

Lebron-Wiggins-Pain
Cultural Center
RESOURCE LIBRARY
Hampshire College

CURRENTS

Mission Statement

This publication is an attempt to celebrate our unique voices. It aims to provide a forum for writing and art that embraces our multicultural/cross-cultural perspectives. Reflections of racial identity, civil rights history and the fight for equality have long been expressed through voice and vision. In its purest form art reaches many people and allows for multiple readings without losing it's own meaning. Current's goal is to continue n that tradition and give voice to under-represented cultural minorities on campus.

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Unique Robinson

When Jim Crow Raps.

1

i've decided that...
i'm now a dealer of drugs.
them words that do more damage than
heal in ya blood
cuz while my—
peeps down the street
kill to get love,
clothes and shoes
powers that be
is concealin' they rugs
so while my homie on the corner
is viewed as a loner
pressure to make more
to take care of his daughter
it's blue lights
WATCHIN him—
surveillance
BLOCKIN him
that war on drugs
where we fight wit *their* glocks and the
billions of dollars
spent to maintain this coverup
faces spewin' hatred that
we'll "kill crime wit rubber gloves"
lock minorities up and call em
murderers
of our land we *must*
keep pretty for tourists but them—

guns we be bussin
and them ones we be husslin
is all circulatin from that gov't discussin
what new way they can think up our
destruction
they tell u "crack is wack"
but they want us to be strugglin
never want us to be sumthin
fear we might *squeeze* sumthin
in that White House
and watch them whites *bleed* sumthin
but bump that—
our first mission's to get the dirt off our
skin
but everytime we help *ourselves*
they wanna murder again

put our face in the pen
be displacin our kin
lost our throne
now daddy's gone—
just erasin our men
cuz they be chasin us with
a little taste of the rich
take this money, nigger—
but make self hatred our *limbs*
and we runnin wit it
since we lost our
arms and legs
blown them out
everytime we run away
from corrupt police
cuz instead of fightin these
we be
steady blowin our *own* away
keep talkin "Stop Snitchin"
when we aint got a pot to piss in
that rival crew against you
just is *not* the issue
cuz *we* fillin up these jails,
not the officials
who smuggle in coke while we scream
"this block will miss u"
constant distractions
for Latino and Black men
don't want 'em to fight the fascists
at their own game wit politics
so they keep 'em sellin crack and
the plan works!
look at how many it attracts, man,
fast money's more appealin than
flippin Big Macs man
minimum wage cant buy him a new jacket
cuz these cats see TV
and they wanna be
that rich.

and it's very possible
cuz if 50 cent can rap
about glocks and ho's
then easily
my boy can cop his flow

and quickly become the
new minstrel show.
same 5 songs on the radio
cuz these label owners
wanna get paid, u know?
makin us caricatures of our own selves
while America just
"luh what we sayin yo"
but the moment we show more
than an opening act
when we be dropping knowledge or
historical facts
folks close they ears
cuz what we moldin here
"aint gon get airplay"
so they be throwin it back
keep telling us that "people aint open to
that"
so we inhale rancid raps
and more dancin tracks
intellect turned down
so we can hear
our advance in taps...

cuz we *still* slaves to those
who said nappy hair's dreadful,
but they profit our rows

and we been liver lips so long,
but now they payin for those!
and use the n-word
why?

"it's just a sayin"
and i'm 'posed
to laugh along
cuz the joke's
ironic, not racist!
i'll fold.

u gotta wonder how we don't let this
anger explode
cuz we frightenin when we speak,
but when we playin them sports
these folks is
all eyes
watchin us
all live
while some of us still livin wit rats and
false cries
and we constantly fear *ourselves*
cuz the news just talks lies.
but they never wanna see the day we're all
wise
but i bet u they'll hear us on the day we
all...
RISE.

Time

"It's too bad you have to raise a chicken all that time, but you can only eat it once," says the American student

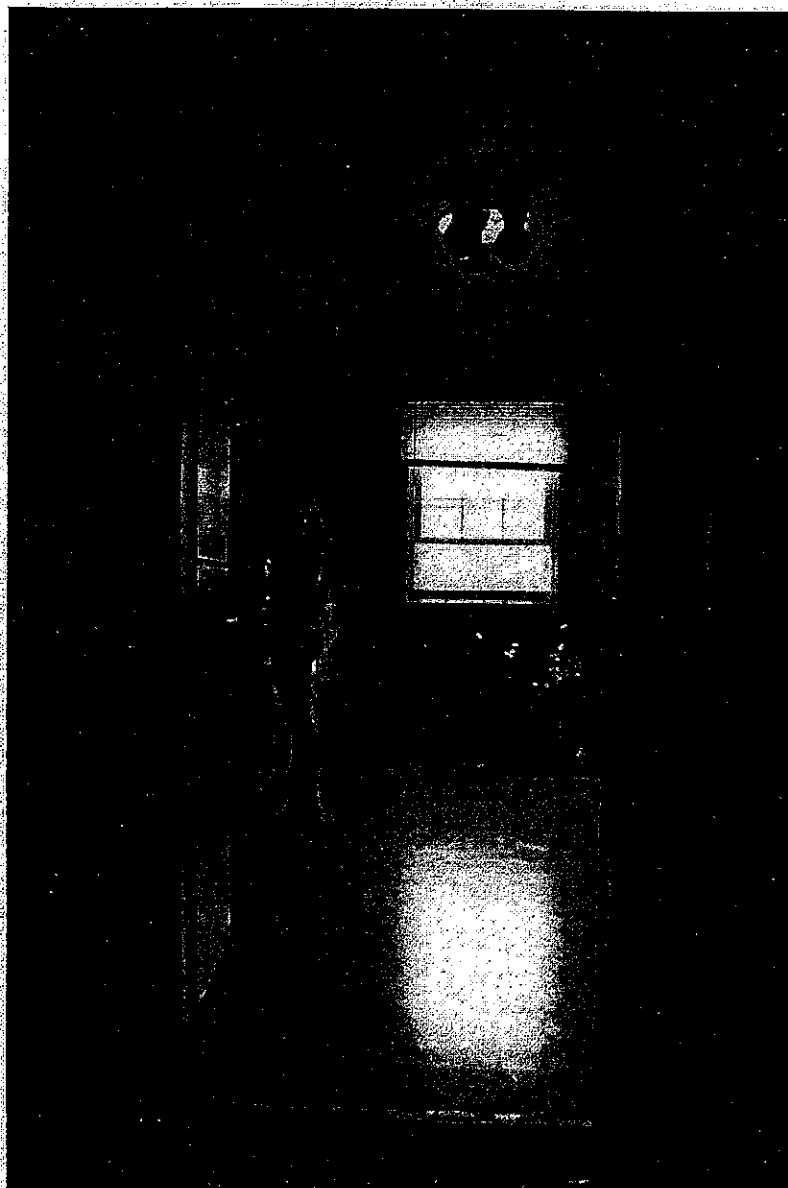
As the group bustles down the cobbled road in the center of the village;
and seven gray horses trot unbridled up the hill to graze;
and Dona Teresa presses maize between her palms,
cautiously happy with the thought that her Roberto will return home at last
this April, after seven years building houses in North Carolina;
and Dona Irena rests in a chair outside the *papeleria* she opened forty years ago,
when the neighborhood was blown east by the government
so They could mine the mountain.
Her long plaits are streaked white now,
her heart dizzy as a stone.

