The Yale Literary Magazine

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DEAR READER,

You survived the semester. Mia McKenzie, who created *Black Girl Dangerous*, points out in her essay ‘On Getting Free,’ that the things we do to survive often hinder the end goal of getting free. For a lot of us, moving through this school constitutes some kind of survival or other—which proved especially true this past fall. Reading and writing require freedom of us. Real freedom, though, not the freedom to hurt someone but the freedom to live life without strictures or structural violence. Ironically, a lot of that language (freedom, survival, censorship) has been coopted by people who say that ‘freedom’ of speech precedes others’ survival. It’s just not what that word means, and for the Lit, words are paramount.

To read and to write well, we learn in our seminars, one’s imagination needs to have autonomy that too seldom exists in the world—a fictive autonomy, a creative autonomy. The goal of a publication like ours should be to reconcile this freedom with the social responsibility of being a platform for student art. The Lit for too long has upheld an imbalance of artistic representation in the literary community. ‘The scene of race taking up residence in the creative act’: this is what Beth Loffreda and Claudia
Rankine hope for in the introduction to their new anthology, *The Racial Imaginary*. "One way to know you’re in the presence of—in possession of, possessed by—a racial imaginary is to see if the boundaries of one’s imaginative sympathy line up, again and again, with the lines drawn by power." As a publication and as a community, we should be striving to be a home of all undergraduate writers and artists. That’s the magazine’s responsibility to the campus. We want to do that work, reader, and we want you to help us.

For now, we are so proud and excited to deliver to you what you hold in your hands. This semester, as every semester, the work in the magazine varies in its formal interests and choices: the greatest bond these pieces share is that they were all well loved by a roomful of dedicated readers. Also, they’re all beautiful, and energetic, and each piece takes up residence and lives well and undeniably free in itself. We’ll see you back here next semester. Thanks for reading.

YOURS,

Jake
# Contents

**SECTION ONE**  
Poetry  

**SECTION TWO**  
An interview with Maggie Nelson  

**SECTION THREE**  
Prose  

**SECTION FOUR**  
An interview with Tracy K. Smith  

**SECTION FIVE**  
Art
volumes
The language of mourning begins
with an orchestra that only knows one song
it is pulling the strings backwards
so they spell out your name in harmony
light up shoe, half-swollen eyelid,
walkie talkie and a radio tune stuck
on the chorus saying *party, and party,*
a corpse needs no conductor
when it is wearing shoes it can walk away in

I have already begun speaking
when you come into my living
room and spray the walls with Lysol
I am disinfecting your body in case
it decides to bleed again in case
you need a clean canvas to paint
the walls yellow and white or was it
yellow and soundproof foam
if memory suffices the timpani would be still
humming *party, and party,* and the part of my violin
I never learned would appear easy I know
it is your front tooth and missing
strand of hair next to your unattached ear lobe
frilly pink shirts, dismembered barbies,
hot-air balloon fortunes, and videos I have
of you laughing that do not make me cry
if I send them out to enough people
they will give me their finger bones to strum
eight years two months fifteen days
into the hollow double base of the river
wading through my pelvis brimming white foam like the coffee in the cup
you weren’t supposed to touch
it sounds like hissing like a train
steaming away from its mammoth
mouth sings a song rolling backwards
from the hills raining snow
and snow and muting snow
Countdown to Perihelion:
23 Days, or Dust Love Song
take my hand
handful of dust
hold me in your arms
armful of dust
kiss me
mouthful of dust

_halo of dust_
solar wind

come to me
shrouded in dust
look for me
blinded by dust
reach out to me
through acres of dust

_halo of dust_
solar wind

find me a ring
among the dust
meet me
in a church of dust
make me sweetly
a bride of dust

_halo of dust_
solar wind
build me a house
walls of dust
plant me a garden
fruits of dust
bring me a child
bones of dust

halo of dust
solar wind

watch my hair turn grey
color of dust
watch my eyes go blind
vision of dust
bury me
body of dust

