

FIGHT: A BAREKNUCKLE PLEDGE

ROUND 3

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On Sacrifice

Easter Sunday 2020

Where there is togetherness
let there be distance
along the paths we walk
along the paths we ride

Where there is celebration
let there be vigilance
along the grass we avoid
along the trajectories we calculate

Where there is occupation
let there be vision
along the shores we emerge
along the wars we wage

And where there is resurrection
let there be none to witness
along the pathogen we spread
along the isolation we observe.

-L. Ashby

The Air Conditioner Broke

when the air conditioning dies so do I
drowning in puddles of my own sweat
getting up to put my head in the freezer
I either stick to or slide off the furniture

when the air conditioner does so do I
walking aimlessly around shopping centres
flicking through books I won't buy
eating food I don't want to eat

when the air conditioner dies so do I
having a cold shower or making an ice bath
would only be a waste of my time
I'd get out and sweat all over everything again

when the air conditioner dies so do I
maybe Hell is nothing but a stinking summers day
do churches have air conditioning?
there's no better time to find out.

-Benji Forsyth

Black existentialist trauma

I'm the searing coal in the seminar
twinkle-toe headasses side-stepping

a hot topic I'll be the subtle glance
out your left eye if it means you see me

sometimes I backburner my Black
so bad I'm stuck scrubbing the soot

from off my own tongue woke is just
a term for dragging my drenched body

into every subject I'll spend a whole
lesson lecturing the room on how

unloving a text was I haven't learned
to talk about Blackness without holding

a white hand praxis is pledging
allegiance to every midnight that spares

me your poem about a sparrow
is identity politics every week I slam

under string lights to remember what
it feels like to love the work I do I just

want to write a Black poem without
the wake of death but is it honest

if another boy (and another)
dies before I reach the end of it?

-Aris Kian

we cannot afford to keep our best secrets
under the floorboards. we drag around our endowment

in our pants, whip it out and brag about it.
we are the model minority, all modest

and make-do. where else is our money going, if not to bigger
britches? we keep them ironed under the weight

of the light rail. our state schools humble us. we have no need
for hedges. we are the starving metropolis

you asked for. we're still picking the dropouts
from between our teeth

-Aris Kian

Stare Bear

after Michael Zavros's Bad dad, 2013

Narcissus would have sighed in envy
of you. Stare bear into that
uncanny blue, inflatable boy toy
super dad, champion of triple
-takes and nothing.

High-five your own pruned
fingers, Dad. Your feet barely
touch rock bottom. Step out, nosedive
into deep end, sink until your whole
body stays under like a brick.

You cannot hear me with your ears
muffled below the surface, can you?
Only noises and charades, never clear voices.
Hear us bomb, pencil, swan without
fear of hitting the bottom.

Maybe you glimpsed it already, hummed
below creepy crawly babble spidering over
your foot, left impressions around your eyes
when you slid off your goggles.
Party's over, champ. Now get out.

Your towel's already soaked
and starting to smell off.

-Sean West

RALPHIE FRAZIER

I.

Ralphie had to be five as he rode his tricycle up and down the sidewalk in front of his house. *You Dirty Son of a Bitch, You Dirty Son of a Bitch* he howled as he pedaled. He was looking across the street at me. This went on almost every day for the first weeks of that hot summer. His brother Robert was maybe twenty and dressed like he had a job. A shy and sensitive one, my mother called him. I think he worked in a bank. David was old enough to drive a hot rod and did. *Fords are junkers* was the only thing I ever heard him say. Both of them were very good looking young men. There was no father around. Ever.

II.

Their house was the only one that did not have a lawn on a street of decent lawns. They had dirt with a clump of grass here and there. It was the kind of dirt that did not look like it could grow much of anything anyway. Their house needed paint. Badly. Even I could see that, though I am sure I did not much care. Mrs. Frazier often sat on the front steps of their porch during the hot summer afternoons. No one had air conditioning in those days. Or even dreamed of having it. She was a very attractive woman and had a man visitor once a week, always on Sundays. This in itself was scandalous in that neighborhood. And so naturally gossip followed her. Gossip that gradually filtered its way down to me.

III.

I suppose I was six – or maybe seven. Old enough, one would think, to know better. Or maybe not. One afternoon after Ralphie had worn himself out on his tricycle and his little sister Darlene pattered around in the dirt alongside the house, I found myself sitting alone with Mrs. Frazier on the front steps. She was looking far away into the distance. She was, as I said, a very attractive woman. I suppose I thought it would be a fine thing if I could establish an easy familiarity with her. “Mrs. Frazier,” I said warmly. “Did you really shoot your husband to death?” That was it. That was my bid for intimacy with an attractive older female. “Oh, Bobby,” she said calmly after a brief hesitation. “That was a long time ago.” This must have seemed to me a satisfactory response. I do not believe I said anything more. I am sure I did not apologize. The memory of the episode ends there. Not so long after that Robert died. My mother told me my father, a doctor, had been called in to sign the death certificate. Death by misadventure, he wrote down, I think it was. Though I suspected – the backyard over the fence gossip again, no doubt – something sadder and more messy and more tragic.

IV.

Ralphie and I became playmates soon enough. Not bonded, though. We fought and let it slide. Fought and let it slide. Still we had Kick the Can. Topps Baseball Cards. Rin Tin Tin and Cheyenne and Dragnet and Gunsmoke and Wyatt Earp on tv. My sister had an imaginary friend named Bong Sing. Bong Sing sported fairy wings and carried a wand. Ralphie boasted an imaginary friend called Clint. Clint wore cleats and packed heat.