In the gloaming she sits. The points of her buttocks totter on the wooden chair.
Beneath the heat, she eyes the clouds roving over the red crags
that crown the village, and waits for the rosary at eventide.
The *papeleria* is walled off by the white plaster house next door.
A woman runs a general store there. She sells flavored ice and Jell-O.
On the wooden beams that support the roof,
two pigeons have a conversation.

The cock delivers his serenade.
Orotund groans intend to lure the blue hen into union.
But she will have none. He approaches her confidently, with many bows.
She
ducks
below
the beam.
He puffs out his neck feathers, hoping to seduce her with his iridescence.
He glides down to her, still singing. She flips to the
top of the beam. He is patient. He waddles close. She tiptoes
backward
to where the beam meets the roof at an angle, a tight space where
he may not mount
her. Circular notes expand the triangle. He steps on her head.
She flutters down below the beam.
They continue this dance for hours.
At times he seizes upon her. At times they unite for a few brief moments.
But she despises him. Dona Irena chuckles.

She looks up. The student group has arrived for their lecture.
She stands, and carefully dusts off her apron.

Her hand passes like a feather through the teacher's gregarious grip.
They tread together to the back of the *papelaria*, where maize grows tall.
Dona Irena grabs a hoe and thrusts it into the soil.
"Some poor people in the cities," she cries, "do not have the time,
to grow their own corn. They have to buy tortillas at the store! In *packages!*"
The ruffles of her apron ripple with the breeze of her laughter,
and she leans on the hoe for support.



...But I'm a Writer.

rippin pictures and papers
 to disguise what's hidden in vapors
 cuz every breath i take
 is pro'lly written by makers
 love God for givin me patience
 to deal with
 slitherin snakes that
 continuously know who's
 sinners and saints but
 never look introspectively.
 pointin fingers till they break off,
 but they ain't impressin thee
 thinkin they talkin God's word
 but they belittle God especially.

but i pay no mind to these folks
 cuz i know how the world operates
 but when this ideal that's so unkind
 enters your private base
 bein around it all the time
 can wither your
 mind away
 cuz mommy doesn't like to hear the line
 that
her child is gay.
 so...i pocket it
 lyin i said i'd never do to her
 but i'm steady doin the opposite
 to protect my identity
 cuz she *swears* she knows what the
 prophet says
 is 110% right
 but never fully read what the
 Bible said
 but only a handful of
 Christians
 know how to interpret what's mentioned
 so we're forced to deal
 like orphans here
 without support for us wishin
 that we didn't have to enter churches
 and forever look nervous
 just wonderin when the preacher
 is gonna say we're disturbed for
 lovin the same sex
 and how we need our
 brains checked

and there's my mom beside me
 sayin' he's correct
 lookin over to the left
 like she knows i'ma respect
 someone who can't see past
 that i'm flowin in this direction
so what?

i'm still God's child up under this
 but you folks play God so much like
 governments
 and the moment we wanna persuade u,
 you're hushin this
 so here i am—
 left to just mutter this
 in my composition
 cuz the moment i tell my fam
 i thrive off of *women*
 i swear i'll be the devil's sheep
 instead of God's image
 on a road to Hell
 faster than
 lyin ministers
swore she was on the right track
then she was misguided a-plenty,
let satan talk her down
and now she's
dying within thee.
 wishin there was a world
 outside of Massachusetts
 to where i wouldn't constantly
 have to feel stupid
 everytime the TV
 just happens to do the
 topic of gays
 and my mom just
 has to renew them
 feelings she felt
 and expresses them freely:
hope you're not into that foolishness
 and expects me to see the
 matter from her perspective
 but i just settle on being
 silent cuz i can't think
 to correct what she's speaking.

frozen in time like
 jesus' three days
 the pros and the cons?
 they ain't hearin what we say
 leave us to load a bong
 or fleet to drinking
 to escape this frustration
 of how we're seen as "freak" things
 cuz all they ever say about us
 is the extreme thing.
we're comin for your kids
and we're comin where you live
 and in my case, i don't like lettin
 out my private biz
 to my mom cuz she can't stand the thought
 of me wit a wife and kids
 so here i am now
 livin a life of fibs.