halo of dust
solar wind
Dorothy
I am feeling like a golden brick when the dust rolls in.
Look, there I am, that pouting lump of doldrums
with sweat sheened up platinum on my cheeks.
Oh yes, that is me, sitting pretty in a wig of hair
I blame for braiding itself so messily.
_Hey cutie_, says a worm in the dirt.
Just smile for me, says the broad-shouldered
stone I’ve spent all morning pulling faces at.
I weep down at my million-buck fingernails,
dreaming I had gold teeth
and a grill to sizzle and gnash at them.
By the time it all starts to go sepia,
my tears are looking like butter and delicious
and the crows are landing on me with their tongues out like
_Oh, delicious, or, Job well done, sucker._
Look closely and they are cat’s tongues,
little pin-hooked rugs. Suddenly the sky is a rug
getting the dust beat out of it.
_Do birds even have tongues?_
Trees coughing in the unexpected grit of it.
_Would I dream such a thing?_
‘No, you shining hick,’ hacks an apple-cheeked
old bole. The dust is so thick now that the termites
have pulled up in their rusted bandwagon.
Field mice are throwing handfuls
and building tiaraed sculptures of themselves.
Furniture Music
‘Furniture music is basically industrial. The habit—use—is to make music on occasions when the music has nothing to do.’

—Erik Satie in a letter to Jean Cocteau, March 1, 1920

i. ‘Very lost.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courts</th>
<th>at closing hours</th>
<th>not much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to talk about</td>
<td>we were</td>
<td>busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furnishing</td>
<td>a maze of</td>
<td>domesticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wood burnished</td>
<td>memories glazed</td>
<td>time and time again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shiny enough</td>
<td>to spy</td>
<td>lacquered reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food forever fresh</td>
<td>a homely</td>
<td>plastic chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that will survive</td>
<td>Apocalypse</td>
<td>a perfect room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a perfect storm</td>
<td>minus the tags</td>
<td>labelling unreality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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clumsily named like the way we walk
II. “A little bit warm.”

Yesterday is a two-seat sofa. Too much for one to fill alone, too cramped for two to share without discomfort. Its thick grain leather covers all contact areas, acquires a beautiful patina with age. Division comes in boxes of six, like dice. Important not to mix one’s underwear and the other’s ties. A well-organized home shows restraint: good fences make good lovers; good paint makes good fences. A shelf of books is worth more unread. The kitchen’s heart is a wooden block, hollowed with slits where the knives are kept. You can stack the chairs so they take less space. You can stack the emptiness so you take less space. The good thing about minimalism is that emptiness makes your house seem larger, even though homes here only get smaller.
III. ‘Moderately, I insist.’

We sit on the mattresses the lights above dance
silver disks project the logos
of loneliness every answer
hard and soft in-between you
we could lie down and wake ourselves up somewhere else

unformed and infinite homes sleep on the shelves
On Winning the Award for Most Outstanding Shopper
I am congratulated on all sides by heads of lettuce because to get to the biscuits and noodles you have to squeeze past the vegetables and being new to the country they are generous with their admiration and have spread their leaves forward as if to embrace.

I may have fainted en route but if upon waking it’s still the same song that’s playing, and it’s Minnie Riperton whistling maternally to her daughter, then I can believe again that the world is contiguous, and that the entire mall is celebrating something small and lonely, like a baby, or a feral hamster. I want to ask if these memories are mine or merely the reflection of electric lights against the storefront, the glow of a hall of mirrors, crafted accidentally from a shiny pleather boot and a hand mirror. Once I gave a Thank You card to a salesman with a limp. Once I held open a door to stranger while having a nosebleed.

Once I ate a whole cheeseburger, each last remaining sesame seed. Once I hailed a cab and gave it to a child in need. Once I picked up a bottle of shampoo that fell on the floor and restored it to its best position. Brilliantly the light shines upon the freshly mopped floor and rewards, even the children, with tiny coins.
What We Think We Feel
Mom says she has her mother with her
in the car. I can’t tell if she’s
joking—Mama, Granny’s dead. But Mom
means the ashes. In the kitchen, chopping parsley,
Mom tells me that she picked them up
from Waco, drove them to our home. She’s been
talking to them all day, showing them
around. Here is the grocery store.
Here is our church. This is how
I live. She says it’s nice to have Granny

silent for once, then starts
to cry, to say she doesn’t mean
that, quite, but I know why
she said it. I tell her, I was there,

that evening at the restaurant, I was
nine, when Granny made our waitress cry.
I was there, digging my nails into the bottoms
of my thighs, watching bubbles leap
off the red straw in my soda, not looking
at anyone, pretending not
to notice, like always—I was there.

I tell Mom this story, and it is
different, but the same as every other
story I’ve told her in the past week,
so I quiet. Mom
doesn’t, or can’t, although as she turns
away, I see her hands tremble over
dinner, as she stoops above a pot
of squash soup. Beneath oily hair, her face
tightens, lips moving furiously,  
as she works through it  
again and again,  
spilling soft confessions  
into the rising steam.

