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PERSONAL ESSAYS
Dear Seungman, I’m so sorry for this late reply. First of all, I just wanted to say thank you so much for the beautiful lyrics. I really wish I could face you with some beer and talk to you all night, but since I’m staying too far away from where you are, I’m just writing this loosey-goosey letter to you. So the story begins with my dad, about 60 years ago. My dad lost his sight when he was 5, in the aftermath of the Korean War. He was abandoned by his family because of his handicap, but then he met an old guy who became my step-grandfather while he was bummimg around streets and subways to survive. My step-grandfather took him in and washed him, fed him and gave him a place to live with a new family. My dad started studying what he could learn, such as acupuncture and massage. When he was around 30, he had a chance to tell his story on a radio show. A young girl who was listening to the radio later visited him, and then, despite her family’s opposition, decided to take care of him for the rest of his life. That’s my mother. They got married, but their marriage wasn’t blessed by others because most of their families disagreed with my father and mother’s decision. Only my grandfather, his family and few others were there for my parents. Under such condition, I came into this world. I remember me as a young kid, seeing my family going through a painful and tough life. My dad couldn’t make enough money to support our family, so my mom started to have many different jobs; newspaper delivery, milk delivery, housekeeper and all sorts of small jobs, even for just a penny. I remember I was putting eyeballs on fabric dolls sitting next to my mom. We earned one cent an eyeball. However, we were happy. My parents taught me well. They praised me for good things, they scolded me for bad things. I used to play soccer with my dad. We went to a playground near my house, holding our hands together. You may wonder how we played soccer together because he couldn’t see. I kicked the ball to right in front of him, then shouted, “The ball is coming!” then he followed my voice and kicked the ball back to me. We really had fun. Since I always held his hands, everyone in
the town knew about us. I really hated when people called my dad "blind". If people made fun of him, I fought until I saw blood, but I couldn’t answer my mom asking why I had to fight with them because I knew my mom could get hurt just like I did. When I was 9, I cried hard hugging my parents and asked, "How could I live alone if you all die?" I might have been lonely and scared at home alone because they only came home at midnight after their work. Then my younger brother was born next year. I struggled so hard to be a good brother to the little one. Since our family didn’t really have enough food to eat, I hid food as much as possible in my pockets when I got invited to some rich kids’ birthday party, such as fancy cookies, candies and feed my little brother. Every time my little brother cried at midnight before my parents came back from work, I carried him outside and we cried together, and people in the town would come out and yell at us. Several years passed and our family finally could own a house, our own house. I can’t even count how many times we had moved out from where we stayed, and how many times we were kicked out from places. However, thankfully, we had a chance to come to the new city called Bundang—a new town. We moved in to our first house, and my mom opened a small restaurant in Seohyun with the money she had saved. The restaurant ran very well and was full of many people. My mom’s new business had continued to thrive, and she deserved it. She was a hard worker, no doubt. I was a middle school student by that time and started to help her business as a server, and I also started hanging out with my friends in the area, Seohyun station, becoming an “angry teenager.” I guess the relationship between my dad and me started going off wrong during that time period. Since I got older, and our family could live just like ordinary people with some money, there were many things that came up that I wanted to do, and wished to have. However, my dad who lived in the dark for almost entire of his life, wasn’t able to understand how the world had changed, what people and his son in that age wanted in the changing world. I guess that was the reason why we always had arguments.
I was truly immature. When my dad scolded me, I fought back with nasty words that I wasn’t supposed to say. I couldn’t control my anger since I was young. I rushed into bathroom and kept punching the mirror until I would see my fist bleeding. I ran away from home often, too. One night, after running away from home, I got drunk so bad and came to my mom’s restaurant. I was completely out of mind, even holding a cigarette, and lashed out at her, “My life is never going to be like you guys, never, ever!” My mom slapped my face for the first time in her life. She was crying. I went back to look at myself, and asked myself what the heck I was doing. After that happened, I started studying more. Then fortunately I could go to university, and could start taking photos because I met a guy we both know. And my life had changed. (I will skip this story because you know every-thing about the guy and me, right?) But the relationship with my dad and myself didn’t have change yet. It got even worse. Leaving that behind, I moved to the United States to study photography. It was really hard in the beginning. New country, new culture, new language and new people made me lonely and frustrated every day. I missed my mom, brother, and even my dad who I hated. At that time, there was an assignment called “Alias” for one of my classes. My teacher told the class to become another person and take pictures with a different point of view. I could be a painter, musician or just an ordinary person. Then I thought, ‘What if I become like my dad?’ I went to some places, closed my eyes, and took pictures by listening, smelling, touching and feeling. I told the class about concept of the project showing my pictures. They truly liked it and were touched. I came home and took a look of the pictures from my project again, then found what I have missed in my entire life. That was my dad, who lost his sight, who was not able to see anything in this beautiful world, but, ironically, I was a photographer who could watch all of this beautiful world by using the eyes given to me by him. I could share the pictures with everyone but him. I’ve been missing the absurd-im-portant truth in my whole life. Then I closed my eyes
again just like when I was taking pictures for the project. I realized how it’s hard to be in the dark for just few minutes, the dark where my dad had been staying for over the 60 years. I should’ve understood him better, I’ve been so bad, and I was a jerk, I was such a foolish son. I made a phone call that night and said to my dad, “Hey dad, I had a class today, and showed this assignment about you. My teacher and friends here truly loved it. And I just found what I’ve been missing in my life. I may see more as a photographer because you can’t see. I know I never said like this to you, but just want to tell you that thanks for giving me these beautiful eyes. I, your son, see this beautiful world with this amazing gift from you, I really hope one day medicine will cure you and you’re able to see how beautiful my pictures are. So please live long. I love you.” I don’t know how I held back my sobs when I was saying that, I can’t even hold it now while I’m writing this letter. Anyways, the wall between him and me was collapsed after the incident. I still can’t act easy just like when I was young, but now I believe I’m taking a right position as his first son. My dad also counts on me even though he doesn’t really express that much. I think, I was the problem, and I was also the key. Once I decided to make our family happy, we were happier. I think the story I wanted to share with you in this letter is pretty much it. I can’t wait to listen to the song you will write about my story. Thank you so much, Seungman, Hope we can have some beer when I go back to Korea.
There I was, in the middle of a busy restaurant crowded with cowboy hats and plates of iceberg lettuce, chaps and a buffet line longer than at the State Fair. I sat in my seat, quietly, as my mother tried to smooth down the frizzy locks on my head that rested uncomfortably on my shoulders. My smiling chubby cheeks disappeared as I swatted at her hand to make her stop. However, nothing could ruin that moment, because I was wearing my favorite outfit: A bright red shirt with a cat wearing a pink boa and purple sunglasses. Across the top and bottom, the shirt stated “Doesn’t play well with others.” This outfit also included black velvet stretchy pants, the best kind. I calmly sat my Lisa Frank binder on the ground and grabbed my fork and knife.

