

Image and text from Humans of NY - uploaded Feb. 19th 2019

*"I'm not sure if you've heard about the accident at South By Southwest a few years back. A car plowed into a crowd of pedestrians. Four people died. Twenty-five were injured. I was the twenty-fifth. I broke my back and neck in four places. The driver was fleeing from the police in a stolen car. He was twenty-one years old. His name was Rashad. A lot of people in my life thought he should get the death penalty. But I never had strong feelings about it. Maybe I disconnected from my emotions. Maybe it's just my personality. But I mostly just felt sad that he's so young and he'll be in jail for the rest of his life. Recently I looked up the address of his prison. I purchased a PO Box. And I wrote him three letters. I've held onto them for months without sending them. I guess I'm struggling with the fact that empathy is a privilege. I'm still alive. I'm still able to walk. There are people who lost more than me who might be upset that I'm showing him any compassion at all. But I*



*find it curious that I know nothing about somebody who had such a profound impact on my life. All three letters begin the exact same way: 'We've never met, but we were in the same place at the same time.' I'm not sure what I'm looking for. I just figure there's something to be said. And I'd like to figure out what that is."*

*We've never met, but we were in the same place at the same time.*

It's funny, the way a life ruptures, not only in the moment, but over and over again for years afterwards. How mine got to continue on, undaunted. Altered. It is funny the way the faces on a crowded street dissipate through the gaps in history only to rise restless in dreams.

My grandfather was haunted by ghosts like those, only his had limp hands and guns on their breath and voices like bombshells, breaking. Mine have traces of singing still caught in their mouths, of music and late nights and kissing in the back of a minivan and liquor spilled on a shirt and birthday cake and an "I love you" and a grandmother's heartache and yesterday's flowers from an anniversary and, and, and. All that living. Are they yours, too? Do you get a right to them? To any of this? I carry them in the casual gestures of strangers on the street, in the folds of my sweater, in sleep, in the phantom pain at the base of my spine. I spent two years learning their names and another year unlearning them. Twenty five people breathing. You were twenty one and that number isn't very much to carry, Only that you must add their lives onto yours now, always. Have you spent any time unlearning them yet? Have you spent any time wishing you were unborn? I have.

We were in the same place at the same time and I don't hate you anymore.

I have a sister who plays piano. I'm telling you that because all through our childhood she would wake in the early morning and play in the grey light. I'm telling you because she has strong fingers. Because she's got a boyfriend now who gets annoyed when she makes too much sound. I'm telling you because she believes in God. The piano player. When I was seven years old I put her in my lap and I sang and she fell asleep and I think a part of her is still there, pressed against my chest. We are finite. She is twenty now and she still says she knows him. She still plays.

I don't know what I want to say to you.

I rose early the morning we met. My apartment was already hot with summer. It glowed soft orange, the curtains, the bookcase. The shower sang too, icy and distant. I loved it because it kept me awake.

On the way to work I watched a woman get out of her car with her dog and the dog tore away from her and bounded across the street because he saw a squirrel on the other side. The cars were rushing by and she screamed his name and put her hands over her mouth. He was so close, but he made it. I saw him for weeks afterwards. Those long legs, brown body bent forward, a blurr. Almost not alive anymore. I saw her face, too, when he reached the grass. The relief broken over it, almost violent.

I had lunch with my sister. She sat across the table from me at a restaurant and she did not look me in the eyes. It is not easy, loving someone. You have to, though. She drummed her hands on the tabletop, index finger dipping in and out of the watermark from a sweating glass. She had on a red blouse and she didn't know that that night I would be on the ground. She would be in her pajamas in front of the TV with a carton of ice cream and a spoon. Both of us would feel broken, both of us would be wearing the same dollar store chapstick, but only one of us would wake up the next morning alright. She ordered a quesadilla and told me she was sad.