II.
Mom tells me the reason Granny  
was the way she was was  
because her mother didn’t love her.  
And that makes all  
the difference, see, Mom’s  
saying. She tries to work her hands  
through this logic, stroking  
the same small place on my arm over  
and over. Her explanation seems  
reasonable. I tell her so. She nods.  

Her hands still, then  
pick up again, because what if  

it carries through generations, this  
not-loving?
The day after my grandmother’s funeral, I stayed in bed with my mother, watching women spread raw legs in a television show about midwives, a drama, but based on true stories. I told Mom not to watch it, so soon after Granny’s death, but she insisted, cradled the laptop between her hips and tried not to move, while onscreen, a woman was torn apart down her inner seams. She had red hair, the woman, she didn’t scream much, just thrust breath from her mouth in fast pants—in-out-in-out-in-out. The veins on her swollen legs looked like brains, purpled and meaty, and the veins in Mom’s hand stood tight as rope as she gripped my arm, moaned along with the woman—when she finally started to howl, neck slick and bent back, and the baby wouldn’t come, Mom upset the screen on her lap, shouting

I thought, surely the veins must burst, I wanted to say hush, Mama, be quiet, I wanted
to say it’s okay, you loved her
in the best way that
you could, but

it is not enough.

Onscreen, at last, the child fell
from the woman, followed
by a flood of dark waters. Mom
was crying, yet we watched a second episode,
a third, another and another and
another, watched mother after swollen
mother drop bloody child from her hips,

then take it in her hands,
having given all of herself
for its existence, wrap it
in her breasts, hold it against
her skin with nothing
in between.

IV.
Mama, it’s no answer, but
here’s what I think:

Two, three years ago. I had been coughing all day.
I could hardly walk

so bent over and spent
I was, sick at Thanksgiving

and unwelcome at Dad’s sister’s
house, with my raw germs and desire
for silence. We needed somewhere
to go, so you snuck me across town and

into Granny’s apartment, past the nurses
in their faded scrubs,

the old women with their crooked
lipstick smiles, a man alone

at a chessboard. We didn’t
tell her I was sick—when I kissed

her chin, I tightened my gut, managed
to keep my lungs still. But later

while she slept, beneath the roar
of her humidifier and the hiss

of breathing tubes that snaked
around the loose flesh of her face,

you washed bruise-like traces
of mascara from my cheeks

and held me together
by my shoulders, as I hacked

and hacked. We slept on her couch,
beneath the loose stiches of an afghan

she had knit years ago, an elaborate
twisting of blues and greens and gold.
It swallowed us, so you were grafted
to my shivering body, the regular ebb
of your chest stilling
my breathing. Mama, it was the first

I had rested in days, cradled
by you, both of us in the house

of your mother, and I loved her
for the peace she could give us.

When we left, the next morning,
and you stooped above her whiskered face
to wake her, I remember how your own face
was pale from staying up with me,

as you always have, Mama, giving me
your long nights. Granny told us
to come back soon, which
we did, which you always did. And because

Granny always meant what she said,
she meant this, when her sleepy lips murmured

Margaret, you’re a good girl.

\v.
But her hands have moved
to my face, because even

still, Mom knows she must
be guilty. She’s clutching
at my cheeks, whispering
I’m sorry—for what, I say, and I almost

resent her ridiculous logic,
her hungry, hungry hands,

so fragile and tired and full of needs I can’t fulfill. Mama, it’s no answer, but after everything, this