Across from me sat my Uncle Darron chowing down on chicken fried steak, a bit of golden eye shadow covering his eyelid, left over from his rehearsal of his one “woman” show. To his left sat my Aunt Dayna, who taught me how to make a three-pointer and would always let me win in a game of horse. This was her celebratory dinner. Tomorrow, her first novel was going on stands. The story, based on true events from her childhood was a heart-wrenching tale of an alcoholic abusive father in the center of the Midwest. Sitting next to her was my sister Danielle, wearing her shimmery pink lip-gloss with a crop-top to match. Her bleach blonde highlights sprouted from her head like wildflowers. Teenagers are weird. Next to my sister was my mom, Debi, sipping on iced water as she laughed about something someone had said, her smile radiating as she took another sip.

Sitting next to my mother sat my grandpa, Fred, Debi’s father. He wore jeans and a black t-shirt. His monotone voice could be heard from the waiting area. He was telling some old basketball story from his college days. Then came the last person sitting at the table, my step-grandmother. Sharon.

She poked at her salad, as her short blonde hair moved by itself. Her face was fake; at least that’s what I overheard my uncle say. I didn’t really know what he meant by “her face was fake.” He said it was, “Malibu Bar-
bie joined the cast of Golden Girls and made a soft-core porn. I should probably stop putting my ear against the door when I’m supposed to be in bed.

He was right about one thing, her face was fake.

As I was examining the outer workings of her forehead, she looked up right at me and winked. I cocked my head to the side like a dog. I don’t understand my elders. I have a real problem with authority; at least my mom says I do. Again with the whole, I-probably-shouldn’t-put-my-ear-against-the-door thing. Whether it was screaming as loudly as I could at my doctor, refusing to get a shot, or throwing a tantrum in the middle of class because my teacher made me put a coat on in the snow, I was a menace. But that was in my younger years. I was nine, I was almost an adult.

“Are you going to get an entrée?” Dayna politely asked my step-grandmother. “I am fine with salad; I’m trying to watch my figure” she proudly stated. I put down my fork for a second. Salad. What is salad? It looks like a plant, why do adults eat plants? Maybe I’m not an adult yet, because I like macaroni much more than plants. I picked up my fork again, as my mom broke the moments of silence. “This is all so exciting, but it’s a lot of pressure on all of us. Mostly for you, Dad. Are you okay with the info going in the book?” My grandpa wiped the barbeque sauce from the corner of his mouth and set his napkin down. “Why wouldn’t I be okay with it? It’s all fictional, darlin” Everyone was listening at this point, including me.

My mom glanced at my aunt and then back at my grandpa. Then looked at her plate and back at him. “Dad, you know most of the book is true.” “No it isn’t” Grandpa said with a stern, honestly confused look on his face as he looked right at my aunt. He stuttered a bit, but then continued defending himself. “In the book, this father beats, sleeps around, and cheats on his wife on Valentine’s Day. I bought your mother chocolates on Valentine’s Day.” The table is silent. My mom looks at my grandpa, then at my sister and me.

“Dayna, tell me why this information would be true”
My aunt froze. Unable to speak. My mother quickly took the lead.

“Dad..Dad. You, um, you did do that.”

My grandpa stopped for a second, head in his hands, denying what they were saying. “You were so drunk, Dad, you went into this thing called blackout, for years. You could function normally, drive, talk, walk, but your memory went blank. Those stories are true, Dad.” My mom was shaking, I could see.

Everyone was silent.

My grandpa leaned back in his chair, in the middle of the crowded restaurant, trying to take it all in.

“I didn’t do those fucking things.”

He growled as he stared into the bottom of his water glass.

“Yes you did. I was there,” My uncle cried. I witnessed all of it, don’t fucking lie.”

My sister and I looked at each other. We heard that word twice in one minute. Jackpot. I love when adults say bad words; it’s as if they are letting their guard down. It’s like I was one of them, they considered me one of them.


Oh, this was fun. I could use this in front of my classmates and everyone would think I was the coolest girl in the 4th grade. I had it all planned out what I would say. “Hey, want to hear something cool. Yeah? Let’s fucking go on the playground. Yeah, that’s right, I said let’s fucking go on the playground.” Everyone would crowd around me and lift me up on their shoulders, chanting my name as if I had just won the big game. I was jolted out of my daydream by a bark from my step-grandma, “This is an attack; you’re attacking him. He is a victim in this situation. I am so tired of y’all ganging up on him. He’s a strong person; he’s been through so much. He’s recovering, and making progress each day. How dare you set him back like this.” She was almost in tears by now.

“Bullshit,” my uncle barked back.

Ah, another word I could use to make cool
new friends. I don’t know what bulls have to do with this situation, maybe it’s because there was a picture of a bull on the mantle above our table, but shit. Shit, I could use. I don’t know why everyone seemed so angry, I was in heaven. I had words stacked up to the ceiling. What’s the other word? Oh yeah, bitch. Maybe someone will say bitch.

My uncle and my step grandma were now yelling at each other. Other tables were peering their heads around to look at us. We were making a scene, which isn’t unusual.