just trynna keep that peace goin
 positive energy flowin
 at the expense
 of puttin my identity on hold it
 upsets me great
 that i can't be 'nique to the fullest
 havin to deal with closed minds
 with open teeth that keep goin
 and there's no way to release,
 so the repression
 keeps growin
 til i'm 14
 writin in diaries
 prayin to jesus to
 throw them
 away,
 god i *need* to like men,
 bein *betwixt and between* i'm loathin
 self-hatred
 leadin to me bein homophobic

gotta hold back
 from givin my little sis
 the notice
 she's too young to understand
 but she'd see me as a locust
 if i told her—
 a mere pest of the fam

but *gay*?
Yes I am
 so just deal with it
 til we hear the
 rest of His sayin's
 at judgement
 cuz mommy,
 blessed i *still* am
 i still acknowledge
 who's the
 head of my land
 never thought you'd be so shallow to think
 i'd lose God—
 guess again.

not cryin
 just wish you could see my entire being
 without bein in denial
 or thinking i'm
 fire breathing
 i'm still unique
 even with this
 side i'm keeping
 love you all,
 but this hate must die
 if Heaven's where you
think
 you'll wind up sleeping.

Cihan Tekay

8

Double Nude



Morningstar

*Our world is so full of beautiful, inexplicable things,
like asteroids, and tumors that grow teeth,
and every goddamn morning that gets handed to us like a miracle!*

~Shira Erlichman

I've stopped talking to the mornings now,
instead I lie between piles of slumber
listening for the low rumble
inside of my dreams telling me
"everything be alright".
My heart purrs like a stray imagining home
but the words I'm waiting for don't come.

Instead, banana spiders weave endless
webs
and I am running
Instead I have to learn to drive stick
without getting arrested
Instead I'm making land mines to stop
the assassins
Instead the house is on fire
Instead my father is alive again
Instead of "everything be alright"
I have all of this,
echoing back to me across the endless
world
mapped in neurons and globed in bone,
but at least I'm dreaming again.

The only thing I've failed to conjure is you,
the string that was making my heart sit
with its back straight,
You are hope
for those of us embracing chaos
with our lips every time we inhale--
we are so many.

You glow the Morningstar,
sing praises like arias,
and you're bad bad bad.
There are days when knowing that you're my
friend
Gives me a reason to square my shoulders,
and walk the world with the honesty of a child.

So I'm writing your name on the sky
and hoping you'll catch it before it fades out,
because I'm tired of talking to other people
like you're dead.

You're alive
and I too,
and sometimes it's enough. Though,
I miss you,
the sweep of your laughter,
and the hours of talking where all the haters
fade like daylight
and there is nothing but the music of now.

I won't see you tomorrow, but
I will piece together the morning by the
map of my dreams and I will find you there,
your lungs filled with the feast of air
that tells me you can rely on time to find even
faith,

When sometimes we lose it to the nights.

I can dream the bomb
I dream Armageddon
I cannot dream you.

But I'm alive
and you too,
so when moonlight slips
down past the horizon again

I will listen for the beautiful, inexplicable
song of sun rising
out my window
telling me "everything be alright"
even when I don't know that it will.

And One Became Two

Soundless noises saw my helpless body,
And tip-toed to the tip of thy eardrum to whisper words of consolation.
-Quietly loud-
Suddenly the room expanded, contracting me into smaller pieces,
Making my presence known to all.
Shadows darkened as they approached to initiate their new friend.
-Silently loud-
Then She peered through the corner to make her presence known.
Looked deeply in mine eyes and enticed me there.
While she took me for hers,
They quickly parted like maize in a cornfield-single-file now.
So I followed her into a chivalrous world where I opened closed doors,
A world locked away, but unlocked to me.
She stopped me before a room,
Where secrets hung high from the ceiling
Like unwrapped presents.
Where videos played memories back and forth,
Like broken records.
Where an ink pen lay smudged against its daily diary entry.
And she stood there observing my observation.
Water traveled across her eyes-glistening in the setting sun.
So I held her by her hand and took her to lay
To fill out something she was full of,
Whilst she emptied in what I was empty of.
Each others' load equally unloaded.
Like broken lockets,
Or twin-less twins.
At last, blissfully united.
And we quietly awoke to the cheery morning's praise,
Accompanied by each other's company,
Happier two than one can be.

Underrepresented Representatives

People sometimes laugh when I tell them that Hampshire has made me Blacker. My skin has not gotten any darker but my perception of who I am as well as what I am has changed. I never gave much thought to my identity when I was living at home. I was born in Jamaica and raised in a predominantly Black and Latino community in New York City. There was no real reason for me to think about my individual identity in the community because we were all similar in some sort of way, economically or culturally. Now that I'm away from home and in a completely different community where my race and ethnicity are constant topics of discussion I can no longer avoid my identity. I'm Black, Jamaican, African American and also a woman of color. I can't choose to disconnect myself from any of these identities as I once could before. I own them now as much as they own me.

At first, I was naive about the ignorance and racism that people hold in their hearts. When I was younger I was convinced that it wasn't so hard for all people to get along. Also I couldn't quite understand the racism that people were talking about on television and in my school. The fact that I'm Black never really worried me at all.

Over the last few years however several things have happened to me as well as my family that made me realize "Damn, I am Black".

