I didn’t care. “Why weren’t you at the funeral?” I screamed. And then Mary appeared, shoving her way closer. She jumped between the lacrosse players and me. Mary then tugged my waist until I allowed myself to be pulled away.

Now, with only the two of us in the bathroom, I say “He killed Pat.”

Mary frowns, “I’m sorry about Pat, Ben. I knew you two were close. But you weren’t in the car with them during the accident.”

“That lacrosse player was probably high and driving around and got Pat killed.”

My voice is loud, on the edge of a shout.

“You don’t know that,” she says softly. “I’m sorry, but you don’t.”

“He didn’t go to the funeral!”

Mary gives a gentle shrug.

“Pat was buying ketamine from me for that guy.”

I hear myself say it aloud for the first time. Mary doesn’t point out my hypocrisy. My anger slides into silence. She apologizes again and I want to say it back to her, but I don’t know how yet. I’m sorry isn’t enough.
Mary pats my shoulder and then starts to head for the door. As she leaves, she tells me she’s around to listen if I need to talk.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“I’ll check in with you after school or something.”

I ask her about Tommy and if she’s heard anything else about his condition.

“I don’t know. He’s out of the hospital by now, I guess. He tried to call the house a few times, but I told my family to ignore it. There's nothing left for us to say to each other really. We’re done. It’s time to move on.”

She turns to walk away. I don’t stop her. She wishes me luck before letting the bathroom door swing shut behind her.

Alone in the bathroom, I listen to my own heavy breathing, the air racing in and out of my body. It echoes off the porcelain and tiles.

I’m in the art room during my lunch period. Dr. Ambush has stepped out to make photocopies of an article on African masks and their influence on German Expressionism. She had asked me to be honest, “Ben, do you think my students will read it?” I told her I would read it, but I doubt the kids looking for an easy elective will care how objects of ceremony and rituals from Sub-Saharan Africa changed the way people painted in Berlin. She said she’d print one for me too and I thanked her.

Now, I’m working on something of an idea that Dr. Ambush has been encouraging. I want to make something about how I’ve been influenced by people who were guided and mentored by people who were inspired by art from a continent I know as my motherland.
Maybe I’ll draw a geometric tree with sharp angles and visible roots and then write-in names like a family tree growing upward to a point.

While I’m thinking of beginning, a knock at the classroom door leads me away from my worktable. I’m surprised to find Beth on the other side, gobbling the last bites of a chocolate bar. Her hair has grown and now her dark roots crown her blonde head.

“Oh! Hold on,” she raises a finger to give herself a moment to swallow and then crumples the wrapper in her fist. “Sorry, snuck out of my class to come and see you but I got kind of hungry and swung by a vending machine. Murry told me you’ve been skipping lunch in the cafeteria to come here. I peeped you through the little window in the door. Brought you some chips.”

She holds up a small bag of salt and vinegar and I open the door wider to let her enter.

I accept the snack, tear it open and stuff a few fried potato slices into my mouth. Between chews I say, “So, what’s up, Beth?”

She follows me to my worktable.

“That’s how you really want to start this?” she asks, tossing her trash into a small metal bin I’ve rested beside my stool for unusable scraps from the Saturday Evening Post.

“Sorry,” I choke out as the chips get caught in my throat. I cough a “Thank you.” I swallow hard and cough again.

“You okay?”

“Just went down the wrong pipe.”

“Gotta be careful,” she says. “I had an uncle die like that.”

“What?”
“Yeah.”

She takes a seat on a stool diagonal to me. I can see her eyes scanning the piles of materials on the table between us. “What is all this?” Beth points to my collage book, “I saw that at the art show in the gym.”

“You went?”

She nods and then her eyes dash away from mine to the color pencils, paints and permanent markers scattered in front of me. She reaches for a short stack of wrinkled bluish pages on my right. Beth asks to touch them.

“Um, that is paper I made with old magazine clippings.”

I pass them to her carefully.

“The touch is so cool,” she says, rubbing a deckled corner of one of the pieces between her thumb and pointer finger. “What are you planning to do with these?”

“I ran out of pages in the sketchbook, and it didn’t feel done to me, so I wanted to make more pages.”

Turning the paper over in her hands she asked, “How did you learn to do this?”