“Can’t you forgive? You guys are way too selfish to ever think of forgiving! We all make mistakes. Including me. You know one time, I was so high on cocaine, that I lifted my rifle above the shower and put it to my ex husband’s head as he was bathing. I yelled at him that I’d kill him, I’d do it, I would kill him. Bash his brains in!” My step-grandma screamed.

I looked around at everyone at the table. Stunned looks on everyone’s faces as if they had seen a ghost. You know, I’m the youngest; I know that. I don’t get to be in the loop very often, so this was exciting for me. I had no idea what this woman was talking about, but it sounded like one of those movies they always preview on TV but mom says I can’t watch.

My step-grandma pushed her chair back and stood up. Her face now looked like a wet pumpkin. Tears rushing down the side of her face, getting stuck between the cracks of her tied-back skin, I tuned her out for a second as I tried to figure out why she was so upset. Did this really have to do with her? I honestly had no idea what was going on, I tuned back in, probably at the perfect moment.

“And after I went to that club, I took that stranger, and I had relations with him in a bar ditch. All night long!” She screamed as the whole restaurant turned their heads around to stare at our table. What did that mean? What is a bar ditch? It sounds like somewhere you go to buy a hot dog before a baseball game. Relations? Did she do
some kind of trade in a hot dog stand? Why does everyone look so shocked? Everyone was in tears except for my grandpa and me by now. Even my sister. My grandpa was just staring into his water glass. He looked like he was longing for something. Maybe it was silence, because everyone was yelling right now.

My mom stood up, tears in her eyes, as she took me and my sister to the back of the restaurant. I didn’t want to leave my plate of half-eaten mac and cheese and this good conversation we were having. No one had said bitch yet, why did we have to leave? As we walked away, you could hear the table screaming. I couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, but I did catch the end.
“You’re crazy, Sharon. Batshit crazy.”
Bats. Ok, what do bats have to do with any of this?
“Well, you’re a bitch” My step-grandma replied.
“Finally” I sighed.
My mom looked down at me in confusion, “Finally, what?” I shook my head as I lowered my head into my shoulders.
My whole class was going to freak when they know what I learned by just going to a steakhouse with my family.

As my mom led us to the back of the restaurant, I began to realize something. In my family, you have to be who you are. We didn’t believe in sugar-coating anything but peppermint bark. My family is like loose teeth, people may recommend they be taken out, they’re not firmly held in place, but that’s the fun part. Getting to wiggle the teeth around. You can choose either to yank a tooth, or let it be wobbly. We choose to be wobbly.
It was small and warm inside. The air was easy to breathe. Odoriferous with short dark men labouring over oriental flavors.

Our table stood too high, higher than anyone else. Food placed upon it taking up the majority of the small surface.

Every so often the subtle noises of the restaurant were disrupted by our words. I preferred the subtle noises instead. I think we both did. Our words were only to remind us that we were in the presence of each other, otherwise useless. Our abrupt exchanges would temporarily cease and again the two of us became enamored by other things.

The table next to us was foreign. The language felt butchered. There was a heat between the two men and the girl. A restricting heat that only intensified as we continued to observe.

The food was finished. Another pause before leaving the restaurant.

We had become accustom to the warmth of the indoors and were uneasy in the harsh city air. There were no subtle noises in this new air, only cacophony. However I still preferred it over the small disturbances.
Terms:
Halligan: The firemen’s best friend. A forcible entry tool designed to pry and break through materials. Hook: A six-foot-tall steel pole with a double sided hook on one end and a pry section on the other, used to pull ceiling. Search Engine: A typical fire truck to most. It carries water and has a permanent pump inside used to force water through the hose, out the nozzle and then onto the fire. Carries hose, tools, water and manpower. Truck: A Truck or Ladder truck has usual anywhere from a 75-foot to 105-foot ladder permanently mounted on top. This is a more individualized company primarily used for venting the structure, entering, and then searching for victims as well as the fire. Rescue: The firefighter’s firefighters. The Rescue company is a specialized company typically described as a toolbox on wheels. The Rescue can be used for anything from motor vehicle accidents to rescuing a firefighter overcome by smoke, or collapse. Boss: The boss is your senior man sitting in the front seat, not driving. Typically this is either the lieutenant or the captain. You do what they say, how and whenever they say. Job: A job is usually described as a working structure fire where all of the men on scene will be going to work. Bailout: A harness attached to your gear pants used in case something goes wrong inside and you cannot get out. It is a safe way to exit the building by window without use of a ladder or help. You simply hook up to anything stable in the room, even the windowsill and jump using a descender. It is your last resort.

At 16 years old I decided to make one of the best decisions of my entire life. Without much thought, I applied to my local volunteer firehouse. I got in on my birthday in 2011. I never really thought much about being a firefighter. I grew up always wanting to be a cop. My dad was a cop and I guess that rubbed off on me. However, after joining and seeing what all the senior guys were doing, well, I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life and that was to be a fireman. I graduated the state firefighter’s class in December 2012. Once I turned 18 on
January 5th, I was to become a fully interior fireman. This is when everything changed—it got more fun and a hell of a lot more dangerous.

When you first get into the fire service you always start off as a probie. Pretty much all that means is you’re the gopher. Whether they’re a week or 30 years your senior, you do what they say. I was given my “yellow helmet” on my birthday, which means that I was given the go ahead to go inside. I turned 18 on January 5th 2013. This was one of the most rewarding days of my life. To see all my work pay off in class meant the world to me. I was finally growing up in the fire service, slowly, but I was.

On January 23rd 2013, after being interior, we got an alarm for a structural fire with smoke in village, and we were being mutual aided to the next neighborhood over to go help. In my department, we have three separate companies. Harriman, my house, is the Engine company. Then there is the Truck company with an engine and rescue, Mombasha, and Lakeside, the woodsmen. We had to run for an engine and truck to the scene. Myself, my boss “Knuckles,” our driver Rich and the other new guy, Justin, hopped on and took off ready to rock and roll. The truck was a half hour late to the party.

