

SOUTH OF LIVING

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It starts with a hailing. This time. You see arms.

Before you.

Open. Wide.

You stand in the stillness.

Suspended.

Uncertain.

Afraid.

Into open arms you want to walk.Run.Surrender.Return.Squeeze back.
Against open arms you want to take up arms.Lash.Burn.Refuse.Cut them off

You stand in the stillness.

Suspended.

You see arms.

Before you.

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Wide

It starts with a hailing.

This time.

With reluctance, without actually meaning it, I hail one cab after another from the sidewalk where we stand, face to face, taking up space on this Chicago street, in a neighborhood known for and to lesbians. When learning I would move to Chicago, someone directed me. Here. Was certain I would be comfortable. Here. With my people. Here. Lesbians. Here. It is not unusual for someone to direct me in this way. To whom and where I might belong. You must try this Mexican restaurant, I was told on a job interview, upon arriving at a new job, countless other times. In this bar you'll fit right in, I've been told, just as often. Do you know, fill in the blank lesbian, Chicana or Latina, other person from Midwest. The people that direct me in these ways are often white. Well-meaning. Each direction toward a new and other relation. Away from the one who points. Each direction not in response to a request I have made. As hard as it is, I ask or otherwise search toward what I am inclined.

What I am inclined toward is silence. Isolation. This is not necessarily a choice, choice is a spiky beast. Be it choice or necessity, silence and isolation are my comforts. This makes people uncomfortable, she insists, years after we meet. Years after even, this moment on the street corner at the end of the evening, where we have met for the first time after a five-year silence between us. This moment, this later moment, could be a repetitive moment during which she coaches me on being with others. At a conference. On an interview. At a social event. I call her for help. She picks up. She. There. I scare people, she tells me, describing the scene in her way. I break my prolonged silence with a brief and pointed statement. Met often with silence. I tell her I do not get it. She plays along. Tells me, you scare them. Tells me, in the way she truths to me, coaxes uncomfortable underbellies into the light. Actually, I am aware I make people uncomfortable. At times, I like it. Provoke it. Relish in the mutual squirm. The squirm reflects multiple truths. The learned like, the habits that ingrain

themselves into my body, and the ways my body craves discomfort solely for its familiarity. At the same time, discomfort is disruptive. It exposes. Calls attention to power. I'm not always sure I can identify the difference. Hence, the game I play with her, asking her to account for how and why I scare people.

I often wonder what to make of the directives that brought me to her. Of the white graduate director who assured me I would join both faculty and students doing work of the kind I had identified in my admissions application. On that phone call she does not tell me the work I want to do will not be welcome. She cannot tell me of the years I will spend justifying myself and my interests and how I go about them. That the other Chicana graduate student in the program I will enter is the only one. That I will be the only woman of color in my own cohort. That there will be exactly one person of color in any cohort the entire time I am there. That in two years there will be another Latina in another cohort. That we will be friendly and not friends. That it will take one year for my soon to be friendship to shatter. That there are two Chicana faculty in the program. That people will say they do not serve on committees together. That people will use lots of other words to describe them. That I will discuss those words in carefully chosen company. That these Chicana faculty are often called by the other's name by staff, faculty, and students. That I, too, will be called by my friend's name the entire time I am in the program. That I will not answer to that name no matter how I ache to hear her name spoken and that refusing the call will audibly anger the one who hails me in her name.

I find it difficult to think about the things the director did not direct me toward or about. What I find difficult is to know what to do with the things that I think of, with the feelings that accompany these thoughts. To call these feelings confusion too neatly elides the underbellies the feelings bring into the

light. Confusion, then, not a feeling or a state but the pile of bellies, bellies rank with residues of betrayal and suspicion, of sadness and loss, of desire and longing. Those bellies full with the elixir whiteness so willingly offers. Those bellies fed on and malnourished through whiteness and empire. Those bellies that rumble with the groans of survival.

My belly groans from the relations from whom I most immediately hail. Those people from whom I chose to depart. Those people to whom in more generous and compassionate moments I say did the best they could with what they had and from whom they hailed. Those people use love to describe what they call family and who in love fail again and again. Who in the name of love could not stop the cycle of what was repeated and reinvented. Who in the name of love also taught me to love. To welcome in strangers and treat them as family. To cook for and feed them. To hold silence and to listen. The contradictions of the loves from which I hail make my belly rumble. I am too old to hold the people from whom I hail responsible for the person I am today and the healing I must make. The belly that rumbles splits itself open and out the stories spill. Beckoning. Reckoning.