When I was 15, one night around 3 am, when everyone was sleeping in our apartment, a banging on the door and the continuous ringing of the doorbell awakened us. Wondering who could possibly be at the door at such a late hour, my dad got up to see what was going on. I was awake and lying in bed trying desperately to hear what the commotion was about; but I did not dare move. I heard loud voices approaching the small room where my brothers and I slept. Before I could see who it was, a bright light was flashed in my face. Frantically looking under my bed and other places in the room were two white police officers with a flashlight. They were searching for my eldest brother, who was not home at the time. I wondered to myself what the hell they were doing here? How stupid they must be to think he could hide anywhere in here without being noticed. After all, the room only contained three beds. When they had finished searching the rest of the apartment they left. At that point, I was confused about what had just happened. In the morning I found out from my parents that the police were looking for my brother because he had an outstanding ticket, for 75 dollars.

I was enraged. This sparked a fire inside of me that has yet to burn out. Who the hell did they think they were to do such a thing? To disrupt my family in the middle of the night for a fucking 75 dollar ticket! I knew this had happened because of who we are and where we lived. Two fucking white cops harassing a Black family in a working class neighborhood. What made it ok for things like this to happen to my family?

My reality at Hampshire College is much different from that of the inner city neighborhood in which I was raised. Hampshire seems so far away from home; it feels like another world here. One that takes much getting used to. I quickly came to realize that the only thing that keeps me sane is the love and support from the people of color community here.

In the fall most first year students of color I spoke with were shocked by various things they noticed immediately when they arrived. For example one reaction was, 'I see white people,' I was like is there ever going to be a person of color [on campus]?" said Chris Macmillan, an African American male from Northfolk, Virginia when I interviewed him. My roommate Lupita Nyong'o is an international student from Kenya and she explained at the same interview that her first reaction to Hampshire was quite different. "I'm not very racially sensitive so it took me a while to realize that there are no Black people on this campus, so my reaction was oh my gosh boys are wearing skirts the other stuff about Hampshire, the homosexuality." Njambi Wagacha, also a student from Kenya, remembered her first encounters with people in her orientation group. "People asked questions such as do you live in a hut? Do you ride animals to school? Other stupid questions about Africa... Africa being perceived as a country rather than a continent. Also coming to the Cultural Center and being divided into all these different SOURCE [Students of Underrepresented Cultures and Ethnicity's] groups not knowing where [I belonged]."

Most of us felt a bit challenged by questions about our identities because we were never questioned about them before. We never needed identity-based groups in my neighborhood, and if they existed, I was unaware of them. I felt bombarded by all the newly available access to these groups. I would constantly receive e-mails from several different groups such as Umoja and Sisters. All of this was too much for me in the beginning, but I have slowly been able to appreciate all of the SOURCE groups and what they stand for and mean to the community. The

Cultural Center has become a place where we can get together eat food from our different cultures, discuss things that are affecting us and have support from fellow students of color.

Although we have a strong support group it is still hard to deal with the ignorance of our new neighbors. Sometimes people ask very offensive questions or immediately assume stereotypes they have seen in the media. Njambi states, "Just cause they watch it on the Discovery Channel or whatever source of information they get their [knowledge]...they say things like I saw some kids riding elephants to school, well I'm not one of those fucking kids, I don't live in a hut and I'm not from the village. Shit if I was from the village I wouldn't have come to America cause [chances are] I wouldn't know how to speak English. Why can't they just think a bit? That's the thing that pisses me off."

Although Hampshire is supposed to be a very liberal place there are people here who are racist. Just because we live in a bubble in the woods doesn't mean that people are not affected by the society as a whole. All of that doesn't get erased when you come to Hampshire.

There are people here who have made statements directly meant to offend us. Rios, a Mexican-born student explains: "They say things because its racist and then you go up to them and you can't do anything cause if you react in a violent manner you're going to get in trouble." Rios has come in contact with a particular situation that might not have been directed specifically towards him but more towards Mexican people in general.

At Hampshire Halloween there was an individual dressed as a Mexican guy along with two other fellows, one dressed similar to Huckleberry Finn and the other as a Black rapper. Rios retells the confrontation.

"I approached him and asked him, where are you from? And He said from Caracas, Mexico. Caracas is in Venezuela of course and then he had an accent from the barrio but he was dressing kind of like a native Indian from Mexico. I started asking him do you think its funny? Do you think its funny being Mexican? And he started ignoring me asking what do you mean? What's funny? And he was ignoring what I was saying. Then he started to get scared and [his two other friends] were like you better get out of here we don't want any trouble; we don't want to have to go get public safety. Just because I was talking to them and I was in their face and he was still talking mocking me in that accent. Towards the end I sensed that they were 'shook' and that's when he dropped the accent."

Clearly this guy knew nothing about Mexican culture except for the common stereotypes shown in the media. Perhaps he didn't think that what he and his friends were doing would be offensive to anyone. Maybe he thought there were no Mexicans in this school. I'm uncertain of what was going on in his head but I can see how the realities of most of the people of color here differ from the white students and how they clash. Some white people don't respect or acknowledge our realities because it doesn't affect them in any way. It's our problem and they don't seem to see themselves as being a part of that problem. Most of us are adapting to life as 'other' at Hampshire, which can be extremely difficult. For international students in particular the culture shock and adaptation to life at Hampshire and America in general can prove to be intense and life changing.

Njambi explained that sometimes it was frustrating having to communicate with people at Hampshire. "It's like you don't know where you fit in and you want to confront someone. The hardest bit is to try to get someone to not be so ignorant. I wanted to tell them, 'Hey, listen, what you just said offended me but this is how it goes. Here is a map of Africa and then Kenya is here,' but what I was frustrated about was my anger. I didn't want to explain I didn't feel the need to explain. I was like, 'Hey you go to Hampshire; you should have studied this in high school. I don't have to tell you what exists in Africa, you study your own books'."

Njambi also went through some complications with understanding homosexuality and interacting with people whom she had never encountered at home in Kenya. "I was just expected to know that homosexuality existed, deal with it. I'm in a skirt so deal with it. I was uncomfortable not being able to ask any questions. Such as can you please tell me why that guy is wearing a dress? Please tell me why that guy is wearing make up? I wasn't allowed to ask, I was just told, 'Listen, he is wearing make up, you just understand that.'"