We made entry into the building. As the can-man I always bring the hook and a five-gallon water extinguisher in the fire with me to help knock down the fire enough so we can safely get the line in and get some real water on that fire. Well, here’s the thing. We couldn’t find the fire. There was some smoke, a shit-ton of heat yet, we couldn’t see a single bit of red. Rich grabbed Justin’s axe. We knew the structure was a balloon frame condo, which means there are channels up and down the wall that allow for heat and fire to travel around the house quickly. He struck the ground a few times in the child’s room until he busted through the tile. We found some fire; I grabbed the hose and quickly sprayed some water into the hole. The white smoke came back up at us signaling we had found the fire and it was out. That wasn’t the case though. That house got so fucking hot in a matter of seconds. We started ripping down the walls in the
neighboring rooms in the home to try and get a beat on this son of a bitch. The fire was crawling all around us. We just couldn’t see it. We had been pulled out by the commanding officer. We were given the go ahead to go back inside. We decided to walk up the exterior deck to get a better grip on the fire. We decided to walk up the exterior deck to get a better grip on the fire. Being in an unfamiliar section of the town, you really don’t know what you’re walking into, or if the residents are keeping their homes up to par. We got to the top of the deck to find it covered with garbage; it was actually quite hard to walk around. Knuckles forced the door because we had no other way in.

It was clear for a little while, it was hot, dirty, you name it. All of the sudden another crew inside opened up the wall; the amount of heat in the building got so intense everyone felt it. Just as we felt the heat however, on came the smoke. Now this shit isn’t any regular campfire smoke. I donned my mask to help me breath and see. Well, seeing wasn’t exactly in the forecast I guess. We had to get out, we had been ordered out at that point due to possible collapse of the structure. Knuckles yelling into my mask, I had no clue he was right in front of me until we got out. The ceiling had begun to collapse. Justin and Rich were immediately pushed to the ground. I felt a whole bunch of shit falling on my head, I don’t know what it was but one can assume ceiling, roof and wood. At this point fire was blowing all around us. It was approximately blowing 50 feet out of the roof. We couldn’t find our way out either, we were trapped. I thought we would end up having to bail out the window. However, as time ticked away, I thought so was my life. Slowly ticking away like a time bomb.

It is a weird feeling. Feeling heat all around you. Seeing nothing but black thick smoke, and for some reason, you can almost come to the conclusion that you are all right with death. But we weren’t having it. Another guy called out who knew we were up there. We attribute our lives to him. He got us out. We later learned that we were in an extremely dangerous position being stuck up there. We probably could have definitely died there.
After fighting my first fire I was overcome with happiness, the condo was a loss and 70 people were out of a home. But nevertheless, we did our jobs. And it felt amazing. Since then I have fought six serious house fires and been at multiple serious car accidents. I have watched my friends almost be crushed by roofs of houses; I have had heat and fire above my head, while I try to contain the devil himself. Old women’s faces after rolling their cars into telephone poles, the looks on people’s faces watching their homes burn completely to the ground. These are some things that can really hit home if you put yourself in their shoes. They can hurt you, they can affect you in a number of negative ways, however there is the good side of the job. There is the brotherhood aspect of the job. No regular white-collar workers go to work with the thought in the back of their mind that they may never come home. It is an amazing feeling having your brothers all around you to help you through it all. It is an amazing feeling seeing a mother’s reaction when she sees you successfully cut her young daughter out of her car after it rolled down an embankment into the woods. It’s a feeling few will ever experience. It is a job I am extremely proud to work on.

All in all, I guess what I’m trying to say is firefighters—black, white, whatever they may be—are always ready to give their all. We dedicate hundreds of hours of our time, paycheck or not. And we love every single second of it.
I wake up—my face is pressed into unfamiliar tan carpet. I rub a small bit of drool from the corner of my mouth, feel the indentations pressed into my cheek from the carpeting... sit up. Whoah... uhhh?! I get the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach; goose bumps dot my arms. I wonder just where in the fuck I am.

It’s obviously a hotel room. Six or seven people are crashed out all over the floor, the bed. I recognize... none of them. From what I can tell, I’m the only one awake. My brain feels foggy and disoriented, like sour oatmeal just sloshing around my cranium, a totally useless brain. I don’t seem to have enough clothing on. “Uh, shit..” Clad in just a long grey skirt, I look around for whatever (I think) I remember wearing last. This does not feel good and my garments are missing. For some reason I grumble, “somebody stole my clothes,” although I suspect this isn’t true. Maybe it is. Who knows.

I move quietly, if not clumsily, just wanting to get the hell out of there without anybody noticing. Slow body aching, I pull on a green Bruce Lee t-shirt and some underwear from my backpack, keeping the skirt on. Then somebody I do recognize comes out from the bathroom. The tall guy with the bad teeth.. I remember meeting him at Tompkins Square Park in New York City, which for people that don’t know, used to be a decent, albeit sketchy, spot for copping certain kinds of chemicals. I remember the bathroom—at the restaurant across the street from the park—I shot the drugs he sold me. Sitting back down, across from him, I washed down the benzos he’d slipped me under the table, with a glass of water with lemon. “Thanks.” There was some hazy talk about a Grateful Dead show, friends in the nitrous mafia ...then... traveling through space and time?... whooosh! I’m here now, thinking, “Come on, Kaytees, you know better than to mix downers...how did you let this happen?”

The pills were free. Gangly-bad-teeth over here probably planned this. “Thanks”.

He lurches over to me and tries to land a sloppy wet kiss on my mouth, succeeding in saturating half of my face. ’I’m too frazzled to say anything. I don’t know
what to think. All I know is he definitely isn’t my boyfriend and I’m definitely not attracted to him. But my head is swimming and there’s too much going on for me to have a reaction. I’m just too foggy to be adequately disgusted, and don’t feel like making a scene; so I puke in my mouth (just kidding). He tells me that he’s glad I’m not dead, and that he was worried about me. I guess I’d had too much (sure did).