My white grandfather sometimes took me to movies. Together we watched and I learned to laugh at the absurdity of slapstick. An absurdity dependent on the bodies of people of color, women, and queers. To distance ourselves from. The jokes he told me, over and over, of what one calls two Mexican firemen, of what a Mexican weather report includes. His wife, my grandmother, who socialized me in the language of concern about the too-many Mexicans who lived in one trailer in the trailer near hers in the trailer park in which she lived. What must they, my white grandparents, have thought of their mixed-race grandchildren with the Mexican surname that their white-passing skin would neither protect them from nor erase their visibility through. I have no idea what they would have thought because while they were alive and with their faculties intact I had

neither the thought nor the courage nor the interest in asking them. Without the awareness or inclination to ask my white grandparents, I also did not ask my Mexican grandparents what they thought of their white-passing grandchildren. While I have heard and read of Mexican-American families who celebrate, revere, honor the light-skinned among them, my white-passing skin came from the body of a white mother, a woman they had rejected long before my birth. Rather than exalted, my light skin meant I couldn't play outside as long as and with my cousins. Instead of deflect the rejections, my parents, who must have at one point loved one another, chose to stay together before and after the death of their first child. The daughter they deny. The daughter kept alive through whispers. The four that lived after. The children who speak but not to one another.

To be in my family is to be in an endless game of Red Rover. Red Rover, a game that mimics war, of the integration and forced assimilation of prisoners of war. A training ground. In this version at either end of the field rows of linked brown arms and hands face linked white arms and hands. One side sings across the distance to the other, Red Rover, Red Rover, let Kimberlee come over. The hands of the person who is called to come over are released from the clasp of their current side. Running as fast as they can across the distance, the called person charges at what they perceive to be the weakest link, aiming to break the bond. If the bond is indeed broken, the called person chooses another from the side they have broken through to join them in the return. The side once facing a loss is now strengthened. However, if the called person does not break through the link, they are absorbed into the side that calls them. And back and forth until a single person stands alone. Defeated. My heart pounding, sweat running down my face I charge from one toward the other, never having been shown or taught how to understand how to love them both. To refuse the call. To call otherwise and elsewhere. When I am called by either side it is with relief and reluctance that I release the hands that

hold me. Close to one side or another, I surrender neither to capture nor to the spoils of the battle. I claim no one and no one claims me. I feel, and was also not inconsequentially, fucked.

Fucked, explains the Chilango I sit across from, is the origins of our shared ancestry. Or so he insists, uttering just once, *somos los hijos de la chingada*. While I often struggle to put the words I know in Spanish together in comprehension, this I recognize without the need for repetition. He tells me this after learning that I am here in Mexico City on a trip sponsored by my university to foster relations and exchanges between academic sites, that I am a Chicana from the other side. He tells me to listen closely, *somos los hijos de la chingada*. I lose much of what he continues. But I perk up when he directs me against sharing this with anyone else in the university, in my daily classes on culture and history. Another directive toward silence I heed and wait. To listen for this origin story that never does appear. None of the professors, many of them lighter than me, speak of the fucked. Neither do I speak of the ways I was fucked.

To speak of the fucked and the state of being fucked is to speak of survival and the state of those who survive. Those who survive an altered relation to relation. The aftermath of a relation that once was or what might have been or was expected to be. Survival indexes intimacies, and interruptions to the anticipated or implied directive, the promises, of intimacy. Intimacy interrupted. Corrupted. Survive, a verb, and survival, a state of being. Survive. The verb survive accounts for the aftermath, the changes to living. In Latin, the verb *vive* reflects life. In Spanish, *vive* takes the form of a command. Live! It implores. Live! Be alive! The affirmation of life. The insertion of the prefix *sur*, reflects on that life. In English, French, Latin, *sur* is above. In Spanish, it is south. *Sur* and *vive*, apart and together, above or below, require the listener to look around that life. Survive, a hailing from and around those who slip

south of living. Speaking south of living, survival turns back on intimacy. Queries the routes that direct some southward and from the south expose that intimacy's innocence was never intact. As one who survives in multiple structures of survival, to face survival as intimacy feels an edgy and angsty, uncomfortable and fragile, yet also an urgent and impatient doing.