On the other hand Lupita explains, "When you say, 'Look, I'm Black, so deal with it', nobody wants to deal with it." Instead some people might say such things like, " 'Well when I see you I don't see Black,' that has happened to me. People deny you of your race. What's wrong with being Black?"

Racially charged conversations are also hard to have in class because there are so few of us on campus. In most of my classes I'm either the only person of color or one of two. Zardon Richardson, a friend of mine on campus, recently mentioned in a conversation with my roommate Lupita, that he felt it was too much responsibility to be Black at Hampshire. "I'm not a

representative of Black people; I'm me. I have my faults too and if I make a [mistake] it shines on all Black people. That's too much of a responsibility."

Lupita expressed similar feelings but not in the terms of Black identity but more in the sense of coming from a developing country. "In my adolescent class we were doing all this stuff about third world countries and I was the representative for every single third world country and honestly, that's [impossible]. The only third world country that I can even remotely represent is Kenya and still I can't be the spokesperson for Kenya. I can't because I have not consulted my people."

When people constantly see us sitting together in the dining commons they get the impressions that we are trying to separate ourselves. There have been times when people questioned the need for identity-based housing. Chris expressed his views on the issue: "I'm sorry, it ain't about separation [I won't speak for everyone but personally] everyday I'm the only person of color in [most] of my classes. I go to a school where I can walk from one end of the campus to another and if I walk real fast I won't see another person of color. I don't know about you but that doesn't seem like I'm separating myself. I should be able to go home to where I rest my head and see something that reflects who I am."

Although quite a number of us are very close friends, we sometimes question our friendships and wonder whether we would be as close if we met under other circumstances. Chris brought up his thoughts of what things might be like if we attended a larger school or one that has a different race dynamic. "If we were all put in a HBCU (Historically Black College or University) I don't know if we all would be friends. Because you don't have to be like, 'I'm Black,' cause everyone is Black." Here there are so few of us that we all tend to gravitate towards each other. Lupita said she felt like we were sort of "forced to accept the differences between the Black people here. The Black gay and lesbian people, the ones who like punk rock and the ones who like River Dance. You get all these sorts of Black people coming together. Where at home you just hang out with your type of Black people."

So, being a person of color at Hampshire means that you are part of an underrepresented group. And underrepresented usually means having an insignificant voice. But at Hampshire you seem to become a representative of that underrepresented group, which is a big responsibility, and a heavy burden. But because we mainly stick together when we have a voice it seems to echo louder than we could ever imagine.

What Am I Supposed To Say Now

What am I supposed to say now?
How am I supposed to react?
When yesterday this was nothing?!
Yesterday I knew you

Or knew I needed to
know the you I knew better

Today..... I see
death

And you want me to say something
I can't

I'm me and you are... inaccurate!
My past robbed from across the table
You sit there and tell me everything
And now I seem to have nothing
Not a thing

Your chest is now free and mine is now
missing

I want to scream and make you take it
back

Take it back!

I don't want to know

I don't want to know you if you are going
to introduce yourself to me every time we
meet

When will it stop

When will it start to make sense

Why didn't I know

Why do I have to know now

Two-and-a-half years apart

Two...

Too apart

What can I hold on to?

What do you want me to do now?

Understand and Forget? Just know? Talk?

How can you ask so much of me when you
asked nothing of me before

I looked up to you and you looked everywhere
else

I am debilitated

Move on?

Future is only attained once the past is
passed:

Once upon a time there were two sisters...

History has only began

And 'til it's done

There'll be no moving on around here

You've had your life to understand

I've had lies *not* to

And so I plead for solitude!

The secret is out

And now I am on my way in

Thank you, sister dear

You have shown me the door!

How can I burn

I am ashes



Cihan Tekay

Untitled

19



The Monkeys (A mi abuelo Joe)

"El perro desaparecio," dijiste Usted.

The family was splayed on the couch, like monkeys;
exhausted from an afternoon of standing
in an assembly line around the kitchen table,
in descending order of rank,
making tamales at Christmas.

At the mean head, Grandma spread *masa* like clay
onto big leaves. With thick fingers and a hoary voice
She commanded them into being,
then passed their soft bodies,
in a *cascara* of hands,
to my waiting mother.

My mother, your *changa*,
gave them guts and blood.
She ladled them full of red meat and frioles;
she turned them over gently to close them at the seams.
Dad belched for our amusement.
He loves her, too.

How happy we were--
las changitas blancas, Lee Lee and I--
to receive these tightly wrapped packages
and stack them like gifts in a bowl!
It was we and you,
stumbling, saintly overseer,
who gave them soul.
You poured laughter over them,
while sipping beer at the counter
with your buddy Spike.

(Remember when the raccoons almost got him?
He loved to make mischief and friends,
and always forgot he was small).

"El perro desaparecio," dijiste Usted.
My mother looked up in despair.

Then, just as he left, he hopped back into our lives,
slapping his little paw on the doggie door,
and running heroically to the couch.

We all laughed at the supernatural event.
But as I sit here now, in the absence of you two gentle creatures,
I feel an emptiness. and wish it were so easy to return.