When I was a teenager she could tell how I was feeling by the music I was playing when I picked her up from elementary school. As soon as we got home she would run to the piano and on the days when I filled the car with heartache she let her fingers dance, light as the ghosts of themselves, and it brought me back a little. Have you ever seen someone do something not because they had to but because they were hungry? That was the way my sister played. That was the way that twenty nine people sucked in air, and twenty five of them breathed it out again. Four sets of lungs still have the taste of Red River Street inside them. They aren't getting anything back.

My sister has the strongest fingers. She played once for my grandfather and he shook his head and held up his hand and she stopped. I could tell the music was bringing back all those ghosts. Faces at the windows. He trembled like he was still nineteen, caught in the edge of the world, caught in thunder.

My sister tucks her hair behind her ears and she tucks her sadness back beneath her clothes. That night she changes into pink pajamas and closes her eyes to the harsh light of afternoon. Her eyelashes are long and dark and curl upwards. She watches television and thinks about Mary Magdalene and the piano sits in the corner like an oasis or like a tomb.

I wonder if you noticed the sky that night. The way the clouds lengthened as though stretched between two sides of a busy street. We drove into Austin with the windows down and the hot air blew our hair back. We grew large as the buildings swelled, hands opening. I hadn't seen those friends in three months and so we laughed with our mouths open and Austin slipped into our lungs like the hot breath of an old song. I didn't know I'd be seeing you. I didn't know that afterwards you would always be that song stuck in my ribcage and that dog as he flew desperate across the street.

We booked five months in advance for the concert. We didn't think twice about the price. It was hot indoors and people clung blurry to one another like fluorescent shadows. We put our hands in the air for the last three songs. For three songs I did not think about my family and my heart rose up through my fingertips and out through a crowd of lips as they sang. They let it ring

on, loud and impossible. Have you ever been to a concert like that? Maybe if you had you would have stopped.

I am writing to you because we were in the same place at the same time and only one of us got the chance to feel alive first. I read a quote once that said “We aren’t seeking the meaning of life, we’re seeking an experience of being alive.” Sometimes I imagine you driving through the blackness with your headlights on, staring straight forward, searching. They don’t let you drive in prison. Maybe it is through your fists, opening and closing in dreams.

You ran a red light on Red River Street. That color took too much from us already. Exit sign, bitten lip, stop light, fire trucks, the pavement slick with blood like ice gleaming, the insides of eyes. As the policeman turned his lights on we emerged from the venue and out into the air, a stream of people having just shared music, still heavy in our heads. A hundred of the same songs. As you swerved to evade the policeman I pushed my hair back from my face and dug through my bag for my water bottle. The girl next to me was doing the same and we smiled at each other for a moment. I noticed how bright her eyes were. Full. From the night and from being.

You hurtle through the barrier and suddenly the crowd is there and you hurtle through them too because what are lives to you anyway? You are running. From a policeman and from the night and from God. You plow through bodies.

Funny, isn’t it? The way a life ruptures. The way we fall, fracture. I don’t want to think about how it must have felt beneath you. Once I dreamt it was my body in the driver’s seat and my hands at the wheel and my own soul crushing as people screamed and I kept going. The thunder of a war is all the same no matter where you decide to live, whether or not the fight is your own. My grandfather knows this. So do I.

We were in the same place at the same time and I didn’t see you coming and I am angry but also I remember your eyes. Yours and hers. I saw hers and I smiled and then all at once the whole street seemed to scream out in pain and with blinding force I was flung to the side. There are some things you don’t want to remember. Not pain like that. Not splintering.

But I saw you. I saw you as you were forced from the car and the edges of the world tinted sharp and red. I lay on my side and I could not move. You looked at me. The night rose black and impossible, this time not with singing but with pain, blinding, everything red as heart torn open. I saw your own heart torn open as you looked at me and twenty one years old hung so heavy it could swallow you. You seemed so small.

A war is waged through pain, through memory. It rises uninterrupted and sharpens in silence.

Your sentence was not my victory.