Chicago was not the first place I learned to hail a cab. At 21 during a trip to New York City, I learned from friends of my high school friend. My friend lived in the city, a student at New York University. She transferred there after the first or the second year of the first and last school we attended together after high school. It would take me another 12 years, two universities and one community college to complete my degree. After we graduated high school, or maybe it was before, she decided and directed me to go to college with her. My parents not having attended college, it was neither in my imaginary nor my interest. I see now that I am attracted to women like this. Who push me beyond my limits and interests and while my timeline is my own it includes such relations.

Out of high school, we attended college, though not in the same classes or at the same times. She, a waitress, often worked at nights and I signed up for a temp agency for secretarial work and took daytime assignments in offices, this is the kind of work my mother did and that I would do for the next 12 years. The university we attended had only recently evolved from community college and did not require an essay in its application. If it did, my friend wrote it for me, as she filled out and filed my application. In the two years I attended evening classes at this university, my classmates were also working full time, many of them completing a degree at the expense of their employers, almost all of them older than me. Because I smoked, I met other smokers on break from the three-hour night classes and sometimes during break, and often after class the people I met would invite me out to bars to drink and smoke. I remember the woman who

told me of Bambi's Bottom's Up, a lesbian bar somewhere in our town in which I didn't know there were such things as lesbians. When she asked me how long I had been out, I froze, looking around the bar at the faces of the people who knew me or my family. Although I do not remember my response, I do remember that I did not meet her at the bar on the night she invited me. I also remember that she was the first person to see me in this way and I left that town shortly thereafter.

It was in the next town, Detroit, that I attended the second of three universities, also at night, where I approached the lawyer I worked for, asking for vacation time to visit New York City. Although I had grown up in a family whose members worked in car factories and other manual forms of labor, no one taught me about labor rights, how to ask for a raise, or even paid vacation. The directive I was given was to keep my mouth shut and to do what I was told by my boss. To make no one mad, collect my paycheck, and keep my job. I have always wondered at the conditions of this conditioning. Did my immigrant grandparents, from whom I hail, learn to keep quiet as a condition of labor as they migrated from an untold town in Mexico to a not-talked-about stint in Texas to the Iowa meat plants they worked in, to the auto industry of Michigan? Or was it something else? Something different? Did they carry this tendency toward silence with them? When I had the chance, it would have never occurred to me to ask. I, too, had learned what I needed to know to work, and to not ask too many questions. My boss agreed to let me go to New York, but did not pay me. In New York, my friend's friends asked me to help them hail a cab, explaining that cabs do not stop for men of color—though they probably didn't use that language—and that a cab would stop for me, a skinny tall white-passing 21-year-old girl—though they probably wouldn't use that language. They taught me to stick out my leg, bare in a pair of cut-off jean shorts and combat boots, which is what I wore at the time. Put that leg right out in the street, they urged me. Raise my hand. Look directly into the eyes of the driver.

Legs for days. A way my legs have been called. A way to call attention to body parts. Parts of a woman. To pick a woman apart. To call out legs in terms of days is to note the length of those legs. My legs. My height. Of six feet. Mostly made up of legs. Legs attached to the rest of me. Legs which account for a significant, but only a portion, of me. My entire life—as I remember—my height has given people I do not know enough pause to comment. Often, I am asked whether I played basketball. As if height lends itself to skill. Which in my case, it doesn't. And they are often disappointed when I tell them, no. And I feel ashamed to disappoint these people. These strangers. I feel useful when I am asked, often by older women in grocery stores, to reach something for them on a shelf they cannot access. You're welcome, I flirt shamelessly. Tell them I am happy to help and ask if there might be anything else I can help them with. Without shame. The 21-year-old legs that stopped the driver of the cab, the stranger who slowed down and lowered his window to ask where I was going was pissed to learn that I would not be his fare. I do not remember what he said but I do see the look on his face. Pleasure melts into shock that dims into a rage. Is this shame for his expectation exposed? The expectation of me in his back seat? Is it frustration? The knowledge of his helplessness laid bare in the bait and switch of the passenger. His livelihood dependent but not chosen. And while I would not have used this language, I did know that I already knew how to use my body to get other people what they want.