is what I most remember, that there was love, and I’m telling you about it as best I can.
The Inquiry/Fight/Love Goes On, in Other Words: an interview with Maggie Nelson
We tried to place Maggie Nelson in a broad contemporary context. We asked if she saw herself as participating in a formal movement along with writers like Claudia Rankine and Ben Lerner, whose writing can be placed along the axes of critical social and lyric observation. She said she doesn't really think about that stuff when she writes, though. Such questions must belong to us readers. Maggie Nelson has written nine books—most recently *The Argonauts*, which traces the author’s relationship with the artist Harry Dodge and the birth of their son, Iggy, amidst a life of reading and theory. She teaches at Cal Arts. Her answers are mostly longer than our questions, but not by much. We choose to think of that as a reflection of how complicated her books are, and how much we love them.
Honey
BENJAMIN LINCOLN WASHINGTON teeth curled back stretched tight gums chewing always chewing green and spitting up ink jackson marched his pretty horses up the rolling raving hill smoke and guns bullets biting gnawing at flesh stripped of marrow bodies endless graveyards honored exalted golden medal wife dead killed by hearsay you say our say they say let them say benjamin lincoln washington jackson marched up his pretty horses stripped my thick slab of flesh inside my mouth organ pulsing and curling words bouncing up and down hitting the sides of a warm hot thing throbbing with veins and blood and nerves jerks and twitches they stripped my thick slab of flesh gone and cut out those white things stabbing cold and ache into there i cannot no more there is no more muscle and arteries pulsating inside my chest a network of gasps and thrashing i sleep heavy in the dark cut out my tongue you cut out my tongue
you silence muffled hands around my throat panting in
the black fingers stretching out greedy for thick slimed
chocolate licking your skin and hairs and pores defiling
wretched filth get out get out of me i dont but i have
to they call it the aristocracy of pull the aristocracy of need
kings and princes and queens and whores everywhere
up and down up and down the merry go round spin spin
like stars hurtling into the infinite subjugation of space
where you and i small tiny float and stab and curse ter-
rrible terrible we are both terrible but your eyes are closed
are they not closed shut peeled back retinas blue eyes
you have blue eyes but you cant see in space the whorls
and warps heavy and slick in the dark

the clink of metal iron in the teeth reaching and curdling
and souring like milk left out to rot the flies buzz in me
and you the flies buzz and the vultures howl at the moon
something soft you have cut down because it was too
pretty and you could not buy that could you the moon was
not yours and it is not mine but you wanted it anyway
you said it was good and fine to cut down everything
lay waste gnash through the land ravage pestilence disease
war everything bubbled and boiled under our fragility
youth and love and death and taxes membrane thrumming
and humming we and you and i take me back to that
strange place can you feel sorry for an infinite addiction
endless and always nigging jiggling dancing up and down
up and down love not what you want but what you need
hate not what you need but what you want envy is green
and callow and foolish odysseus and aphrodite made
love under a willow tree toxic bare clothes wrapped around
hide me in here do not look at me in my nakedness.
Swimming

WINNER OF THE FRANCES BERGEN PRIZE
I SHOULD CLARIFY that I am not black. I am biracial. There is a difference, and it is not small. I am possessed and possessor, slave and master, cotton picker and wearer. In St. Louis, the birthplace of my family, I can reach to one neighborhood and touch the bodies of two boys gunned down in the street a few months after Michael Brown and call their scarlet leakage TheBloodofMyCousins. I can also knock on the door of the bigot banker that goes to church at seven in the morning and say “Hi Uncle.” I am biracial, but I always know I am black first. And what does this do to the mind? What does this do to a body? I do not have an answer.

“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background”
—Zora Neale Hurston

I feel most colored when I am thrown into a swimming pool.
AT THE POOL

My friends are tall and thin; I am grounded low. While they breeze easy with long legs, tennis skirts, and limbs they can wrap their fingers around, I am a progression of the ethnic pre-woman baby fat that will become ‘curves.’ They spend most days hopping in and out of the pool with their hair wet. One of them, a soccer star from a suburb in Ohio, has a platinum bob cut short, so that it does not get in the way of her defensive playing. When she pulls up out of the pool it is immediately detangled by gravity and settled into the soaking signature skullcap of a proven high school athlete.

(What’s it like to work with gravity? I ask the strands drying vertical from my forehead. Kids on the playground used to call me the sun, with so many cowlicks radiating out&up, out&up.)

The other girl is Italian-American with long wavy hair that dries puffy as the ferns that grow outside the pool fence. Somehow, it is improved while wet—its color richer, its ends pulling up from the cotton of her t-shirt as though seeking to suck the light of day. Once out of the pool she turns her head to the side, opens her fingers into wide frame, and combs her tresses into a loose braid with enough weight to drape itself, as if sketched, over her shoulder. It is a scene entropic in its grace.

I was always worried about what my friends could see in my curls, which I call curls because I have never learned a better word for them. Any theoretical re-appropriation of ‘kinky’ never took root in my household, and I wouldn’t use it even if it had. I didn’t like when people called my hair natural as soon as I pulled myself out of the pool. They would pick at the ends like the split thread of an old sweater and grimace. The contrived self washed away at the bottom of the swimming pool. The chemical ‘relaxer’ as white as the faces that demanded it washed away at the bottom of the swimming pool. This could only mean
a failure of discipline, treatment. Forget any question of beauty. Forget any seizing on unique. I looked only to pass.