In the street lives fractured and mine paused, skipped a beat, and restarted. I came out on the other side to see myself free.

In the road the lights spun and the screaming rose up like an ocean, disjointed, crashing, a call to sleep. Somewhere the music of the concert lingered eerie and tragic, as intangible as the essence of rain. Somewhere, not there, I thought about dying, only in the context of your eyes. I thought about my sister. Her hands stronger than living. How were we going to go on living? How were we going to go on?

The woman in the ambulance needed me to stay awake. “Do you have family?” she asked. I told her that my sister’s name was Rose. I could feel her, still pressed against my chest at seven years old. The silence between songs.

My sister’s name is Rose.

*We've never met, but we were in the same place at the same time.* So was she.

I imagine her so easily, her life stretched behind her, fragmented and beautiful like the shattered glass in the road. I imagine her as if she is free. Maybe it is because when I sleep the dog haunts my memory over and over as he bounds into the street, unknowing. The car hurtles through space but he makes it. He makes it in time. In my dreams sometimes I am the dog, sometimes the driver, sometimes the woman as the relief breaks over her face.

Sometimes I can see her eyes as she turned to me. Sometimes I forget how to breathe.

When she was five years old she wouldn't get out of the swimming pool. It was a public one, and her first time in the water.

When she was fifteen she fell in love with a boy. It was summer, and the first time she felt brave.

At first she only stood on the edge and the pavement scorched her toes hot and vicious. There were children splashing, laughing, doggy paddling in pink floaties, and mothers on the steps with their sunglasses on. Her mother didn't know how to swim. Neither did her brother. They brought her there and they pushed the rubbery floaties up over her arms, retreating to the shade of the grass, her brother flirting with two white girls in flip flops and bikinis. She watched the surface ripple, light and inviting. She stepped in. First one foot, then the other. The cold was surprising. It sent a soft ache all the way up her legs and tingled promisingly in the pit of her stomach. The second step. This one was deeper and her knees were submerged. Third. She could feel the water tugging at her stomach, infinite and heavy with weight. For a moment she felt afraid. The sounds of laughter faded and the swimming pool grew quiet. The water lapped at her skin like an animal: rough, unfathomable. The last step and all at once it had caught her, up to her neck, her ears, body suspended, her floaties keeping her chin above the surface. Keeping her breathing. She fell in love and never fell out of it, her feet dangling suspended in space. It was the first time she ever felt held.

She stayed in the water until the light began to fade. It cast patterns on her skin beneath the surface, and she felt as if her body was the whole breadth of the world, white clouds flickering across brown mountains, as if she was no longer real, no longer had a name.

He was seventeen and soft only on the inside. He had an earring and birds flew from his mouth when he talked, words so smooth she didn't believe them, not at first. They slipped through her hands like liquid light. But he told her his name and slowly he let enough life drip from him to build her something to dip her feet into. Rivers or feathers, and the silk of easy conversation, he was what she had been looking for.

In May they turned off all the lights and she felt his chest beneath her hands, another continent, another oasis. For a few minutes she belonged to no one and the sweat of them beaded wet over dry sheets. She thought she could feel the earth moving. Another distant swimming pool, its depth a strange baptism beneath their hands.

When the door opened the room filled with harsh eleven o'clock light and there was her father, angry, so angry. There were his hands. On her. On him. He blinked pain away from his eyes and let it hurt her because all love is not soft. The front door slammed closed and he was gone, seventeen lingering uneasily in the street, weighing down his shoulders. The house retreated into itself, tougher, disappointed. She felt her father's hands on her as if there were scars, as if there was more than an imprint of a thumb, that dark reckoning.