Back in Chicago, with her on the street in the lesbian neighborhood I was once directed to live and did, and then didn't, because it was too white and too expensive, it is without surprise that I note one cab after another pass us by. My current hail is without legs. While my legs may still go on for days they also carry the weight of extra pounds and the face of a no longer 21-year-old. While I remain achingly aware of my body in the public of any space I am with others, I learn to move it differently. I deny any possibility of and refuse to

imagine myself as a sexual being. I still understand myself as for others and to silently take in their directives. I imagine I flirt much in the way people assign flirting to babies and old people, with pleasure but without viable sexuality. It's not that I am not aware that babies, old people, and I are not susceptible to sexual harm. However, it's just that I don't assume that people engage in flirting with me in any serious or sexual way. For me to hail a cab now takes the deliberateness of the fullness of my six-foot frame and a stare and a hand in the air. Muscle memory places the leg in its place. To each passing driver I assign a knowing, a recognition, and a belonging that they, too, are in on the world she and I are making. That she and they, in each passing driver, are strangers who through recognition can make worlds and be in relation even in and alongside the economy of exchange that makes us driver and passenger.

It was in this same city in a different moment that such a worlding between a driver and his passenger, he and I, opened and failed in the space of a ride from the airport to my then apartment on the north side of the city. Already on edge from the noise and the public of travel, airplanes and airports and people, I willfully entered the cab that I did not hail but was assigned to by the employee at the airport who manages and directs passengers into cars. Although I know, or think I know, that to be in the line and at the airport, the drivers are licensed and registered, I enter the ritual of survival I have developed ever since I have lived in a city that allows such relationships for those who can afford them. I'm never sure that I can afford it, and I could take the train for a significantly lower fare. But it is night and I am tired and an hour alone with one person feels a lot more manageable than the hour and a half I will need to be differently alert for and then have to tread in the dark with my luggage the 15-minute walk it will take to get to the door I can lock. Sifting through my options in survival, this time, often times, I choose debt.

In the back of his cab, I surrender myself to a tedious ritual of survival. It is not a ritual unique to cabs. Rather, it is a ritual for living I have developed that I adapt to any context that places me in relation to other people. Find a woman with a child, I heard somewhere, and she will help you. The saying, I think comes from the belief in mothers as protectors and caregivers. But I have been in enough public bathrooms with nonbinary people and seen the ways that mothers look to know they are not reliable. And then there is my own mother, who could also not be relied on to care for or protect me in the way I would like to imagine all children might flourish and develop. In publics then, I trust myself. In the cab, I give just enough direction, just enough information that I can track the route he will choose and determine if he is taking me elsewhere. Though quicker and more expensive than public transportation, especially trains, I also find cab rides to be a horrific exercise in vulnerability. To willingly share your address with a stranger, who then has the knowledge that you have at least enough money for this ride and also what belongings you have with you, the whole thing is terribly personal. I feel visible. I do not like feeling visible. And despite my legs and—when I show them—my tattooed arms, I have the cultivated illusion that I move through the world invisible and unnoticed. Although I have ample evidence to render this an illusion, I hold onto it for the sake of my survival.

Rogers Park, I utter, my eyes meeting his in the mirror. I meet his eyes because I also believe that while I am afraid of what I imagine him and also me capable of doing, confirmed by the city's policies that govern our relation, policies that recognize and temper the humiliations and violences of which we are capable, I also cling to interdependence and humanity in all people. With this contradiction, or rather coexistence, I am comfortable. I compare the face in the mirror with the one on the license, force myself to register the numbers. In these moments I neither wonder at nor care whether my sometimes photographic memory that holds only numbers like engravings in my mind

is something I was born with or developed as a condition of survival. Those things I have survived. Inherited. Feared or imagined.

Some time after the flicker of recognition that passes between this cab driver and me, we begin a halting and uneasy exchange that surpasses the policies governing our relation. I initially am unable to place his accent that he fills in through the spurts and starts. How we have come to these topics, I cannot remember. My memory registers only those things necessary and it is necessary for me to remember that he is from Algiers. He tells me this and I cannot know why. Is he too lonely? Does he, too, need to tell his story? Am I an audience both willing and captive? He is angry but his anger is not directed at me. Or I am so used to being in the company of anger, my own, others, that I either absorb it or acknowledge the need to witness it. He asks me what I know of Algiers and I, knowing little—knowing nothing—blurt out what my mind reaches for in the way of connection and share what little I can access about Franz Fanon. I am embarrassed this is my response. Might I have asked him why? Might I have told him nothing?