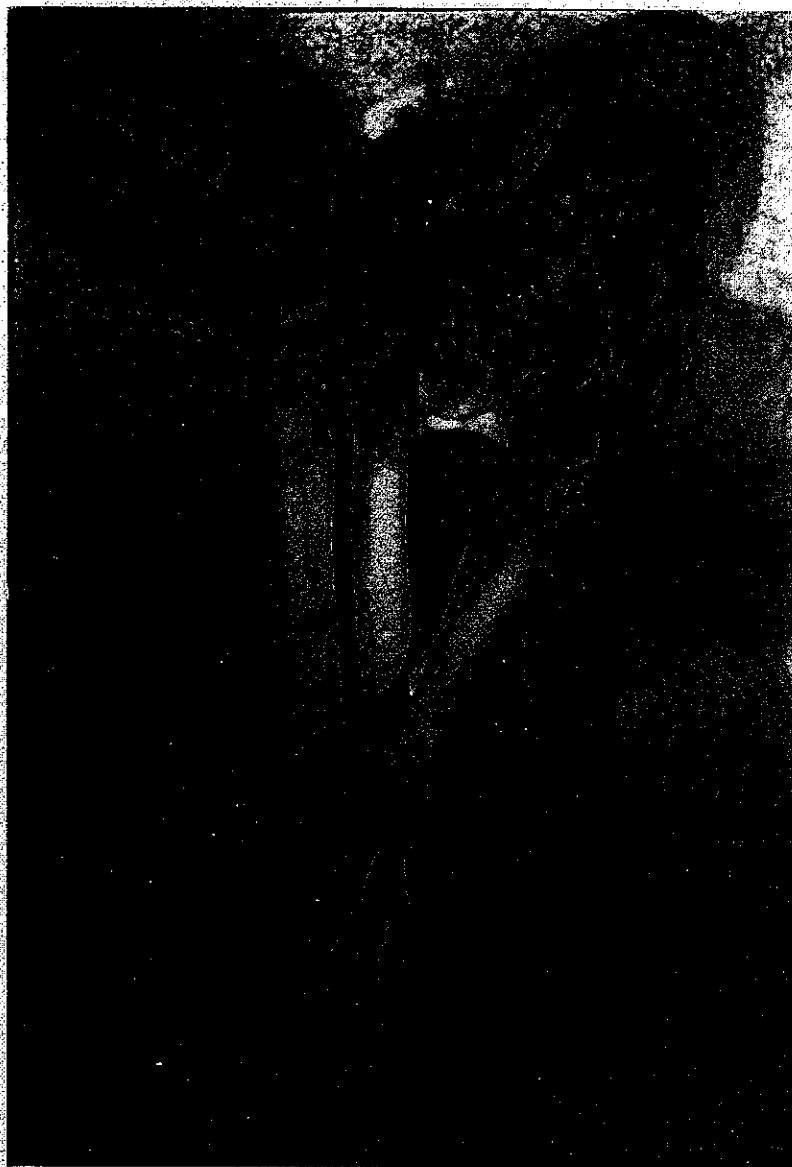
Anonymous

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New Orleans

i went to new orleans about a week-and-a-half ago and arrived back at school Saturday night. i can't explain what the experience was like enough to justify it. in so many ways, and it's hard for me to say, you had to be there. it's so fucking uncomfortable to me to come back here and be in an entirely new environment. where so many people are so unaware of what's really going on in new orleans. we knew while we were there that so much of the media doesn't cover the facts, but we come back to hampshire, and - bam. we're hit with a ton of bricks, each one a reminder that the u.s. government doesn't do anyone justice, or give a shit about its people. i'm going to bed now with this resentment and frustration, but will anticipate the growth of more interest in the politics of the society we actually live in.

Untitled



Ill Kill the Bastard Who Says Hair Is Only Dead Skin

"Just For Me, No-Lye Conditioner Relaxer Free"--the commercials would not stop playing. Only a constant reminder of the horror I would endure that summer night of 1992 in our Baltimore home. "Unique, you're getting your first perm", my mother said. Was that something for me to be proud of? But she would not take me to a hair salon, like my fellow female peers. In fact, I think I was too young for the hair salon. I was *four years old*. These are the times in a child's development when they worry about penis envy and sexual identity, *not* hair salons. My mother was a pro at perms, nevertheless. To watch her sashe' around Baltimore with her fresh out of '92 slick-back tiny ponytail hairdo made me wonder what I was in for. And I honestly had no idea.

We were in the upstairs bathroom in her fiance's house. I sat on the toilet with my hair all around my face, just a-wondering. She opened the J-U-S-T-F-O-R-M-E box, took out the instructions tape and let me play with the gloves. I stared into the black girls' eyes on the box. "This can't be too bad, she's smiling", I thought. And she had the cutest longest ponytail with a pink ribbon at the top. I wasn't too keen on pink, but I knew that she was pretty. Then, my attention span switched to my mother, as she took the giant 10 ounce jar out of the box filled with a white solid substance, almost identical to vanilla frosting. "This shouldn't be too bad, that looks like vanilla", I thought. Then she mixed this with a given clear liquid solution in a 2 ounce bottle. The side of the box read: "Mix solution with permanent until it turns from pink to white." There my mother was, mixing and mixing with the popsicle stick. Scraping the last bit of perm off of the popsicle stick, she placed Vaseline around my edges, on my eyebrows, and the nape of my neck. I thought I was about to be eaten more so than get a hair treatment. Suddenly, the vanilla frosting got this foul, foul smell that made me want to explode with fear. The smell is indescribable. Think of a flower—your favorite flower, at that—and throw in burning hair and fried fish. The process had only just begun. My mother came for me with the parting comb and the foul smelling cream in her hands, and placed this cream from my scalp to the ends of my hair, all over. Nothing happened.

Then, my four-year old reflexes began twitching. My entire head burned like Hell, like I suffered the sins of an unbaptized child. I come from a Pentecostal family, so Hell was not a place to go. However, I ventured there every two months. I would have made a pact with the devil himself to not endure that burning, scorching pain any longer. And, to make matters worse, my

mother tells me that I cannot leave Hell for 15 more minutes, since the perm has to work through all of my naps. Naps? What are naps? I broke out into sweat and tears. "It burns, it burns!" I screamed. My entire head covered in this fish-smelling vanilla cream. And I can't scratch at it either, since that'll be like getting pitchforks stuck in my back. And don't *dare* fan at it, since this'll dry the white substance to my head, and it'll be harder to wash out. Just sit fucking still, and take it,—you four-year old punk. That's what the "Just For Me" commercials *should* say. This was my eternity.