I don’t say anything to him. I just gather my things and stumble out of the hotel room, shoes in hand. The sun is blinding. Dizzily, I grab onto the railing. I’m on the porch of the second floor, by the stairs. A pretty, sunshine blond girl with flowers in her hair looks up and beams at me. She asks me if I’m okay. I tell her I don’t know.


For my next piece of information, I ask, “What day is it?” I mutter that I’ve got to be back at school for a test on Monday. What a joke. She walks up the stairs and gives me a hug, which I don’t return. She tells me, “It is Monday, baby, let’s go,” and walks away, into the sunlight from whence she came.

I lose my grip on the railing and fall back against the wall. Last I knew it was Friday...Friday! Head droning, “Oh, no, no, where did the days go?”

The tall man comes out, clad in baggy gray sweatpants and a t-shirt big enough to make me a dress. I bring up the impending sickness—the monkey on my back is beginning to bite. Hating to do it, I ask him if he can help me. He sure can, this is a drug neighborhood.

We walk down the glaring street, the dilapidated city seeming like some post-apocalyptic nightmare zone. I don’t say much as he whines about family issues and other things—his shitty life that I don’t care about. Then he brings up that we did not have sex.
I had told him I didn’t want to…that I didn’t want to do it if I wouldn’t remember it. Was he telling the truth, or just testing me? What a freak out. I make a mental note to get myself tested. I hated having to worry about this, feelings of shame start bubbling up to the surface. I get a few bags off some ghost and bang them right there on the street.

And the fog begins to set in again. I wonder what my boyfriend and parents know about my whereabouts; if I’ve talked to them at all. I’ll need to call in an S.O.S. for some cash to catch a bus home. It’s an awkward call. And an awkward wait, while I get a ticket for loitering in front of the ATM. The cop apologizes, says he has to because of the store owner who called in a complaint about our idling. I find it amusing, getting a ticket for literally doing nothing. Maybe it was Gangly’s fault.

Bits and pieces of the days before come back to me. The backseat of a car. Stealing the rapist’s drugs out of his pocket after he fell out. Helping him look for them afterwards, in true junkie fashion. That’s all I could remember. I should have left his pocket alone. Maybe I could have woken up on Saturday.

On the bus ride home, I thought about my boyfriend and parents, who were surely worried about me. What would I say, what should I say, what to say....

“I went to a concert. Made some friends. It was great.”
SHORT STORIES
"How many?"
"Two. Two for dinner."
The stout host pretended that he couldn’t process her words. Or, he pretended not to hear.

"How many?"
"Two," she said. "Two for dinner."
He said, "Let me check."
She recognized it right away. It was the same hesitation she experienced before when she tried to eat there in May.

Two months ago. A white couple with ideal facial symmetry approached the host desk. They were seated 23 seconds before Kai and Rio were promptly turned away. Kai recalled the look of shock on their faces as the blackies were kicked out on their rear ends. But, Obama is president. Black people can do whatever they set their minds to, which is why this time they were taken to a table.

Encaenia, large Mediterranean oak tree, didn’t feel like the sort of the place she should be anyhow. The somber decor, the taxonomy, the scent of muscle relaxing cream coming off the waiter’s nape, all of it was unwelcoming. Besides that, something about being perceived as a threat bothered her. How dare they assume the worst? She took all of their stares personally and attributed it to racism. No doubt about it. Within five minutes of being seated, the man behind her dropped cabernet merlot blend on his date’s silk dress. Did they leave because of the dress or because two of the darker sort rolled in? May that silk dress rest in peace.

Kai’s pride, born out of a relentless necessity to prove racists wrong, rarely got her into trouble. Her whole identity rested on the fact that she was the truth. She was the truth about what black women were capable of when they work hard. Educated by some of the countries best institutions she was the product of merit scholarships and good decision making. Like a good girl she marched to the tune of an ongoing bootstraps narrative. The melody is an even more determined version of Whitney Houston’s "I’m Every Woman." She had a rare brand of determina-
tion, but even Kai knew that she didn’t belong inside of some taxonomy-ridden restaurant. However, she had to do it for all of us.

There is nothing new under the sun. Not belonging was something she had a keen awareness about. Most of the time she was proud of it. But, on that night, her misfit nature was made all the more evident when she looked down to see not one, but three imperfect stitches on her pelting sweater. Rationalizing that the sweater’s deterioration could be attributed to natural wear and tear did little to soothe her weeping ego. Deep down and on the surface she was ashamed. The truth had to showcase perfection and this sweater was no such thing. Not only was it passed down; it was two seasons old.

But Kai wasn’t one for embarrassment. She did the embarrassing. Racists everywhere hung their heads when she walked into a room. The gentle glow of her mahogany skin reminded them that their prejudice thoughts were unwarranted. Her ambiguous blackness coupled with an exotic kindness revealed that she was unaffected not bitter about the centuries of abuse her ancestors were forced to endure. When told that she was “different than other black people,” she smiled and told anecdotes about what it means to be the only person of color everywhere you go. When being nice didn’t work, she’d blog about it. Or, she’d use my personal favorite, “sit and spin” followed by a perfectly manicured middle finger. She felt good about the work she did to overturn race problems in a post-race society. Raising awareness was a sweet glory that few were able to enjoy/endure. Kai was one of the chosen ones.

She sat down hoping that her presence would prove something. Moments earlier Rio cautioned her not to go in. They had brown duffle bags filled with overnight necessities. It was Kai’s idea to stay in her aunt’s Upper East Side apartment for the night. Tia’s house offered comfort and always enough leftover rice and beans for a midnight snack. An hour train trek from Crown Heights and a duffle bag laden walk from the subway station on Lexington and 86th made her feel like she deserved a
good meal. She did deserve a good meal. Spiritual work, content pieces for the magazine, maintaining a reserved demeanor (when she could) in the face of ignorance; it was all the best effort she could to build and keep positive relationships. Just a sista trying to get closer to God; that’s all it was.

“Would you like for us to check your bags? I’m sure there are lots of diamonds and gold inside. Hahahaha.”