He continues, speaking with knowledge of Fanon. In my ritual or survival, I fail to register much of what he says. Of life in Algiers. Of his life here. I was there and, yet, remember nothing. The blank space recedes as we near my apartment and I am relieved to offer an intersection rather than an address. In my memory, it is after I have paid his fare that his request comes, urgently. He asks for contact. For connection. A phone number or an email. He insists that he is looking only for someone to talk to, that he has no one to talk to in the way we have talked. That he is lonely and homesick. When I tell him I have a partner, and I do not tell him my partner is a queer woman, he assures me he is not looking to date me. No, I say. No. As I turn from the cab and rush toward the door of my apartment building I want to weep. But I do not. In fear. Of men. In distance. From connection.

Fear and distance are familiar protagonists of survival. Their tentacles first compete then move in tandem to reach from and beyond sites of trauma. They labor to anticipate and then offer protection against any manner of future threat—threats, which are endless and looming. Their offering is both promise and lie. There is no protection given or guaranteed. The failed possibility of this chance encounter collapsed at the intersections of gender and sexuality, class and nation. And while survival reminds me that this state I live in, this being that I nourish, permits few luxuries and fewer risks, I nonetheless often wonder at the losses it secures. And while I do not romanticize what might have been with this man who was my driver, nor regret my refusal or the conditions that give rise to it, I carry and I recognize his loneliness. This, I think, is the temporality of survival, to generate a fluency and a foundation in anticipation. To hover always and only at the edges of belonging. To render the queer worldmaking that I assign in my writing and in my reading and in my aloneness always and only imagination and imaginary and imagine, states best served in the agony of insomnia during the depths and the darkness of 3:00 a.m. From the depths of survival, imagination and imaginary and imagine are watch points, fuzzy and uncertain knowings from a possible time before. This knowing gestures toward and from the very being of survival, the act of what it means to survive.

On the street in the lesbian neighborhood with her, the night finds its way to an end. I want the night to never end and I want the night to end immediately. So I can be alone. With my feelings. Not that I will process those feelings as much as survive them. I find feelings best felt indirectly. In novels and narratives. Movies and commercials. In the witness of wriggling worms on the wrong sides of forest floors. Through the cat who births kittens in a spare bedroom, the cat who came home with me in a box from a Starbucks. Watch her nurse the kittens and then watch each one adopted out. All these things bring all the tears. My own experiences rarely bring me to tears. I was raised to

mistrust my tears, to stop them. Still well past the age of assigning my behavior to how I was raised. In all likelihood I will go home and watch TV. Something like *The Bachelor*, *Grey's Anatomy* or *Law and Order: SVU*. Although I probably would not use this language to account for my taste in TV shows, if pressed I might utter something about the relief I find in the repetition of such shows, in the formula that pushes normativity just enough for the margins to be annihilated or absorbed. There is no accounting for taste.

Except there is, an account to be made for taste. When someone says there is no accounting for taste, I wonder if they would rather not account for taste, their own or others? Taste. It reveals something about a person. In the same way I can account for my taste in TV shows, I can account for other tastes. When I am lonely, I take out a spoon. Probably from the dish drainer or the dishwasher because I hate putting dishes away. I reach for a jar of peanut butter and a bag of white sugar on the top shelf. In bed wrapped in a blanket I will dip a spoonful of peanut butter into the sugar and put it in my mouth. This. A taste I can account for. This. The taste of loneliness. Of despair. If I were to place the taste next to its memory in my mouth I would certainly gag. But I do not place taste next to memory in my mouth. And when I have had my fill, I return the jar and the bag to their cupboards. The spoon in the sink.