This process—known to many as getting a perm—is pure torture. And the nerve of these black businesses to torture black women and children with these products! Every 6-8 weeks, we'd send each other back to slavery with the white cream scorching our heads and scalps. And to do this to kids—those pedophiles. If perms weren't patented, I would call Child Protector Services on every bastard that created this enduring solution. But it is a coming of age process for nearly every girl in Baltimore. My mother had one. My sister, 4 years older than me, had one. My cousins, all my age, and some older—had one. My grandparents—had one. There was no escaping it. There was no natural haired woman to tell us the eulogies we wrote for our heads every two months. Every two months I would look at that girl on the box and want to shoot perm into her eyes. And once I discovered the creator of this monstrosity in the 2nd grade, Ms. Madame CJ Walker, I wanted to give her a taste of her own medicine, too. However, I was still a child, and these were only thoughts. It would be a full decade before this African torture would cease. Because of this conditioning, "the perm" became an extension of my existence. Life wouldn't be the same without it.

Each memory of my childhood has "the perm" slapped all in it. Every time I went out to play with my friend Brian, who lived in the complex next to us in our Woodland Park Apartments, I could hear my mother saying "You comin in early tonight, 'cause I didn't let that perm sit long enough last time." I'd dread every moment of playing, just wondering exactly when she was gonna stick her head on the screen of our second floor window and call out "UNIQUE! UNIQUE! Time to come in." For this very reason, I used my child-like logic and told Brian "let's go to your house so my mother won't see us outside, and remember that I have to get a perm." That we did. I was successful in deterring this torture for another month or so.

We'd go into his apartment, close his door, and play "House", where I was the wife and he was the husband, and we'd pretend to make babies. I'd pull down my pants and climb on top of this little guy on his bed as he whispered "rub my chest", trying not to make much noise for his little brother to slam open his jagged door and interrupt. Only thing was, when other neighborhood friends came around to play, preferably girls, I'd behave in this same way with them. In fact, I think I liked it a little more with them. It was something devious about playing around with 6-year old girls, something about our anatomy that kept me never wanting that play to end, no matter how guilty I may have felt afterwards.

A similar scenario happened when I went to my aunt's house and visited my cousins in their apartment in 1995. I had just got a perm so tight that I couldn't raise my eyebrows when I laughed. Me and my guy cousin Jameak, who was also four years older than me, would talk endlessly about Power Ranger's episodes, and I would ask him who he liked the most on the show. The Rangers turned to Ninjas around this time. He said to me "yeah, the yellow ranger Aiesha was phat as shit." Secretly, I would agree. I think he caught on to me vicariously liking her through him, since I wouldn't stop talking about her, or asking him why he liked her so much. Him and his sister Shacon started calling me gay quite early. But who figures out their sexuality at 8 anyway?

Me and my fresh perm continued to visit family, and my 8-year old hormones continued to get the best of me. When I stayed with my father on holidays like Easter and Thanksgiving, I knew what I was in for: lots of food, and lots of—well, exploration. The huge feasts we'd have at my grandmother's house, and all the cousins I would see—and sleep with. Four of us in the same bed, and two of us playing "boyfriend/girlfriend", making *me* the boy, all the while maintaining a level of quietness to not wake up the other two. I swear it felt like guilt slept in the bed with us too, 'cause the next day, I'd get this funny feeling in the pit of my stomach, like a sinner in church or something.

I swear this guilt weighed me down like a ton of Barbie dolls. I'm from a Christian family, you know, so none of that "funniness" was allowed. But I was a *child*, for God's sake! When my cousins would ask me, an eight year old, if I was gay, of course I would proclaim *hell no!*, giving up one "sin" for another. I'd burn in Hell for that. And since I already had a taste of Hell, I definitely didn't want to revisit it. Every time I said my prayers, I'd ask God to remove these

feelings from me. Nevertheless, I'd still talk about Aiesha, still have my Santa's list of affairs, still think of pornography as my sheets moved at night. And not even an ass whooping could stop me from doing *that*.

This guilt grew with me like my hair did, as I had a record-breaking 3-year crush on my best friend Erin. I'd peek at her in the shower, kiss her on the cheek at night, but still talk about the Backstreet Boys. Secretly, I also had the *hugest* crush on Scary Spice from the Spice Girls, and this, too, would haunt me for the rest of my life. The crush truck kept on rolling in 8th grade, when a Cuban friend became the sole reason why I enjoyed school. At eighth grade graduation, I rocked a *fresh* perm, wearing my hair down for one of the few times in my life. I couldn't wait to see what she had on. I couldn't wait to go to her house with the rest of my friends and get a makeup makeover. But oh no! I *still* wasn't gay. I basked in those feelings in my secret corner like prayer, thinking that if I meditated on them long enough, they'd go away. Life didn't wait for this transition though; it went on as repressive usual when I entered 9th grade.