“Yes. Please check them.”

For tonight, she would repress her desire to put people in their place. Tonight, she would be lady like in stretch jeans and hard bottom boots.

“I’m not even wearing makeup,” she said.

Rio was like, “I really don’t care.”

“Volete sentire le specialità? Cosa ti piacerebbe ordinare?”

Her smile encouraged the waiter’s passive-aggressive use of Italian. In that moment she wished to be the type of woman who could say, “bitch we don’t know no fucking Italian.” But, instead she kept it coy. Motioning to Rio with her head, she silently suggested that together their knowledge of bastardized Spanish should be enough to decipher the words of this petrified European fossil.

“Would you like to hear the specials? What would you like to order?”

Rephrasing the questions in English made it worse. She let the heat rise to her third eye. It flushed down to her cheeks. The agitation traveled down the throat. It passed the oozing heart and navigated down past the stomach sack.

“I’d like the stuffed chicken with eggplant, please.”

“And signore, what would you like?”

“I’ll have the pasta coronaldi with the ricotta and vegetables.”

“Very good. I’ll get those started. Menus?”

“I think we’ll keep one. You want some wine babe?”

“Yes. I’ll have a glass of wine. Excuse me. Sir, we’ll have a glass of the chardonnay.”

“Very well.”
The waiter returned with a twisted smirk of disbelief on his worn visage. They are still here.

A basket of brick-shaped bread dropped on the table. Kai felt compelled to delicately devour the puffed pieces of whole grain. She tore into the loaf. She took pieces and slowly moistened them with the tip of her tongue before she allowed the white to dissolve in her mouth. The entire restaurant stopped to see if the monkey would bite the bread, mistakenly dip it in their water cup, drop the bread, or otherwise try to eat the bread with a freakin’ fork.

This is how the women in Paris eat bread. Almost like poison, the bread churned her stomach.

“You know Rio, maybe I came in here looking at things totally wrong. Initially, I thought that there were just a bunch of stiff ass white people in here. Honestly, I thought we’d be turned away again. That’s most definitely what I predicted. But, now I’m thinking, you know what? We deserve to dine on the Upper East Side. We’re just like everyone else. I used to live here. These are my neighbors, right? On top of that, there are some Spanish people over there, and there are some Australians and those Japanese people are here too. They brought their whole clique.”

“That’s true. Very true. But let’s not forget what happened the last time we were here.”

LAST TIME
Dinner for two
Meals by hubris and language
A Babylonian
The observers scoff
aliens are here
We are the america
we were
years ago
the foreign familiar
shunned
others escorted.
shunned
as with peace they are offered wine
no room
The elder of them
claims with his soul
Those around him
wish to Eat. In. Peace.
eyes strive to dismiss the us
we always are
years ago
A mutual understanding
At the door. The crown molding
Inside
carved with hands like ours
Made with thumbs.

The exit’s entrance to a brisk night
air the color of moon
The same we that we were
Waited for scraps
toes pointed North
but there is no escape when you are
Not welcome

However, she had to prove a point. Posted her round ass up there showing off thick thigh. Vaseline on the lips. Old school new black boyfriend in Malcolm X glasses.

“Here you are, singnora. Your meal has been served.”
Bon a Pe Titty.
“Well, thank you.”
The waiter floated away. She looked down at her plate to see what looked like three gray dicks chopped in half on a bed of bok choy with orange carrot sauce drizzled atop.

“This ain’t no damn chicken man.”
“Yeah. I know that doesn’t look like chicken at all.”
“I’m not really interested in consuming beef or pork
at the moment.”

When the waiter returned to check on them, her face did most of the talking.

“I did not order this, sir. I most definitely ordered the stuffed chicken. I assumed at the onslaught that maybe you pulverized the chicken breast and reshaped it, but now I recognize that this is not what I ordered at all.”

“Of course it’s not.”

The waiter pointed his nose and gaze at Rio in search of approval.

“Thank goodness she’s smart enough to notice the difference.”

He reached for the plate.

Rio’s grimace revealed just enough teeth to warn the server to back off and replace the meal.

“I’ll be right back.”

When Bon a Pe Titty came back, he was so thrilled to drop off that plate of chicken, you would of thought he was going to eat it himself.

“Enjoy! I know for sure this is chicken. We are so sorry. We never make that mistake.”

“Oh no problem sir. No problem at all.”

She smiled the largest smile she could muster just to prove that she could smile. After her quiz on the difference between chicken and dick she felt slightly exasperated. Candlelight casts shadows on pale faces. I am haunted for a short moment although the bodies remain still.

It was the most delicious chicken she ever consumed. With historical pleasure she cut the breast up into small pieces speaking the names of her heroes in her head with every bite. This is for Toni Cade Bambara, this is for Tia, and this is for my abuelita. The chicken was gone in five minutes.

Rio ate his meal. He used slang, spoke about sports and reported on the shameful state of affairs in hip-hop. Though impassioned by fruitful discussion topics, he seemed unusually comfortable. Kai wondered why he didn’t carry his race around like a backpack filled with textbooks from the 1970s. What made him so relaxed?

“What makes you so relaxed? Aren’t you a bit leery about
the conspiracy meat they just tried to serve your girlfriend?"
“But, you’re eating aren’t you? That chicken disappeared.
You wanted to come here not me.” He pulled out his
phone to check the scores.

In the midst of her performance, she almost for-
got the reason why anyone goes somewhere to eat. She
sought after the place she was in days after her spiritual
retreat. A signal went up to her brain. She knew. When
she relaxed, she was a better person. Draw the shoulders
away from the ears. Relax the jaw. Release tension from
the toes. Remove all thoughts of responsibility. She imag-
inated inhaling lavender scented steam and then committed
to talking about colored folk stuff with Rio. Her voyage sent
her away from the conversation at hand, but she jumped in
seamlessly.

“I agree completely we can no longer stay silent
and allow Kendrick Lamar to disrespect his peers in pub-
lic. I say, write a letter.”