I like alone. Not so much lonely. Across from her on the street in Chicago, I try to discern the uncertainty I feel. Of who I am. Who I am to her. What this night has meant and where it might lead. I want to claw my way outside the loneliness of this uncertainty, crawl into longing. Longing, at the edge of uncertainty, seeks out another in relation. A relation in sight, across from her in the familiarity of what I wish I knew, we hold on to one another. On that street where I fail to fully hail the passing cabs, we kiss. My tongue in and out of her mouth, I taste the gin in hers. The gin in her mouth lingers from what I imagine might be the generous pour

of the bartender who keeps time with us in the gay bar on a Monday before 9:00 p.m. Maybe the night starts later in gay bars. She and I, we are neither of us late night people and despite the ways the pleasure mixed with longing will consume my 3:00 a.m. thoughts, my yawns lead us out here to end our time. The gin is laced with the heat from our earlier meal at the Vietnamese restaurant, the meal over which we lingered in the way a relationship does when it is uncertain of what it wants to be. In the way people who find themselves having lived through the ways whiteness can thread its way through queer and Chicana relations, trading speech for silence. She, who has, in response to a death that, though meaningful in the way all life and death is meaningful, meant not too much to me. I note the combination of gin and chilis is neither familiar nor unpleasant. It just is. In the warmth of her hands in mine I hear her laugh. Laugh at me as I tell her, sipping my Guinness, that gin is best drunk on summer nights and not the damp of this Midwestern spring. What I wouldn't give for her clarity, to be the kind of woman who drinks what she wants despite the season. Through the press of our bodies I watch the residue of fear drip down my face, absorbed by the concrete.

The kiss. It takes me by surprise. It shouldn't. This is not our first kiss. Years ago, she and I shared countless kisses. Which is to say, I didn't count them. Maybe I should have. One. The healing kiss in the fall of my first year of graduate school during the flu that knocked me on my ass. The flu promised me by my fifth-grade teacher, who lectured at me as he drove me home from a sleep-away class trip to a pioneer-type town, telling me that the first year as a new teacher, which he predicted I would become, would come with an illness that would strengthen the immune system. While I did not become the grade school teacher he imagined for me, teaching children to become citizens with and for some notion of god, I think of his care fondly every year in a new place when the germs take over my body. She and her girlfriend showed up at my place with a pot of soup and a tub of Vicks that she spread over my bare chest after she took off my shirt. Leaving me to sweat it out alone.

Two. Her kiss in a series of kisses my new friends gifted me on my birthday in the first year of my Ph.D. program sitting outside at a bar after seminar in March in the desert. March in the desert, for me the blissful moment I wish I could return to and to stay there where the nights are cool enough to relieve the days that only hint at the heat headed this way but not quite yet. The kiss unexpected, and I imagine unplanned. The kiss I laughed through that made it all teeth. The kiss with the tongue. The kiss that took me by surprise and made me feel warm in the ways I do not expect to feel warm. Three. The kiss goodnight, as she and her girlfriend put me to bed during our sleepovers where they kept a spare bedroom for me to relieve me from the alone that bordered on lonely, reading me the poetry of women of color until I fell asleep. Three. The magic number. A logical place to end. And while it's not the ending, I cannot remember past it, or before, or in between. I cannot remember past, though there must have been countless others. Or at least, I want there to be. Why wouldn't I? I longed for a connection, longed for belonging. To her. Queer. Chicana. A kiss, that thing I learned would take me there.

While it turns out that kissing is one of my favorite things, to watch and to do, each first kiss takes me by surprise. And from somewhere else, for at least a time, I watch it happen. Or disappear. The first time, at least 40 years after the first time, I told a therapist of the room beyond the wall in the basement of the apartment I grew up in. The concrete wall. It moved. Opened. Behind it was a lady. How kind she was. A teacher, she must have been. To me, a nice lady. The lady. There was a desk. It was warm. She talked to me and we did homework. Solved problems. How I loved her. How I wanted to run away from the therapist and his words that suggested, marveled even, at the survival instincts my brain relied on to invent this woman, the walls that moved, to save me from what I cannot remember. I hated him. I loved her. She, as real as anyone I've never met. Who I'll always remember. I remember the kiss. How I asked for it. Pleaded for it. Just it. Nothing else. And how I remember little else. When I do, I feel nothing.

This kiss with her, it feels like a first kiss. In many ways it was a first kiss. While cells regenerate in seven years, in the five years that separate Chicana loves whole worlds can be created and destroyed and built up again. Five years. Five years, the time it takes for cancer to go into remission. Five years after the bedsides of the cancers that I have sat next to and mourned and healed and left that mean to me that cancer is not—cannot—be a metaphor. For the thing that drove us apart. Cancer, the thing that caused the death that initiated the together that brought us to this kiss. Five years—the anniversary symbolized by wood. How I want to carve our names into wood encircled by a heart. That the wood I want to carve is my own skin and that I can see, can you see, the chips, the splinters that fly when the knife, the needle, carves. The after carve care that gives way to skin, different skin, forever altered skin now a smooth and shiny scar. With this kiss, this moment, my belly, split open, stretches wider still at the site of return, of opening. The kiss laps up the blood that pools around us from the scars ripped open, our fluids finding one another, mixing together, forming new stains that will become yet smoother skin.