AND ON LAND

Curly is not what biracial black hair is. It is the word white people use to describe it on shampoo bottles and salon brochures, but that is because they do not care to observe and record its distinct nature. It is really like cotton balls plugging outwards in masses from the skull. It is really like the underside of a homeowner’s hedge,¹ where hands get lost and fiddle with waves smooth and slight until they lay-tight-lay-right in the dirt. Sprouting cottonballbramble thickets out of the skull oozes the fragrance of academic-grade ‘moral confusion’ coaxes people into a grateful blindness, calling it curly, and in doing so, making it clear that it should aspire to be not what it is but how they would most prefer to see it.

And so biracial black and black women go through the ritual, drag baby girls to the hair salon, carve out two hours on a Thursday to sit in the beauty shop, suffer the burn of strands limp with relaxer (white paste with slight concentrations of formeldahyde), press into skullskin sweetsmelling shimmer spray or flowery pomade, when wet with water, feeling its expansion against the hot dryer, like a thirsty stomach swelling against the will. We call this self-discipline. We call this ‘getting our hair done’ or ‘to burn, cut, hack, spray, spit, batter, and beat the hedge until it is suburb-grade sod or something close to that.’

After leaving my friends at the pool I go to my mother. In front of the hotel bathroom mirror, her hands full of pink lotion that smells like coconut and suntan oil, she parts my hair into sections and braids, wetting it down until it turns a dark brown, running the tips of her fingers across the tender parts in my scalp. This is a satellite version of the beauty salon ritual. Use product to dothis. Use enough

¹ In a legal anthropology class once I read a civil court transcript. A woman allowed the hedge in the front of her house to outgrow its boundary and cross her brick driveway into her neighbor’s yard. Although she and her neighbor shared the driveway equally, the hedge had clearly begun to encroach on his property. And, what was worse, its branches had penetrated his front lawn and begun their advance beneath a thin layer of top-soil, ruining his sod. The transcript was meant to demonstrate bias in the language of civil court.

The woman refused to destroy her hedge, citing a claim to personal property. The neighbor, a white business owner, explained plainly that his homeowner status entitled him to certain rights that were beyond the scope of her claim to landscape. The neighbor won the case, and she, with her hedge, was forced first to ply off its branches with a hacksaw and, when that would not work, uproot the plant in its entirety and place it in a series of dumpsters set in the alley behind the two houses. A few
product that the hair, thirsty due to its savannah-bush nature, cannot absorb it fast enough. When the product dries, when the hair has lapped it up, apply more, tamp it down, so that it cannot speak, spring or ask for attention.

‘People are always telling me about the natural hair movement,’ my mother says, yanking.

My white father sits on the bed outside, watching Wimbledon on the TV.

I cry, tender-headed, hating the smell, and the style, the length, the color, the unnamable texture. My mother tries to feed me pride dug out from the teeth of her hot-combed upbringing, has me google Madame CJ Walker, do a book report on her, and then teaches me how to blow-dry it straight without her help. She tells me it is interesting hair to have. ‘At least you won’t go bald when you’re 50.’

Then she starts losing hair at 50.

After she married my father, she never wore her hair untreated and has since rejoiced in losing some of it because the less hair you have the easier it is to treat into submission.

Self-hate, she used to call it, but only for one side.

AND AT THE POOL

My friends sat at the pool eating ice cream and taking turns throwing their flip-flops into the water. They did not bother or shake about what sat above their shoulders. They flipped and twirled and braided, letting each strand dry with the form of the water that shaped it. Just sat and maybe watched as it dried and dripped patterns of wet spots across the cement.

SOMEONE ELSE’S POOL

Why has racism lingered so long at the swimming pool? ‘Water has long been the site of racial anxiety… Racial tension over integrated swimming pools boiled down to two major anxieties: contamination and miscegenation.’
(Bennett). Spell out the recipe for the pool party in McKinney, Texas.² (‘Boiled down’ like water used to clean. ‘Water boiled’ as a means of rough purification when far away from filtration systems.)

Black people have been dragged out of pools since there have been pools for them to swim in. The hair is only a recently considered component, because black women are only a recently realized component.³

The Zeitgeist buzzes insistently about accountability in the digital age. The talk started when cellphones became the neighborhood watch. So when I see the evidence posted on my screen in the morning after I’ve stepped out of the shower still damp and wrapped in a towel, I should not be… horrified. I should take pride or comfort in the fact that the hurt was recorded, can be recorded, the wounds watched as they opened, the blood spilled over so many screens. Never mind the compression of the screams that cannot be delivered beyond the bounds of a cellphone quality audio file and embedded computer speakers. This is action, audience, theater, meaning—this is something. And that is the closest thing to memory or evidence we’ve ever had.