Oh, the first day of high school: September 4, 2001. The night before prevented me from sleeping—for nervousness, yes, but more importantly because I got two (yes, *two*) perms that evening to make my hair straighter. I rocked a slick ponytail that next day. Thought I was the *shit*! White and Blue Nike Presto shoes, LEI jeans, crazy sky blue Las Vegas shirt. Bright sunny morning it was. Saw Erin, gave her a huge hug, and we took the 44 bus across town to school. The bus driver for the 36, though at first a wench towards all the students that packed the buses to fire hazard alert, began to be unusually nice to Erin and I. We'd hope and pray the slow 44 would meet up with the 36 in time for us to see her—well, me anyway. The guilt came trickling back. Erin and I would have several sleepovers that included us confronting our issues—9/11, yeah, that was pretty fucked up, but I have a crush on another *woman*! It took her to guess who it was, since I wouldn't tell her. Big girl things happened when I got my last perm on March 23, 2002. Another slick ponytail. However, my raised eyebrows couldn't even see the transition I'd walk into then. That summer, Erin and I stayed at her aunt's house. When Erin was getting her perm done, her aunt felt my pain and fury as I stated "I wish I never had to get a perm again in LIFE," since I thought it would be impossible for my mother to put the popsicle stick down. She stated "you should just tell her you don't want another one, and just get your hair straightened with a hot comb instead." I called my mother and told her that; with sweat in my palms, and my hair frantically itching (it often did that when on the topic of perms, and still does to this day), she said "yeah, we can do that." Hell diminishing. Heaven opening. The perm era—was over.

That entire sophomore year, I wore some form of braids. This was one step up from the usual ponytails! Ha! I was finally growing up. Erin and I began a friendship with a girl named Jan, who wasn't the Christian coming of age girl that we were. In fact, she—was Wiccan. It took her quite a few months for her to tell us that, and the fact that she was also bisexual. Didn't make me no nevermind, since I liked her anyway, and that only made my explanation to her much smoother. As our friendship got deeper, she put thoughts into my head like "Unique, Christianity isn't for you", and to see her mother—well, mothers—comfortable in their own lesbian skin, I figured "well, I may as well do the same."

Confirmation happened when I went to my first poetry slam. After writing for 5 years, and performing in front of friends, I decided that maybe I should let an entire audience hear what I do. I was highly anxious that evening. My stomach did more motions than my hand gestures on stage. Since my nervousness wouldn't let me be free, it was only natural that my hair matched those feelings: it was cornrowed tightly into a ponytail.

It was a citywide high school poetry slam, and this guy named KIIZ and I were neck-and-neck in the top 2. The yellow lights beamed down on us on the stage, as we looked out into the dim audience. Cheers went to the both of us, but the winner, as we sat uncomfortably in our seats, was me. Nevertheless, we still kept in touch. In my transitive mind, I'm like "I think I like this guy." Only later on the phone did I find out that he, too, was gay—and Christian. He dispelled many of the myths of homosexuality that most Christians blindly follow, starting with Sodom and Gomorrah, and led me to write many poems on the hate crimes spewed against the GLBT community. Six days later, I would cut my perm out permanently. I couldn't get enough of my wonderful puffs.

My mother said to me later "Why *did* I give you a perm anyway? Must have been my nearsightedness. Girl, you got that *good* hair." That entire summer, I flaunted my new open state of mind and hair, and even won another poetry slam on the topic of hate crimes. My mother missed it, since she was rushing on the MTA to get there. I was kind of glad she missed it, though, since she already had suspicions that Jan placed thoughts of homosexuality into my head. I loved my mom dearly, but I didn't feel like being lectured after this joyful experience. I had already molded into a beautiful human being who had finally figured herself out, for the most part. She should have been satisfied with that much. But me and my hair...only kept on growing.

Letter to my grandmother.

Estoy enamorada.
Mujer poderosa, callada.
I am in love.

En mis sueños,
Estámos paradas en medio
De un río,
Con árboles que no podemos nombrar.
Son secretos ancianos—
Guardados como piel y calor,
Las flores que queman despacio dentro
nuestras piernas.

Estámos paradas, tú y yo,
Mi brazo extendido como una rama
Donde tu mano puede agarrarme,
Y estás enceniándome parar, calmada,
En las aguas que cantan los secretos de
Mujer.
Hay tantas cosas que no podemos decir.

In my dreams
We are standing in a river
Whose guarding trees have names we
cannot speak.
They are ancient secrets,
Protected like skin and heat—
The flowers that burn slowly between our
legs.

We stand, my arm like a branch
Crooked for you to hold on.
You are teaching me
How to stand, calm in the waters that
keep our secrets.
For there are so many things we cannot
speak of...

But this is not a translating kind of poem.

Not something I can pass back and forth
between my hands
To show one side of the room and then
the other.
I cannot, in fact.

What sort of steady arm could I extend
If I were so busy changing colors and drawing
curtains?

No puedo traducir porque
A pesar de todo,
No estoy segura que entenderás lo que quiero
decir.

Buita, es que tengo miedo.

Hé oído las estorias de tu vida,
El dolor, y las lágrimas.
Que han corridos por tu cara—
Dejando cicatrizes en la forma de memorias,
arrugas.
Te veo sentada
Como una flor doblada,
Escondida del mundo.

Es la misma cosa cuando te veo caminar—
No te ves tan real, tan regia como antes.

I wish I didn't notice.

When I go into your room
And smell sour hands and all-too-often
occupied bed sheets
It scares me.
The air is haggard with the sound of shuffled
feet
And the word "grandmother"
Is heavy with years.

You have always been so unbelievably strong,
And now I'm afraid I might stop believing it.

I always said I would write you a poem, and
read it at a slam,
Becos you always have been nice enough to
go and listen
Even though you don't understand a word.
And now that I have,
All I can write about is how I see us in my
dreams,

For your body is small and frail,
And your grip on my arm as I walk
you up the stairs is tired.
Y quiero quedar enamorada.
Por eso voy a hablar sobre lo que veo
en mis sueños:
In my dreams
You are teaching me to stand in the
middle of all the things we cannot
say—
You are teaching me to hold in.

I just hope that behind your eyes
There is a torrent—
A babbling laughing singing, shouting
river,
And you're just holding it in.

Las mujeres siempre están
escondiendo algo.
I will sit and listen for you laughing in
your sleep.