I tell her how Dr. Ambush taught me. I explain the process of using a blender to shred Saturday Evening Post scraps into a kind of porridge and then pour the gooey liquid into a rubber tub. With a screened wooden frame made of two pieces, the top a deckle, the bottom piece a mould, I dip down into the paper vat and slide up and away from my body. The tight knit wires catch the swirling liquid paper, and it becomes a whole sheet. I let it sit for a bit between felt towels and then I use an iron to press and dry out the paper.

“How will you get the paper into the sketchbook?”
“I’ll crack the spine, fold the handmade pages in and use book glue to put it all together.”

Another question pops from her head, “And the \( x \) at the top of every page in the book?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain, but. The \( x \) is because it’s like multiplying, adding equal groups that have the same value, right? Each page weighs the same and it’s like they’re multiplying each other. It’s me \( x \) me, not me + me, because in addition you’re adding different sums.” Beth’s smile is wide and makes me feel a bit embarrassed. “I don’t know if I’m explaining this right.”

“No, I get it. That’s really awesome, B. What you’re doing is so freaking amazing, self-expression, the exploration of humanity through pastels and pencils, paint and charcoal, paper and more. Art is so cool. Although, I’m not sure how much I’m into graphic design because it’s all about the money. And I might be a little on the fence about some modern installations because they can be so completely full of shit…”

I look at the wall clock above the sinks. “Beth, why are you here?”

“Oh. Because I heard you tried to fight a boy on crutches earlier today.” I lower my head and roll a red marker under my palm. She returns the handmade paper to the table. “I know Pat was a good friend to you. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

“With everything else going on I can’t imagine how hard things must seem right now. I know we haven’t spoken for a while but I still care about you. I just wanted to come tell you I’m around if you need a friend to talk to.”

“Just a friend, right?”
“Yes.

I stop rolling the marker and look up to Beth. I say, “Hey, I’m really sorry for everything I said when we last spoke. I was a jerk.”

“I know. It’s alright.”

“No, it’s not.”

We let the pause hang, and slowly a smile spreads across her face and mine.

“I heard you got into Michigan College. That’s awesome.”

“Murry talks a lot. I’m excited. It’s like a dream come true, you know.” She hums,

“So, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You hear from any of the colleges?”

I shrug my shoulders and throw another chip in my mouth. “I didn’t apply.”

While Beth studies me, I finish the last of the chips and turn the bag upward to empty the crumbs into my mouth. I crumple the bag in my fist and drop it into the waste bin by my feet.

“So, what’s wrong? Why didn’t you apply anywhere?”

“I don’t know. I had a bunch of reasons not to apply a few months ago, but now I think I don’t deserve to go anywhere.”

Beth shoves her fingers in her hair and pretends to pull. “Oh my God. Have you ever heard of self-sabotage?”

“No. But it’s not like that. Some things have happened since we last talked. A lot of stuff I’m not proud I did. Some things that are really scary.”

“We’ve all done things that we may not have been so proud off…”
“No, Beth, I’m being serious.”

“So am I. If you’re doing bad stuff, stop it. Do better. If you think you don’t deserve to go to college because you think it’s only for good people, that’s not true by the way, but if you believe that, then be good enough. If there’s something scary, face it.”

I look to the ceiling.

“I sold ketamine to Pat and I think that dude on the lacrosse team was high when they got into the accident.”

Beth’s head cocks to the side. “That’s a lot of supposing, B. You don’t know that for sure.”

“I’ve got a feeling…”

“You don’t know.”

“I got a girl pregnant.”

Beth leans forward and rests her elbows on the table. “I’m really hoping after everything we just said to each other this isn’t you trying to make me jealous, because that would be pretty sad.”

“Yeah... I mean no. I just needed to tell someone.

“She goes to our school?”

“No. She’s older. She had an abortion. I don’t know what to do.”

“What?”

“Like, I’m not sure I was ready to be a dad. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now.”

“Well, it is out of your hands now. Had you talked to her? Did you tell her you were not sure?”
“Not really. Honestly, I was avoiding her for a while. I was trying to earn money to help, I guess, with whatever she decided to do. And I was worried about the stuff that landed Tommy in the hospital putting her in danger.”

“Wow... Wow. That’s a lot.” Beth stares at my paper and sketchbook again. I can tell she’s trying to figure out something in her head. “What are you going to put on those pages you’re making?”

“I guess, all the things I want to say but I’m not sure how.”

“Maybe you could write a letter to your unborn kid,” she laughs but then rushes to cover her mouth with both hands. She mumbles, “I’m sorry. That’s dark and so not funny. Sorry.”