She went to the pool every day that first summer when she was small, and every summer after. Water called out to her like the ghost that sometimes flickered in and out of her father's eyes. Unanswered. Soon she could cut through water as easily as breathing. Deftly, as though through habit. Another little girl walked up to her after the first week and their names soon fit easily into each other's mouths. They grew up in the periphery of that swimming pool, on the grass, the popsicles dripping grape sticky sweet from their hands, on the roof later when they convinced the lifeguard to let them up the winding stairs. It was in the water though that they remained the same, suspended, each holding their own names in their mouths, lungs straining. It was that air inside them that lasted up through childhood. The ability to hold your breath. To keep on, to remain full and let the world dissolve around you, muffled and cold and bright.

Her junior year he showed up at her window at midnight, his earring gleaming. "Where are we going," she asked him. He only shook his head and said, "You'll see." They drove all through the night and she leaned her head back and fell asleep to the rush of the open road.

When she awoke he was pulling into a parking lot. The light filtered in grey through the car windows. He glanced at her and smiled.

When she opened the car door she knew. The rush of it. The air. She ran down the path and there it was, all at once, spread out before her as though waiting. She forgot about him, for a moment. She stepped forwards, a wave nearly reached her toes. Another step. It rushed beneath her feet cold and impossible. For a moment she was frightened. But then she was in up to her thighs, shorts grazing the surface, and she knew at once that this was what you called beautiful. This was what she called the love inside her when it was no longer soft. This was the water from her history and the language she always longed for and she held out her arms and found her life. It crashed around her infinite and terrifying and brave. That sliver like a knife where the sandbar

met water, like her own spine, like the depth of the ghost, like the thunder that comes from reclaiming your own name.

I don't know how to write about her without talking about the water. The way it carried her. Out and away to someplace beyond the realm of memory. The way it flooded Red River Street and glittered on. The wave in slow motion, the car as it crashed into her body, the earth. She already knew how to be brave. She already knew how to hold the air inside of her and in it her own name, her victory. Do you? Know how to be brave?

The ocean rose like a scream or a song. Maybe she felt it coming as soon as she stepped outside. Maybe she remembered the ghost in her father's eyes and learned that it was pain and learned that it was coming.

You sped towards us still and she paused. She looked at me, and she smiled. She said her own name. DeAndre Tatum. She stepped forward onto the sidewalk. Once. Twice. The water rose around her dark and unfathomable and trembling. Cold. Not all love is soft. Sometimes it is just brave. She held her breath.

You came.



*We've never met, but we were in the same place at the same time.*

Maybe I should hate you. But life stretches on and after all of this, I can still walk myself home.

Maybe you like music too. Maybe in some other world you were there at the concert, sweat on your face and laughter as electric as lightning. In some other world you were the boy who loved DeAndre, or another ghost at the windows of my grandfather's mind.

It's funny, who gets to do the killing. All it takes is two hands. The flood of an engine.

I found the address of the prison you are in. I want to know what your life looks like from the inside. Maybe you rise early not because you have to but because you want to escape from those dreams. Maybe your mother visits every Sunday and she doesn't cry until the last second and even then her eyes pool grateful and also lost. She wears floral dresses and she tells people that her son is a musician. That he is living away from home. That he writes her songs about his father.

Maybe I could have met you in another time and another place, strangers in a well lit room, at a coffee stand, on the train. You are wearing a blue shirt, dreads pulled back. You are only twenty-one years old. You extend your hand to me, and I shake it.

"Rashad," you say.

"Sarah."

Your grip is hard, fingers rough as living.

"It's nice to meet you."

You step forward. So does DeAndre. So does Jamie and Steven and Sandy. To meet you. To bridge the distance.

I broke my back and my neck in four places. I kept my life. You kept yours. I am sorry for us. I am sorry you have to live with those names.

I hope that they have a piano where you are. That those hands that took four lives will stumble slowly over white keys and play the thunder, the ocean rising, the hot regret of a city at night. Maybe you will play lighter and lighter until the notes slip through the air like birds on the breath of the boy DeAndre loved and they will somehow make up for the death etched into your palms. I hope that someday you can carry them without igniting. I hope that after all this you can hold your own name in your mouth and their names in your hands and that you can keep on.