-Robert Perchan

black dress

in a mall, i fell in love with an angel of
death: dressed as shopfront widow: ink

halo humming through glass: figure
waxing crescent in couture: i desired to

devour them from limb to lace: every organ
-za sleeve & ruffle: but i, fallen: heathen:

unbeliever: unstitched wings cut from
cloud: draped with dusk: a wave parting

shoppers: a witch with smoke lashes
out at children: cats curled up in

corners of sclera: but i was not man
-nequin enough: so i picked out an

onyx blade: feathered brows: a black
dress: to dance with the damned

-Andy Winter

mani(c)festo

i don't know the colour of loneliness
till the mirror bleeds again
i only know the sound of cat flap
when a dream walks out
when i taste wallpaper instead of words
in another bed i am traveling highways of hand
as if warmth is a knife that needs to be plunged
in this bed i am
disembodied pillow talking to full moon
shivering from ceiling fan like fruit bat
as if i could be unplugged from this city
bus roars into bay rubber doors unfurling
with a haze of bodily fluids

1. the mirror is a maze
2. the head is a hurt
3. the dream is a map
4. the cat is a sleep

i couldn't get boys to sleep in my bed for the longest time
i swallowed nightmares woke up spitting scratches
my fingers smell of whiskers every boy that has made me purr
left tire tracks instead of belly rubs
i'm wandering the streets i replace a bed of sardines
i paw print i smell of his spunk
i grind cuttlebones of boys that stare at me on the train
i four o'clock in the morning epiphany
i jingle of collar

i'm fine

i'm fine

i'm fine

catalyst always / in wheel / in cage / somewhere dream distils / itself into rodent / somewhere
mousetrap / no cats here / head as laboratory / inhaling its own fumes / head as truckle / of
nibbled time / tar transmutes to / rat / rat to / tar changed maze three times & yet / no one else
here / somewhere / tar-slick eyes / & yet cannot stop / running no more dreams / here head eats
itself / i / maze / i catalyst / at the end / cat flap / asks / do you / proceed / with / experiment / ?

all side effects include [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *nervousness* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *insomnia* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *nausea* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *agitation* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *anxiety* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *sweating* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *visual problems* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *psychosis* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *numbness* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *headaches* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *weight loss* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

5. the city is a wake
6. the face is a ghost
7. the hurt is a head
8. the maze is a mirror

-Andy Winter

Weapon

...coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could.

(Arundathi Roy)

Into this hectic rabble
you dance—skip hopping on
silent feet—into a mob
of wilful clowns
squabbling over shiny toys,
throwing their fever dream tantrums,
terrorising the world with their antics...
you dance—undaunted
by their war cries
(tattered notes of vainglory)
howled helplessly into bitter wind...

-Anita Patel

Daydream

I can imagine that Trayvon would've graduated from college by now, perhaps met someone special. But he's taking his time cause daddy ain't raise no fool. He has a cool lil condo not too far from his mama's house. You always gotta stay close enough to mama in case she needs you. Every Friday is fellas night. Dudes he's known since middle school. Shoot some pool, talk politics. He'd say *I ever tell y'all about that time a dude pulled a gun on me for walking in the rain?* They'd say *Yeah man we done heard the story a thousand times...* But on the inside they're saying *But I'm glad you're still here bro.* But you know the fellas can't show too much emotion. So instead they show brotherly love the ways they know how. Watching the game, a few brews, wings. Laughing cause Trayvon only eats the flats. He's always been like that. They spend the evening shooting jumpers into the trash can *Kobe!*

I can imagine he'd be sad about Sandra Bland. Mike Brown. Tamir Rice. Countless other brown faces turned blood red. He'd write Facebook statuses, maybe even write a poem. Hell this is Trayvon we're talking about. Maybe he'd write a law. Laws to protect the innocent from those who are supposed to protect. He's never gonna forget. Cause though it's just a memory, thunderstorms still spook him. He hasn't sipped Arizona tea in ages. The taste of the rainbow disgusts him so now he only eats Starburst, the pink ones. His boys jokingly tell him he's soft but they know he's the hardest one among em. They dap. Say goodbyes. Make plans for next Friday. Somebody picked Dave n Busters. Somebody else said *SLAP*. They all laugh cause last week they was chillin watchin Deion Cole's special on Netflix over at Trayvon's spot.

I can imagine that Trayvon waits til he's in his car half way home and then calls his mama. Even though he's grown, she still likes him to check in when he's out. Cause you never know who from the neighborhood is watchin. Waitin. He calls Mama Sabrina to say *I'm safe* and he can hear the sleepiness in her voice but he knew she would answer. She always answers. She always worries. Cause she knows that the world still hunts brown boys for sport. She knows her sons are the fine young men they were raised to be but that don't mean a damn thing at 2am on anybody's street. At 2pm for that matter. His daddy says she ought to stop and let him be a man but he still appreciates the texts she sends to say *Trayvon called and he's almost home*. He'll never tell him about the texts. He'll just check on him like *Hey son let's go see a game*. Man shit.

I can imagine that Trayvon is living his best life. Sometimes it takes a brush with Death to put things in perspective. He sees the world for what it is but he's determined to be what they said he couldn't be. He has a home office. On the wall, you'll see 4 things...his HS diploma, copy of his undergrad degree, copy of his Masters (grad school was a bitch but he made it)...lastly a copy of a newspaper clipping. The headline reads "Neighborhood watchman arrested for unprovoked assault on teen." It tells the story of a young boy who was simply walking to a friend's house from the store. Who was approached by a stranger and told he didn't belong. Who stared down the barrel of a gun. Who heard the attempted click of the trigger as the gun jammed. Who saw the flashing lights and instinctively put his hands up despite his innocence. Who watched the stranger be handcuffed. Who called his mama. Who would always know to call his mama. The story of a boy who lived to become a man. I can see it. I can imagine it, even daydream. But you see, America's never really been a place where dreams come true.

-Cassandra Jenkins