She struggles to contain laughs rising from her stomach.

“What is funny about any of this?”

“Nothing,” she says.

It is true. There is so much so totally unfunny about everything that has happened.

But I can’t stop myself from giggling with Beth anyway.

x

I press a permanent marker to one of the pieces of paper I’ve made. I close my eyes and I think of Pat. His face comes to me. My eyes stay shut. My hand moves, slowly, tracing the imagined contours of Pat’s head. Slowly. A steady continuous line. I don’t look. I hear the faint squeak of the black felt tip pulled across the coarse page. Without lifting the marker, I finish what feels like an oval and then slide down the sharp slope of his jaw, and then up his chin to his lips and nose and eyes and glasses. I stop. I look again, eyes open. I search my blind illustration for my friend. I find him in the tangles I’ve made. He’s smiling back
at me. I let my tears hit the paper when they come. I apologize to his likeness and promise never to forget him. Below the face I write his name, Patrick/Malomo, and the date of his death.

x

I'm waiting for Al and Mike Chen-Edisto at Mike's sports car after school. I hadn't planned to meet with them. Cutting through the parking lot about to walk home, I noticed the vehicle and decided to stop. When I finally see them, I realize I don't know what to say. I'm standing beside the trunk as they approach.

“What are you doing here?” Al asks.

Mike adds, “Why the fuck did you come to my house the other day?”

“I’m not sure how to answer those questions in a way that makes sense.”

“What do you want, Benny?” Al mutters parting with Mike, moving around me to the passenger side.

“I want to apologize to you. I’m sorry for all the shit with Tommy.” She pauses with her hand on the car door, watching me. “Mike, I’m sorry for any problems I caused at your place.”

He says, “Whatever,” and marches past me. “Katie was a bitch and bad for my mom.”

“Was? Wait what happened?”

Mike opens the driver side. Before sliding into the car, he says to me across the roof, “Not that it’s any of your business but, Katie left the house. Don’t know where she is now. She packed up in the middle of the night and left my mom a thank-you note. Katie said she needed to go figure herself out.”
I imagine where Katie might have gone, maybe home to her parents. She never talked about friends, not really, never spoke about the people she went to school with while using the present tense. I hope wherever she’s headed she’ll be safe and happier. I have no way of contacting her. A hot wave rolls through me as I realize I won’t likely see her again.

I twist my fingers, cracking my knuckles.

Al is still looking at me with her hand on the door. I want to tell her I’ve stopped selling, that I’ve accepted that the next time I see Marcus, that I will give him the money I’ve made and borrowed, and that I’ll accept whatever happens next. But all I manage is another apology.

“How do you expect me to respond, Benny? Like, I’m glad you are figuring yourself out, even though it took Tommy getting shot. It’s kind of a little too late, you know?” I nod and mirror her half smile and sad eyes. “I don’t hate you, but I’m not sure I’m interested in being friends after all of this.”

Al gets inside the car and closes the door. Mike starts the engine. The passenger window comes down and Al pokes out her head.

“I was sad to hear about Pat,” she says. “I know you two were tight.”

“Yeah,” I say.

She nods and her window goes up again.

I step back as the car reverses and then rolls forward out of the school parking lot.

On my walk home, despite a steady breeze, the sun shining without clouds makes the afternoon warm enough for me to pull off my father’s jacket. I fold it into the backpack Mary gave me. Passing under the trees spaced along the sidewalk, I notice some red buds
on branches overhead. There are small green nuts that will fall to the earth as pinecones. Everywhere there are signals of a new season.

My yard is muddied from melted snow and rotted leaves. A few patches of damp, short grass hold on, waiting for warmer days. Soon the yard will grow green with the heat, and if I don’t remember to cut it regularly, the grass will tickle my shins when I pass through the gate. Of all my responsibilities around the house, dad considered my attention to the lawn most important.

When we first moved out to this suburb, my father was excited to take me to a big-box home improvement store. We spent over an hour strolling through the lawn and garden section while dad imagined aloud all we would do in our new yard. He spoke about saving up for a grill and patio furniture. We'd invite people over and have get-togethers. We looked for tools for lawn maintenance, formulas and treatments for soil, and riding mowers. I kept having to remind him the yard was under 400-square feet. We left with an electric weed trimer, a rake with metal teeth, and a simple, classic push-mower. Dad was most excited about the mower, “Like the ones in the 50s,” he said. On the drive home, he kept turning to look at the lawn tools laid in the backseat of his cab. Every time I caught him glancing over his shoulder, he had a grin. He put me in charge of the yard. Outside of the winter months, I was not to go more than ten days without cutting, trimming or raking.