But it is fear and shame that I feel. Fear that at eight o’clock in the morning the world can still get at me. It does not rest or love with me. It only beats and burns.

Shame that I am exempt and still in pain. Shame because although my hair is not white it is not black either—at eight o’clock in the morning I can step out of my shower without the ghost of a white hand grabbing at the flesh of my scalp and yanking me onto my knees into the News.

LEARNING TO SWIM

I have never seen my mother swim. But she doggedly insisted throughout my childhood that my sister and I learn. I cannot count the number of locker rooms we stood in; shoving both of our heads into brightly colored caps that

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R46-XTqXkzE
looked and felt like the ends of used up Crayola crayons. One more way, we felt, for us to be marked as colored. It mattered that my mother was the chaperone for swimming classes, as when we were with our father people often assumed that we were ‘Olive Skinned Italians’ or gypsy children he may have acquired at the novelty store of a mulatto’s forgotten womb. With my mother we were just black. Early on we felt this was cruel. We were, I think, attached to a racial nuance that does not exist in America.

At the Y, where my mother first took us for playgroup swim lessons, I met my oldest friend, a dirty blond girl with freckles named T. In our playgroup, T was the favorite. She was considered by and large the sweetest girl, the prettiest girl, the most talented girl, the smartest girl, the best swimmer, and the likeliest to marry one of the boys we played with. T’s mother believed in entropic child-rearing, letting T and her siblings design their actions according to the fickle understandings of children under the age of ten. Throughout our time in playgroup my mother would drive us home busily dissecting the wrongness of T’s mother with whom she shared the closest and most tightly bound friendship. What bothered her most was the failure at discipline. At T’s house we were allowed to throw clothing and food in a messy array on the kitchen floor, imitating the work of T’s mother, an abstract artist living off her mother’s trust fund. While my sister and I were taught to call adults by the titles Mr____ and Mrs___, T and her siblings called my mother by first name only, shouted it from across the room at her, and refused to honor her requests that they do otherwise. My mother was the one most likely to provide an array of snacks that did not include lunch meat poured from its package onto an empty plate and left out on the dining room table, but she was also the one least likely to be asked to host a party, because the pride she took in the
quality of her household was considered “a little intense.” To suffer nicks, chipped paint, or crumbs in the couch—all the minor destructions that would be wrought by the hands of someone else’s children, little girls and boys who, unlike my sister and me, had never known what it is to be handled, tightened, smoothed, and steadied into place, would have undone my mother, it’s true, but of course they turned her pride to isolation.

‘Kinky hair in tropics allowed for heat/transfer water to be ‘wicked’ away,’ this observation was posted in the comments section of an article called ‘It’s a Slap in the Face When White Women Wear Black Hairstyles.’ From that it could be deduced scientifically that black women are, by design, incompatible with water, built to ‘wick away’ moisture in favor of survival not only to find evolutionary advantage but to remain in the shape, place, and color that they are ordered into. Thus even from the perspectives of biology, water + black hair = disorder.

What is so insidious about this hiding of black heads from white pools? This refusal to get wet, ‘take a dip,’ ‘cool off,’ walk to class with your hair wet? Water is not a great divide. It is running through every part of our survival and encouraging the growth of the African foliage it so easily reveals for those with burning branches and hot combs in their hands—ready for the fire setting. Water can put it out. Water to wash but water also to paint, to grow, to make the mud that dirties.

But yesterday I saw a little girl that looked like me—her hair settled into two fat braids, sitting on the edge of the pool in her bathing suit, skimming her toes over its surface, watching her white friends play Marco Polo.