Bon a Pe Titty returned with his hands clasped behind him.
Kai searched for what hands clasped behind means in body
language. Was he trying to assert himself in some way?

“Would you like to see the desert menu?”

Rio perked up quick, “Yes, we’d love to see it.”

“Certainly, sir.” Pe Titty pranced away like a happy
fawn. Before he returned with the desert menus, Pe Titty
came by the table a few times to reference the dinner
mistake.

“Oh how was the shark, miss? Oh, I’m just kid-
ding. Harty har harty har har.”

“It was the best shark I’ve ever tasted.”

She grew tired of the charade, but felt proud and
impermeable to obvious Yorkville racism. But, just like the
intuition of a long distance mother calling her promis-
cuous teen in college, she sensed that something very
inappropriate was about to happen.

“Thanks for the menu, sir. We’ll have the tiramisu.
It looks quite delicious.”

“Are you sure that you want the tiramisu miss? I
thought that you’d much rather some sweet potato pie.”

Mutherfuckinssweetpotato. Pe Titty’s yellowed
teeth quietly illuminated the dimly lit room. Openly befuddled, Kai scrambled for response. At first, she thought that the pie comment was strange. There’s no sweet potato pie on the menu. This is an Italian restaurant. Like, what is he talking about? But then she got it. Oh, I’m Aunt Jemima in this bitch.

“No I don’t want any pie.”

In an instant, her mind considered all available options. What kind of hex would she put on the place? The generations were telling her. Burn the house down. The roof/the roof/ the roof is on fire. That waiter is so mortified. Isn’t it funny how other folks get hurt feelings when you recognize that they’ve said something offensive? I know girl! You are so right. There is no time for conjure. Just literally light something on fire. Please. Can you? Let some tiramisu cream drop on your left breast. Yeah. Then use a finger to pick it up and put it in his mouth. That’s funny, right? That’s funny. Put a little extra stank on it for your voyeurs. Kai, you’re not doing it right. Yes. I am. No. You need more cream.

She hoped that her audience would look at her when she actually was doing something that could merit shock or embarrassment. Out in the open food porn with her boyfriend seemed trashy enough. She prolonged the cream to breast to mouth sequence and waited for them to take it in and applaud, but they never did. The meal was 140 dollars without tip. Rio paid. She knew that she wouldn’t be back, but she took a picture of the restaurant sign with her iPhone 5 for the memories.
POEMS
In the air, the gap, the hole between...

What now?
The present moment eludes this absolute nowness, this Present
a gift of pastness, a line,
an edge so sharp it hurts;
we cover the sharp edge of Presence
with sensation before it can bite
into the flesh of the neck
of Time, this time our time
the only time which is:
Now.

Turn up the music,
light another last cigarette,
pick up, no put down,
No! pick up a pencil and write another line of the poem or
No! that letter;
ring up a friend you know is gone
on holiday to Barcelona.
Flip through last month’s art mag, see the pictures; the Pictures in your brain intrude. Again, light a last cigarette and turn down that music!
Walk around the table once more to get a better view of the Work in progress which in the present moment may alter, if,
that is, if anything changes through repetition. Try having no expectations and keep calm! Be nonchalant and centered in this present from the past up to your ears in like so many leftover Xmas mornings including the wrappings. Pick up your pen, light another candle at both ends, turn off that music! write out the list of...the lists of Things To Do, then do them why not just do them?!

Go on and sit still. Look up and the phone rings and he tries to impress you and he Nearly succeeds enough so that you now have two hours to complete the day’s Work as yet un-begun till you meet in another two hours, the gap between what now and what then at least gives a foreseeable end to this present edge so let it hurt; it hurts so do not cover the edge of the blade of this time let it cut and get on with it and let it slice not the neck of Time but turn it sideways to let the Work be the cutting edge for the moment;
pick up this pen, and, in the air of the gap between now and whenever in the whole again you begin.
I craved the scar on his arm
when he let me rub it at age 12—
the man who milked our cows.
I wanted one of my own.
During summer harvest
he said
the thresher came bearing down.
He couldn’t dodge it fast enough
and the blade tore into him.
They trucked him into town—
his t-shirt a tourniquet.
He lost two pints
but somehow
with 18 stitches
he survived.

Decades later
I look at the grown-over gash
on my neck from the C-6-7 fusion
needed when my car crashed—
the red keloid bump in my navel
resulting from the stand-by
gall bladder extraction—
the jagged track on my back
caused by the scalpel
after the attack in the alley.
Like the hired man’s scar
these are badges.
But as I run my fingers over them,
I crave unbroken skin.
Hush-a-bye my sweet darling,
Broken bones in your cradle.
Be careful, don’t wiggle you’ll bleed.

Your mom, she’s still sleeping
Though the sun is straight high.

The troll, it is hunting
Down at the end of the hall.

At a closed door it stands sniffing,
Its wrinkled nose sniffing, sniffing
For the child it has hunted
Down the long daylit hall.

So hush-a-bye my sweet darling,
Broken bones in your cradle.
Be careful, don’t wiggle you’ll bleed.
The medic brought the man up to the ward from the ER, handed a white plastic bag with his clothes to the nurse, shook his head, “These need to be burned.”

The man had scabs on his body, some large, some small. Flesh torn from scratching where the scabies ate and shit. On his head, those places where hair hid his skin, lice crawled around, dug in, bit.

His room, with the door always open, was across the hall from my desk. He’d come close, look down, grin, then slowly start picking his skin.

Too many days without booze in his system so his body punched in exploding the nest in his mind. Bugs came from the ceiling, the walls, the floor, crawled onto his feet, up his calves, to his knees. Eyes closed. Mouth wide. He screamed.

When he’d yelled, the nurse ran into his room, grabbed the man round the middle, held tight. The man struggled hard; they fell back to the bed, down onto the floor.