Pushing through the gate today, I look over the yard before going inside the house. I make a plan as I take off my shoes and head to the kitchen. I’ll eat and then go down into the basement, plug the weed eater’s battery into an electrical socket and load the machine with a new spool of plastic thread. I’ll be ready for spring this year.
My stomach growls. I remember mom has left a pot of okra stew in the refrigerator. On the same shelf rests a plate of kelewele wrapped in aluminum foil. There is also a jar of shito, made by Aunts Ami and Abla. I pull all three items from the fridge, put the pot on the stove and twist the knobs sparking the gas burners. I could use the microwave, pour scoops into a bowl and nuke it, but I swear it changes the taste. While I wait, I peel back the foil and slide some sweet fried plantain on a plate beside two large spoonfuls of the oily, black pepper paste. I dip a few pieces of the kelewele in the shito and pop them in my mouth while stirring and watching the stew for bubbles of heat.

The doorbell chimes through the house.

I dial down the burner and leave the kitchen.

My breathing stops when I unlock and open the only entrance to my house to see Marcus on the other side of the tempered glass storm door.

I was too busy looking up on the walk home to remember to glance behind me. Marcus grins. His hands are hidden in the pockets of his jacket. I’ve dreamed of a moment like this dozens of times. Some versions are a nightmare. Marcus immediately opens fire and I’m killed in a spray of bullets and glass. In versions of this moment as a fantasy, I rush out through the door and beat Marcus to the ground. I wrestle his gun away from him and point the barrel at his head threatening to murder him if I ever see him again. In no version of this situation do I just stand frozen like I am now. Marcus speaks. He asks if I could come outside. I shake my head slow. I regret the move instantly, knowing I probably look like a little kid scared to get punished. He tells me again to come outside. His voice is calm, and his grin doesn’t fade. I put my hand on the latch and discover I didn’t lock the storm door. My heart beats faster. I’m about to push forward, when I smell lavender and
coco butter. There are footsteps behind me on the carpet. I turn around to see my mother, yawning and rubbing sleep from my eyes. She’s not supposed to be home. Mom must see the confusion in my face and explains that she’s skipped work, deciding to use some vacation days to spend time with me. She looks past me at Marcus. Mom waves, raises her voice to be heard through the glass, says she remembers him from the grocery store months ago. The boy from the old neighborhood in the city. Right. He waves back at her. His grin vanishes. Marcus tells her he has to go. He concentrates his eyes on me. He tells me I should meet up with him later, as soon as I can. He’ll be waiting in front of Calvin’s house.

My mother and I watch him turn and exit the yard.

Mom’s face is curious. She asks me if anything is wrong. I tell her everything is fine. She sniffs the air and asks if I have something heating in the kitchen. I nod. The okra stew is probably warm enough to eat, but my appetite is gone as I stare out past the storm door. I scan the surrounding privacy fence. It is tall. So tall Marcus could be standing just beyond the gate, and I wouldn’t see him waiting.

x

The day is bright around Marcus’s black Benz. The vehicle looks out of place parked on the suburban street in front of the walkway and stairs leading up to Calvin’s front door. I’m standing at the driver side door. Marcus has lowered his tinted window halfway. He looks up at me from inside. I can’t be sure if anyone else is in the car with him, but I feel like he’s come alone. I look around to see if any neighbors might be watching us.

Marcus seems to know what I’m thinking.

“Ay, I’ve been sitting here for over thirty minutes while you took your sweet-ass time coming down here, and cops haven’t shown up yet responding to concerned calls
about a nigga in their neighborhood. After last September, we’re not the kind of suspicious white people are worried about. We’ll see how long that lasts.”

I shuffle the weight of my body from one foot to the other and then back. My lips are dry from biting them, I can feel them cracking as I tell Marcus, “I’ve got $4520 in cash on me right now,” I stop. Inhale and exhale. “I know it is nowhere near how much you wanted, but it’s all I got. I know you said you weren’t interested in me making payments, but I’m begging you. Give me more time.”

Marcus shakes his head. Calm and flatly he says, “No.”