AND if we have learned anything from this past summer of high and low brow solidarity it should be that staying out of the pool, rather than diving in, is what has been ‘keeping us down,’ so to speak.
On YouTube there is a niche community of biracial beauty bloggers who have toiled long enough at the task of vlogging to find some brand of corporate sponsorship. The array of products and rituals now placed *en vogue* around the treatment of ‘natural’ biracial black hair is innumerable, saturated with coconut and pineapple fragrances and packaging that resembles the bleached out beach towels and wooden hotel bars lining the coasts of Caribbean Islands. Each blogger’s individual process for processing their hair revolves around a rhetoric of pride and exhaustion, with most routines requiring at minimum 30 minutes of twisting, washing, conditioning, and plying, piece by piece, each strand of hair into its natural position. The climax of each blog segment is each woman’s time in a hot shower, which is tastefully shot so as to expose only space above the neck. The shower clips are gauche in that a black woman is, with a certain degree of confidence in her unvarnished beauty, exposing herself in a moment of transition, the moment when, for the audience, the biracial women passes from maybe to definitely mingled with at least one drop of damned dark blood. Even still, there is all of the pomp and circumstance, the recitation of products thrown brazenly in the face of the spectator, the flipping, twisting, and drying. Even still, the path to beauty is no less strenuous than when it was a question of pasting skullskin down with thick white formaldehyde based paste. Even if it is a little less dangerous, a little more natural, ‘it hasn’t gotten any easier to be pretty’ is what the whole thing reeks of. ‘We are still fighting something.’ But fighting to look like who? Not white women, at least, not white women anymore. But not black women either. ‘This is how to elongate the strand.’ ‘This is how to get a good curl.’
In my hair I find an otherness that is unnamed. In being both black person and white person I am dual-natured in a country that has relied so long on dichotomy, black vs. white, it cannot even call its president by the right name. It would have been easiest for me to write this essay as a black woman. At the pool I feel black. My hair feels closest to black. My mother is black. But I am not black, and relying on an otherness that is not my own to convey a point about an experience or a people is the worst kind of exploitation, and it is lazy. Still, I do not have the vocabulary to understand myself. I am instead relegated to explaining what my hair is not—kinky or curly—or what my skin is not—black or white. Here I have the opportunity to make a language, as what I want is not to be given the words, but the power to make them. And still I am at a loss, because I cannot name what I do not know. And even as my skin is light enough to pass me through a police lineup, and even as I know I will never be accused of being the ‘wrong’ color, as a 20 year old girl I still feel, when the question of womanhood and beauty arises, I feel just as black as anyone, wicking away moisture, trying to live without the shade I come built with. And on my head is all dry, all thirsty, all bramble-bush, torn up, thrown into garbage cans, and waiting for another pair of adequately whiter hands to take it someplace useful.

“The meaning of the Yellows to people in the West Indies is this: Their external self calls up hatred, self-hatred, and contempt in the dark; pity and fascination in the whites.” —Hilton Als
Considerations for EG
PK: SO JUST FROM a technical standpoint, I’d say EG submitted a basically fine sample. It’s formatted well, it looks pretty good on the page, and that’s—you know, that’s actually not always so easy to pull off. So that’s good. You can definitely tell that EG put some thought and effort into this sample. That being said, the sample itself is, I would say, flaccid? And EG is clearly underqualified for the position. The “Experience” section, to take an obvious example, is practically empty. What little he put there is hard to parse and as far as I can tell irrelevant, it looks like he’s just trying to avoid answering the question. So I don’t recommend EG for membership.

AL: I agree with PK’s point about EG’s qualifications. In EG’s defense, I would suggest that the brevity of the “Experience” section could be read as an ontological comment about the status of experience as
such. As in, the category of ‘Experience’ forcibly delineates named experiences—i.e., those categories of experience recognized as experience as such—from unnamable experiences, which would favor the structured, institutional, and hieratic over the private and personal, with the possible implication that the private and personal don’t exist or are otherwise invalid in some way. So EG is actually demonstrating a keen awareness of the violence of phenomenological naming, which he simultaneously enacts and destabilizes.

PK I think that’s being kind of charitable.

ZJ Let her finish.

AL Well, no, I think you’re right, it is charitable, like it isn’t how I personally read it. But I think it is open to that reading, specifically if you look at the hyphens. To continue: at the same time, several lines in EG’s personal statement, specifically towards the conclusion, carry a hint of desperation. For example: ‘I would really love a spot in your organization.’ Or: ‘I think this is such a cool group and I would be totally honored if you considered me for a chance to join it.”

ZJ Yeah, that word ‘really’...

AD ‘Totally,’ too.

AL Right, all the adverbs. I do not recommend EG for membership.

TB O.K., so I’d like to go back to what was said earlier about the formatting. I think it’s actually a bad thing. It’s like the adverbs: like it’s too deliberate, too effortful, you know?

AL Overdetermined?
Exactly, overdetermined. I think of us as more of a loose, easy thing, where the looseness is a way of responding kind of to the overly regimented—I don’t want to say bourgeois, but basically aspirational, materialistic, non-literary—

Yeah, and it’s also about problems of expression. I see that.

Exactly. Anyway, the formatting I think belies this need to compensate for something unoriginal and grasping in his thoughts. I do not recommend—

You’re supposed to start with something positive.