With her kiss, my belly is full. In the fullness of recognition, I look up. I release. I hail. This time, the cab answers the hail. The driver stops. I get in. The door still open, I cannot say what plans we make for the future. Only that it is. Becoming. The door shut I retreat into ritual. The license, the face in the mirror. The vague directive to head north on Clark. We continue on in silence for a bit until he breaks it with a question that is really a directive. What. Are. You. What. Are. You. A question I have learned to anticipate, especially from strangers, to which I sometimes respond. A man in a mall turns around to ask if I am European. The 18-year-old blond man-child in the exit row next to me on an airplane who cannot place me. The waiter. The person on a bus. The. The. The. The. The.

This is not an unfamiliar question, a directive. As if the body they see before them cannot be mapped onto their familiar. If the people that I know who have learned to love me have some clarity of my shifting, passing body, strangers seem to be less comfortable enough to want, to need to know. Who. I. Am. If I answer, which I often do not, or entertain the question through questions, which I sometimes do, I hear it is something in my cheekbones, the slope of my nose, the shape of my eyes. I find these parts of me as unremarkable as anything. Rather than skin, or maybe alongside the arrangement of my parts, I think it is my affect. My silence. These things that do not move, or behave, or comply. As I age, when I look in the mirror, which I try not to do, I increasingly see my mother. I have been told I favor her enough times that my father, whose skin does not pass anywhere near whiteness, jokes about the milkman or the mailman, some unnamed man who must have entered my mother at least four times to produce the children who look so white. Red Rover, Red Rover.

Tell me who you love and I'll tell you who you are, I hear again and again. This statement beckons the listener to account for her relations. From south of living, that space of tentative and shifting relations I struggle to account for, to sustain, to trust, love. From south of living, I have not been asked to tell you who I love as much as I have been asked who I am. What. Are. You. Tell me who you are, and I'll know how to love you. In his eyes, I read less a hostility and a need to know than I do a curiosity and a kindness, and for whatever his reasons, a need to place me. My belly full with the recognition of a newly fledgling intimacy, this stranger intimates an opening. When I ask him to repeat his question he responds, asking me if I am from South Africa. If he wants to know who I am in order to love me, I am on edge as this would make me a white South African in relation to his black body of color. If I am what he needs me to be, rather than the mixed-race white-passing Chicana I am, this placement threatens to invert the colonial direction and order of power in which I usually place myself.

And what that would mean for us. Not halfway home I begin to panic. My heart races. I watch the street to track the route I have requested.

I do not go dormant this time. Not the panic alongside the fullness. I tell him I am from Michigan. I hope to not be directed to do the Michigan hand thing because I do not want to tell him more about from where and whom I hail and because I want to secure the distance I place between me and that and them and what I have survived. In an effort to reciprocate and to redirect, itself a survival strategy I invert the question and ask him where he is from, to which he replies, Ghana. As his cell phone rings and he takes it, I settle back into silence.

Closer to Rogers Park, I direct him down a street that leads to my own, with the name and its cross street. After a pause, a full belly laughter fills the space between us. As I wait for his laughter to stop, unable to resist but ever so hesitantly joining in, he reveals that we, in fact, are neighbors, his house down the street from my apartment. Our eyes in the mirror once again, “Hello, neighbor.” And now, pulled into yet another possible relation, he returns and continues, asks whether I’ve ever been to Africa. When I tell him I have not, he insists I must go and I agree. I do not ask about nor insist he go to Michigan and as I pay the fare that releases us from our relation, I close the door on my ritual of survival, emerging different, in the way that rituals tend to do.

It starts with a hailing.

This time.

Arms

stretched

out.

Beckoning. Insisting.

Suspended.

You anticipate.Calculate.Here and there.Before and after.

Into open arms you want to run.

Sometimes you run.

Into open arms you want to walk.Run.Surrender.Return.Squeeze back.

Against open arms you want to take up arms.Lash.Burn.Refuse.Cut them off.

You stand in the stillness.

Suspended.

It starts with a healing.

This time.

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