Before leaving my house, I ran upstairs to my room, collected the cash I had stashed in a pair of socks in my dresser. On the way out, my father’s Rockwell scrapbook caught my attention. I took a few seconds to flip through and think about how far I was from anywhere my father could have pictured for me. I thought of my sketchbook at school. I wished I had brought it home. I wished I could have my work sitting on my desk for my mother to discover alongside dad’s collection of American dreams—in case I didn’t return from meeting Marcus. Mom was still in the kitchen, boiling rice to go with the okra stew. I rushed past, not wanting to stop to say goodbye, scared my face would reveal my worry. I shouted that I would come home soon and bolted out the door. I pretended not to hear mom yell after me, “Wait.”

One of Marcus’ hands is on the steering wheel, the other is blocked from view by the darkened glass. I imagine him holding a gun in his lap.

“Whatever you have to do to me, okay, but please leave my mother alone. Please.”

His face twists in confusion. The window drops all the way and he rests part of his elbow on the door.
“No. We’re all good, Motherboy. That Opie-looking motherfucker paid me. Well, scratch that. His parents did.”

My legs feel like they might fall from under me. “I don’t understand.”

“They got me my ten grand. Cash. Not credit. No checks.”

“You came to my house. You followed me home.”

“Yes... Maybe to tell you it was all good. Maybe to scare you a little bit, remind you how much shit you got into following around these rich white folks out here.” Marcus sighs. “Motherboy, I told you, didn’t I? These people got me all my money in bills. You out here around people who can do that, find 10k whenever they might need to get rid of a problem. I was the problem, right?”

I’m surprised by how much he sounds almost like a friend. A memory of him and me when we were younger: us sitting on a bus bench talking about Japanese cartoons. Him shoving a bully off me, and then teasing me about how I, coming from a continent where people have to fight lions for food, should be tougher.

“So, we’re done? Just like that?”

He laughs, “Yeah, it’s finished.”

“I don’t have to worry about you coming out here again?”

Marcus’ brows narrow. A flash of rage crosses his face. “I don’t got time to keep coming out here to the boonies to follow you around. What do I look like to you?”

I don’t have words. I’m not sure there is language for the frenzy boiling under my skin. For months I’ve been living under a threat, and although it was scary, I realize now the terror gave me a sense of purpose. Ever since Marcus returned in my life, he was motivation. I’m unsure what reason I have to do anything now.
He seems to read my mind again, “Look, I’m going to give you advice. Go home to your mom. Finish school. Get a job and stay on your art shit. You might end up broke, but maybe you can still make something. Be happy.”

“Okay?”

“And if you come to the Southeast again, you will be fucking shot. Dead on sight. Believe it. I better not catch you in my part of the city.”

“I understand.”

Nothing else is said between us. Marcus leaves. I’m left standing alone in front of Calvin’s house. Under my feet the world is spinning. I close my eyes and try to feel the rotations. I wonder, if I timed it right, could I jump and fall off the Earth.

x

At home I find my mother waiting for me at the dining table. She’s reading a tabloid and shaking her head. Across from her is a plate of food covered in plastic wrap. She puts down the magazine when she notices me. She says I should sit, eat something and tell her about my day. I move closer. I look over the plate and think of how she did the same for my father every night, unsure of when he’d come home. Until the night he didn’t.

My mother asks me, “Eh, what’s wrong, Benny?”

I tell mom everything.

About the robbery.

About Katie and her pregnancy.

About the drugs and Pat.
She stands up and I collapse into her arms crouching my head to nuzzle her shoulder. My back is tense, preparing for her angry blows. But she pulls me tighter, closer. She’s crying now too and our apologies blend together.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry.”

And then in Twi, and Ga, and Ewe, *I’m sorry you felt alone in this.*

Back and forth, calls and responses, between gasps of air.
Mom wakes me up minutes before my alarm. I can’t remember the last time she was still home when I was getting ready for school. Sitting at the end of my bed, she tells me she’s taken off from work today and we are going into the city to visit an art museum. She’ll call to have me excused from classes. I’ll pay the bus fares and for metro cards. Mom leaves me to get ready. By the time I’ve washed my face, brushed my teeth and put on clothes, my cheeks are sore from smiling.

Alongside the morning commuters cramming the busses and rapid transit train cars, mom and I make a plan. We’ll go to the National Gallery of Art. At the entrance of the museum, we lose the hurried energy of the men and women rushing to work. We take our time through the halls of the galleries. Our steps are more like shuffles as we both seem to recognize that there is no place else we have to be.