Oh, right. O.K. I guess he does something interesting with the word ‘love.’ I’m mainly thinking of the line that was quoted earlier—I’d love a spot—as well a line in the ‘Reasons for Interest’ section: ‘I love literature.’ And there are some more. It’s almost like by repeating that word over and over he empties it of its meaning and shows how all love declarations are, in a sense, absurd. It’s almost Dadaistic, like he’s reducing a cliché back down to its sound component, so it becomes meaningless again, but at the same time it’s always been, and we’re just left with that sound, repeated over and over: ‘love.’

‘Love.’

‘Love.’

‘Love.’

It’s kind of an ugly word, isn’t it.

Well I think the point is that now we’re in this new interpretive realm. We’re formulating questions of meaning, evaluation, etc., outside some of our,
like, inherited—meaning hegemonic, patriarchal, whatever—hermeneutical assumptions, which are really encoded in the language. Anyway, I do not recommend $EG$ for membership.

ZJ Who else?

DA I think just me. So I know $EG$ personally. He’s kind of, well—like, he doesn’t usually do this kind of thing—but I actually encouraged him to apply.

KP Huh.

DA Well, yeah. I mean, listening to all of your points I’d say I kind of see what you’re getting at. The desperation thing, for example. He does really want this (and I’m using the word ‘really’ deliberately here), and the ‘Experiences’ thing—I loved the reading that was said earlier, but I’d say you’d have to be pretty generous in how you interpret some of the personal statement in order to ascribe that level of sophistication to the text as a whole, as in, I don’t think the text can sustain it. Anyway, after listening to all of your points I’d say I agree that some elements of $EG$’s character aren’t totally suited to this organization. And now that I’m thinking about it, reflecting on my own knowledge of $EG$, there’s even more stuff to confirm it, like the way he dresses for example. That’s actually really interesting in tandem with the text or considered as a sign system of its own, I would even call it a metatext.

ZJ O.K., interesting. So what’s your verdict?

DA I don’t recommend $EG$ for membership.

ZJ O.K. So I’ll just conclude with my comment. Going back to the formatting, $EG$ does something cool by
forgoing the indent. There’s this immediacy, an undercurrent of trauma, that takes us beyond style, beyond text. Sort of like what was said a little earlier, but I’d say the referent is less Dada than Suprematism—

AL [snaps]

ZJ—not so much as it was formulated by Malevich as in its interpretation by Kseniya Boguslavskaya.

AL Yes.

ZJ But, to the extent that we can extricate content from form—and I think, in this particular text, to a large extent we can (and I can show you my reasoning here after we’re done if you’re interested)—the content of EG’s sample betrays an unoriginal mind. If I had to speculate, I would say that EG lacks the sense of identity, not to mention the basic social ability, be a worthwhile member of our organization. His transparent attempts to please—almost pathetic in my reading (and again, I can point to passages)—are, for me, the crux of the matter. I do not recommend EG for membership.

[nods of assent]

ZJ O.K. If there are no final comments we can move on. Does anyone have any final things to say?

EG Thank you all for your consideration.
Concrete as Vast as Space: an interview with Tracy K. Smith
WE LIKE TO THINK
of it as parallel to what we
know, “My God,
only bigger.”
So begins one of our
favorite Tracy K. Smith poems, “My God,
what we know,
only bigger. She is the author of three books
of poetry, and most recently a memoir,
Ordinary Light, which was a
2015 National
Book Award finalist. She teaches at the
Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton where
she is Director and Professor of Creative
Writing. We sent her an email out of the blue
to ask about sincerity, science fiction, and
where to go from here.
NOTEBOOK 1 (WATCH OUT)
This magazine is set in two typefaces, Akzidenz-Grotesk and Plantin. Akzidenz-Grotesk is an early sans-serif originally released in 1896 by the Berthold Type Foundry in Berlin. Plantin is a hefty old-style serif designed for the Monotype Corporation in 1913 by Fritz Stelzer, who based his drawings on a sixteenth-century Gros Cicero face cut by Robert Granjon. Here the typeface appears in two of its versions, Plantin Infant and Plantin Regular, though the latter is used only for Maggie Nelson’s and Tracy K. Smith’s responses to our questions.

Many thanks to Alice Chung and David Rudnick for their sharp and generous typographical insights, and to Carmen Cusmano at Yale Printing and Publishing Services, without whom the magazine simply would not exist.

The Frances Bergen Memorial Prize was judged by Richard Deming.

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