My shift over, I grabbed my bag, walked fast, past the man struggling in the nurse’s strong arms; past the man fighting bugs from the whisky-dug trail deep in his brain.
The dream beginning at midnight plus thirty.
From a silver pen’s barrel
Dust pouring,
Coloring yellow
Fresh cream.
Yellow cream staining
Black coffee
At midnight plus thirty three.
do you remember
Bloody Marys out of opaque plastic
on the beach?

ice cream and Electric Relaxation
"But yo, I gotta stop when you trot my way"

a too-early spaghetti strapped dress and
ankles dangling off your roof?

remember sore heels

the "bump bump bump-bump" of
little wheels on cobblestone

goosebumps under Haines

the kind woman in Astoria

who made me brave when

she snipped 18 inches of fried strands

Greenpoint, Bed-Stuy, Riverside

Flatbush, Crown Heights, Bay Ridge

Marine Park, Ditmas, Rockaway
i wish i could miss you less.
i wish
i wasn’t constantly berated by my own memories and thoughts of something that never existed in a tangibly real form.
i wish this made sense.
i wish
i made sense.
i want the world to stop turning for five seconds so i can throw up my bones, because they’re collecting dust and shaking in their spots the way my memories of you rattle around in the cage of my skull, and in the hollow emptiness of my eyes.
I'll follow your shadow
and brain-sleep sounds.
impossible to summarize
you are forever halfway done—
a teacup with no tea and
another moon.
simultaneous loss and gain of not one but many. she is you (and also I) while others and others, always.

talk to me about feathers and fishes, rain on pleather and backwards crosses. heels and hips and your grandmother’s favorite dress.

still, I’ll be walking
ode to a pink crustacean underbelly but not Gregor Samsa.
neglect is the worst death, I think.
she spoke with her eyelashes and felt with her hair,
like tentacles and synapses and silent films.

ode to succulents and burnt coffee particles floating
to my nostrils but not the unfinished sentence in her
high school yearbook.
she put that bookshelf together and it’s still standing,
holding up the corner of the wall.

ode to magic words like moist, primordial, Moroccan,
and sinew but not my father’s birthday.
his jacket smelled of leather and grease and I learned
to tye knots on his shoes on the the cold-morning
floor of the foyer.

ode to rollercoasters and goosebumps but not ultra-
gloss magazine spreads or 40-story buildings.
she thought of elevators and made them all silver like
rockets or submarines not tunnels or wombs.

ode to your favorite story but not winter steering
wheels or spiced apple cider.
she kissed your nose for a blank stare and I felt the
wettest raindrop sliding on glass, splattering and
splitting on my bare, freckled shoulder.
it's in the way she moves in the mornings
mindlessly going through her routine:
pee, clothes, food, teeth, keys
her thoughts are elsewhere as she tightens her
shoelaces

tender kisses pressed to the veins in her throat
a warm hand braced on her hip,
a thumb teasing the line of flesh when her shirt rides up
molten core eyes that make her stomach boil and
her heart roast
when they see right into her,
acknowledge her,
and never shy away from what they see

the bus lurches at a red light and she's snapped out
of her reverie
the space beside her is empty
it always has been,
and always will be
You all wonder why it’s been different
you all wonder why change is everlasting
is it the colder weather, is it my face of leather

your leather face; it shows all I needed to know.

when I feel the exterior of your face,
I shouldn’t have to touch it with my hand

instill it into me.

You all wonder why it’s been different
you all wonder why change is everlasting

your leather face,
composed of various materials
keeping it so tight
so tight
the tight, tight leather,
it will take longer for this leather to break in
Leather is flexible, but not easily tearable.
Leather needs time

You are just animal rawhide fastened together—
manufactured by a vast aggregate of accessible people

you won’t understand
until you realize what lies underneath your skin

You all wonder why it’s been different
you all wonder why change is everlasting

within leather skin
there are two hearts beating
the heart you expose
and the heart you keep in;
the valves of your hidden heart
the tight, tight valves
that keep the blood flowing
that keep your leather skin glowing,  
the heart to be showing  
must be exposed to those  
who know  
your skin is temporarily tight.

because leather cannot stretch  
leather cannot grow  
without harsh realizations  
that your skin isn’t made of cotton.

You all wonder why it’s been different  
you all wonder why change is everlasting

your blindness is unique—  
for your leather skin is transparent  
and still, you cannot see

if you looked from my angle  
you may escape the blind spot  
so until then,

I’ll always be 90 degrees away.
I lived here once...
A speck of dust on
her wayward limbs,
limp, flailing
in the hot breeze,
but always with
a smile,
ever allowing her
too deep to change me,
leave her ravenous impression
on my soul...
I lived her once...
Called her barren,
lifeless streets teeming
with life home,
answered her call
to Fortune!
to Fame!
Toasted to her
grandeur over
small talk and
overpriced cock
tails, dream within
a nightmare within
a dream.

Yes, I did live here once...
Hand to mouth,
foot to concrete,
ass in gear,
but suddenly,
as if unplugged,
I awoke
and found myself,
found my city
lived in me. In
a place where
too big to fail,
1% versus the 99,
gentrification,
stop & frisk,
Giulì-Bloom-Quinn,
Sandy,
rain, fear, hate
and poverty
could not touch.
No subway can
reach here.
An important note, read, written in red, under red light, spy ink
Makes no sense like two speckled brown ducks with a blue spot
Feathers are heavier than bones
Inch deep ash up on our roof
Would wash away in rain
But for the tragic handful
Saved in an empty salsa jar:
Tostitos, Medium Hot.
It deserved a kinder vessel.
My mother jokes across the dining table, the room cramped with familiar faces
“I knew when India fell in love with Gold Digger we were in trouble,” she says with a slight giggle in her breath
Because years later it is funny, the intensity I felt for that song
And it wasn’t the catchy beat or Kanye’s swagger
But the girls in the video, I envied them
Their curvy bodies and luminous lip-glossed lips
My small adolescent brain and build differed so from the images
They were the objects of male desire, something to strive for and I was flat chested
Short chopped brown hair, no make-up
Boring in every sense of the word, no luminosity
So I strived to please men, wasted years of my youth desiring their affection
I gave myself away piece by piece in hope of finding just a glimmer of gold
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