I discover my mother most enjoys art before 1700. I should have predicted her love for Biblical scenes. At Daniel in the Lion’s Den by Rubens, she can’t stop talking about the way the light in the painting pulls her eyes to the only human figure, his hands clasped, legs crossed, chin up, praying to the heavens to escape from the swarm of savannah cats circling him. Mom points out the red cloak laid across a rock beside Daniel.

“Probably a message about the blood of Jesus,” she says in a tone that I’m not sure is a question or an observation.

I tell her that if she likes Rubens’ religious stuff, she’d appreciate other Baroque painters. I mention names I’ve read in library art books and heard said by Dr. Ambush: Velázquez, Rembrandt, Caravaggio. We go in search for their work. On the same floor of the west building, we find Caravaggio’s The Taking of Christ and mom’s mouth falls open.
I’m surprised by how much the struggle in the painting, the pushing and pulling between the figures, makes me uneasy.

We move on.

Mom sees Hieronymus Bosch’s *Death and the Miser.* She stands in front of it silently for several minutes. I find a bench and take a seat to give her space to think through whatever it is happening inside of her as she studies the pale, bed-ridden man, the reaper creeping through the door of his room, the small demons poking around from under and behind the furniture, and the lone angel at his shoulder pointing up at a beam of sunshine cutting through a window overhead where a crucifix has been placed. The painting gives me the creeps, but I don’t tell her that, and we continue without her sharing the emotions the piece gave her.

We walk through periods of Western Art History printed on the walls: Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism. We see an untitled Rothko from 1949. I remember Katie telling me that he was another one of her favorites. My mother scoffs and sucks her teeth at the stacked blocks of color on the yellow canvas. She says, “What is that? There is nothing happening.”

I hear myself say something Dr. Ambush once said to me, “You’re understanding the painting as a closed text.” Mom looks impressed but unsure. “Ma, some art doesn’t say anything by itself. The viewer makes the meaning. I think this Rothko is like that. It means whatever the person looking at it feels.”

My mother shakes her head and blows a sputter through her lips. “For whom does this do anything?”
I have to cover my mouth to keep myself from laughing too loud. “It does a lot for a lot of people, ma. That’s why it is here in the national gallery.”

We pass through more movements until we are surrounded by what the museum dubs Contemporary Art. The first piece that gets my attention is by Betye Saar. It reminds me of my collage book. It isn’t a painting, although it has paint in it. It is assembled out of fabric and iron, chicken wire, staples, keys, belt buckles, change purses, coins, gloves, book pages, wallpaper, vegetable husks, feathers and butterfly wings, all held in place by sheets of glass in a pine wood window frame. Viewing it on the wall is like looking at a strange, golden, storm sweeping the contents of someone’s purse onto the wind. I read the name on the title card over and over again, *Wishing for Winter*. I don’t fully understand what it means, but I see myself in it.

“I want to do this.”

My mom folds her hands behind her waist and tilts her gaze to try to catch sight of what has me obsessed. “It is messy,” she says.

I see a Basquiat and tug the sleeves of mom’s blouse to follow me. We stand in front of the giant four canvas paintings that make up his *Flesh and Spirit*. It makes my heart bounce the same way a good punk song does. I expect mom to complain about the raw, unfinished quality, the resemblance to graffiti, and the lack of balance and story.

“I like this very much,” she says. “I don’t know why.”

“Yeah,” I say back to her, unable to explain to her the way this art brings me closer to my own wildness.

By the end of our visit, we agree on only one other piece of art, a painting by Kerry James Marshall called *Great America*. We can’t stop chatting about the top left corner and
the black bodies, just a few shades darker than us, crammed in what looks like the coaster
car of an amusement park ride. They are exiting from a tunnel of ghosts. We chatter on
about how they appear to be riding a wave that will carry them southeast across the large
painted seascape toward a halo of thirteen five-pointed stars like those on Betsy Ross’ flag.

“You know, that was one of the questions on my citizenship test?” mom says to me. “I had to know all thirteen states that constellation represents. I had to know who wrote
*The Federalist Papers* too, and learn the order of all the American Presidents, aye. How
many people born here really know all of that?”

“Not many, I guess.”

We return to the art, talking about the use of the word "WOW," at the top of
Marshall's painting, spelled out in all capital letters in a red blob with thin tentacles
shooting out to small destination points all over the image. At the bottom, the title of the
piece is printed in tinier letters over a long unrolling parchment.

Mom says, "It is interesting how there are the faint lines of a spirit in a bed sheet
over the whole left side of this painting."

"There's ghosts where they're coming from and where they are going."

"Smart." She pats my back and leaves her hand there for a few seconds.

The warmth of her palm comes through my sweatshirt.

We leave the museum when we get hungry. Everything in the area is expensive.
For nearly half an hour we walk blocks of the city and eventually settle on a hot dog vendor.
We stand beside the food truck while we eat. I can see the south lawn of the White House
when I look left. I can see the top of the Washington Monument above the trees to my right.

“When we lived in southeast, we never came up here.”
“I know,” my mother says.

I take another bite.

“Some of the artworks we saw today were in the books your father would bring home from the library. Many of those paintings right here.”

I start counting the number of taxis driving by us. I stop after a dozen. I think about my dad driving these same streets day after day, passing national monuments, galleries and historical sites. I hope he had chances to be still sometimes, to stand like we are now in the capital with nowhere else to rush to.

Chewing, my mother says through puffed cheeks, “Good day, hmm.”

I’m not sure if it’s an observation or a question.

“Great America?” I say, mostly to myself.
I’m creating a rock garden for my mother, shaking twenty-pound bags, trying to get the small chunks of stone out onto the muddy patch I’ve hoed in the corner of our yard. I got permission from the property manager to lay down some tarp and kill a few feet of grass. Mom was seated on the steps to the front door watching me earlier. Her excitement with the process didn’t encourage her to help. She did, however, seem to enjoy giving me suggestions. “You want to spread those rocks evenly, so they are not in an ugly little pile,” she had joked. Mom had seen a rock garden on television and fell in love with it, a place she can sit and think after work in the sun. After I’m finished with the stones, we’ll find her a bench. I’ll put some planters along the edges, and we’ll plant some flowers that she likes. It will be nice.

I can feel the days getting hotter. I’m doing better in school. Graduation is on the horizon, and somehow I will have done enough to get my diploma.

I squat down to spread the rocks evenly. When a few drops of sweat slide into my eyes, I wipe them with the back of my wrist. I’m surprised how much I like this work.

A voice behind me says, “That’s going to look cool when you’re done.”

I peer over my shoulder to find Tommy. He’s just walked through my gate. I stand up straight and brush my hands over my pant legs.

I acknowledge him, saying, “Hey.”

Tommy’s father pushes through the gate behind him. I cannot remember the last time I saw Tommy’s dad. It must have been while my father was still alive. He’s still tall and thin. Still balding with a permanent frown and a crown of graying blond hovering over his ears.
“Hello, Ben. I haven’t seen you in a long while. How are you?”

I tell him I’m fine, my eyes lingering to Tommy for some hint as to why they’re both here.

Tommy’s dad forces a smile and then asks if my mother is home.

“She’s in the house, sir.”

“Well, would you mind letting her know I’m here?”

“Oh, right.” I hustle to the storm door and open it to call inside. Soon my mom appears behind the glass. She comes out to the first step and greets Tommy and his dad, “Ay, Thomas senior and junior. Welcome.” Both say hello and then Tommy’s father asks if he can speak with my mom inside for a moment. My mother holds the door open for him and the pair disappear inside.

Tommy moves closer to me. His steps are slow and thoughtful. I see evidence of the surgical stitches above his ear and temple, and I imagine the one’s at his waist tugging with each movement. He comes to stand beside me at my mother’s future rock garden.

“What are you doing here,” I ask.

“My dad and I are here to apologize.” In the seconds before he says his apology, I recall snowball fights and hanging out at his pool. I remember the first time I knew for sure I wanted his friendship. In the first few weeks of knowing each other, he passed me a note during our Math class. I unfolded the paper to find a small equation written at the center of the mostly blank college-ruled page.

\[ X \div ME \]

\[ X = YOUR\ MOM \]
I snorted so loud the teacher threatened to send me to the vice principal’s office. Tommy barely knew me, had never met my mother, but he didn’t care. He seemed fearless. He did whatever he wanted. Said whatever he wanted. He was the opposite of me, and that’s what attracted me to him.

On the verge of tears, Tommy chokes out, “I’m sorry. Things got so out of control. I didn’t know what the fuck I was even doing, man.”

I search his face for any sign his apology might be fake. There’s no smirk or grin after he says it. He looks sincere.

“Okay.” I say. “You really paid off Marcus?”

He nods.

I ask him, “How?”

“I had to tell my parents. They got the money together. Yellow-Pants got me his contact.”

I thank him for paying all of what was owed. Tommy shrugs and the motion makes him wince in pain.

A question drops out of Tommy, “So, what happens now?” He might not mean for me to answer with anything significant. But a heavy pause rests between us as I consider a future.

I tell him I’m thinking about community college. Maybe after two years I’ll transfer and study Art at the state university. The money I had meant to give Marcus could be used to pay some house bills and some of the cost for fall enrollment. Tommy listens as I tell him I’m going to get my driver’s license, get a part-time job somewhere and save for a car.

“Mary and Beth both offered to teach me to drive before they leave for college.”
Tommy nods, “Sounds like a good plan.” He looks up. Blows his cheeks and releases a frustrated puff of air. “Murry,” he says. “I was such a dick to her. If you see her before I do, please let her know I want to apologize to her.”

I turn his earlier question on him, “What’s next?”

Tommy looks around us. We listen to crickets and cars revving past the neighborhood in the distance. He says, “For two weeks I’ve been on straight-up lock down. When I’m not doing homework, I’m getting chewed-out. I had to promise my mom I’d get back to night school and catch up on everything. I go to her place on weekends, and we study together. I’ve been able to get a lot done, but I won’t be graduating with you guys. After I get my diploma, I don’t know…” He gets quiet for a moment. “I heard from Calvin.”

“Really? How is he? What’s he doing?”

“He’s still in Pennsylvania with his grandma. I got to thank him for totally saving my life. He told me he’s enlisted in the Army.”

Tommy says he is thinking about the armed forces too. Something in my stomach quakes. I remember the kid in the kente shirt last thanksgiving as Tommy predicts the new fight in Afghanistan will be over by the time he would leave basic training. “They’ll find that Bin Laden guy and hang him up and it’ll be done soon.”

“I don’t know,” I say.

I want to change the subject. Tommy seems to want that too.

“I know in other countries it’s normal to take a gap year before jumping into college. You think you might go back to Ghana for a while?”

I squint up at the sun above us and then blink away the spots that flash in my eyes. Why does the same sun look so different on two sides of the Atlantic? The rainy season
will come to the Gold Coast soon. In my father’s home, tiny monsoons will make mud everywhere. In the cities, the downpours will wash away the sand carried in by desert winds from the northeast. Walking through the wet humidity is like moving under an invisible, drenched, comforter. But for now, it’s dry there. Over there the weather is getting hotter, just like here.

“Yes, I think I’ll try to go home again sometime.”

Tommy looks at me, curious. “I thought you and your mom got citizenship?”

“We did. We are. Both places are home.”

I can tell by his expression he doesn’t entirely understand.

“Do we go back to being friends now? Pretend nothing ever happened?”

There’s sarcasm in his voice, and honesty too. I’m sure he would want nothing more than to never speak of the last few months again. The idea kind of appeals to me too. I’ve made some mistakes I wouldn’t mind forgetting, but part of me knows it’s important I do remember.

We stare at each other waiting for someone to explain how we move on. I can’t imagine a time when our silence might be comfortable again.

I say, “I don’t know.”

“Fair enough.”

Tommy’s dad comes out of the door looking both appreciative and exhausted. My mother follows. He thanks her for her time. He says to her, “Let’s continue to look out for each other and our kids.” Tommy’s dad approaches the gate and asks his son, “Are you ready? We’ve got to get to the auto store.”

Thomas senior and junior say goodbye to my mother.
Tommy looks to me. “See you around, Benny?”

I correct him, “Ben.”

He nods and moves over to his father. The dad grips his son’s shoulder, not with anger but with love. My father used to reach for me the same way, a reminder that he was there, that we existed together. Steering Tommy out of my yard, the dad shakes his head but he’s grinning too.

They go beyond the gate.

Mom and I are now alone in the small yard.

“It’s starting to look good,” she says, pointing a finger at the pile of pebbles I’ve dumped.

“Yeah, right,” I say.

She retreats into the house, humming a church hymn to herself.

Something heavy roars awake past the fence. I rush to the gate, poke my head out to the street. I’m there in time to catch a yellow Firebird blaze around the corner leaving behind a cloud of exhaust. The vehicle looks good, fixed well enough to carry father and son to the auto parts store and wherever else comes next. I wish them luck.

I return to my rocks. I’ll smooth them out a little more, lay a foundation. Maybe I can make a space that might remind us every day that we might do more than just survive here.
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VITA

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