

Did You Hear That, Just Now?

Bald Eagle Proud

The cleaning company is called Bald Eagle Proud.
I meet its owner at a café in South Philadelphia
Where over Eggs Benedict, his stomach squeezing
Against his belt, he tells me: I can speak Spanish.
Understand it, too. I only need help with the
Nuances. These emerge early on, cracks splitting
Open a brick façade when he calls me at ten p.m.
With my first message to deliver: Tell Segundo
The glass globes were streaked at the Buddakan.
Tell him to clean them twice today, just in case.
Que los limpie dos veces? Segundo repeats.
Clean them twice for what? Dave is right: there are
Nuances to all this, there are overtones, but I
Do my best to stick to the script. It is the same
With the oven, the single chair left unstacked
After the party at Granite Hill. In the office,
Dave leans into his leather sofa, hands folded
Diplomatically, discussing his frustrations.
I smooth my timesheet, sliced like a single pie
To feed a restaurant into pairs of minutes –
Two for this text, four and a half for this call.
At fifteen dollars an hour, I have just enough
Gas money to drive home.

One month later, the silverware at El Rey disappears.
Ask him what happened, says Dave. Not an
Accusation. Just a question. This is where the
Nuance comes in. No es acusación, solo es pregunta,
I tell Segundo, my words falling like stones into
Silence. Señora, Segundo says, we don't know what
Dave is trying to say. We didn't take it. I wonder
What he looks like, what he eats in the morning,
Whether he dreams of returning to a country where
The nuances are fewer, or more inviting to contemplate.
We say goodbye formally this time, que muy amable,
May you be well, knowing in that way that humans
Know things without ever being told
We will not be speaking again.

Ghetto City

My students have created a board game
Out of cardboard, tape, and staples.
Ghetto City, they call it.

A numbered path leads to a 3D hut
With a restless stick figure in the window.
The goal: reach jail and bail your brother out
Before getting shot.

We play the day John's brother gets booked
And the day Kareem's uncle comes home.
We play the day of the middle school shooting,
Two kids with guns, none of my students,
Nobody hurt. We play as if these things
Make the game all right, safe still,
Hypothetical.

When funders visit, we hide Ghetto City
Under a red sheet in the back of the class.
My students cross their arms, discuss the impact
Of arts enrichment on their lives.

When we play, I am usually the first to get shot.
My students love the way that this makes sense,
And all the ways it doesn't. When I suggest
A new game, they are disappointed in me.
It doesn't work that way, they say.

General Store Café

All day, jazz. At a blue table, Masquerade dancer painted on top
One hand cradling a jug of wine & a white clown face
Glittery scarf, arched eyebrows, dotted eyes
On the walls stained glass, green & gold
Bounce light every which way, winding
Wind chimes, shelves painted lilac, housing
Cloth dolls, home-made post cards, wreaths
Disheveled over rims of chairs, a bookcase of local books
That we don't want to read
But will pretend to
 When forced
To, when there is no one else to share our table
So much jazz: oil paintings of farm animals
Pig snouts blowing kisses
Hérons psychedelic lime green & pink
A sack labeled *Product of Colombia, 70 Kilos* –
 To which twenty-first century soul
 Did this old thing appear artistic?
Rabbit wind vanes, painted wood critters
A forest goddess cloaked in hand-stamped robes
Carly's Grab 'Em By the Cowtail mocha
A plaque stating *Love me, love my dog*
& butterflies swinging from the ceiling.

A woman walks in, eyes wide, lost stare
Her sweatshirt spelling *United We Stand*
Can I get a coffee, she says, trips
Over the frayed rug, bumps
Into the boom box, plastered with
Bumper stickers & rainbow flags
 The radio stutters, shifts from jazz
 To Christmas tunes
Jingle bells jingle bells, faces fall flat around the café
 What is this CVS music? This gas station music?
What is this music that turns my mocha bitter?
That spins the butterflies idly, that nauseates
The herons in pink-green waves, that reminds me
 I am spending twelve dollars & eighty-six cents
 On my organic fair trade in-season spinach quesadilla
Music that sounds like my grandmother's house where she
Stuffed my stocking, read from the Bible
 I do not visit Grandma now

She cringes at my unshaved legs
This music, these fucking lullabies
That make me want to snap shut my laptop
Step outside, reach my fingers to the sky &
 Hold the world close; no
Not the café -
 Hold the world close; recall that
These are two different things
I am a citizen of both &
 One is begging
Eat your spinach quesadilla for the right reasons &
Switch the station now & then, if only for a second because
 Just jazz can get to be too much.

Did You Hear That, Just Now?

Zimmerman not guilty.
Trayvon Martin dead.

In South Philadelphia,
Silent streets: a sleepy fig tree,
Bony cats stalking their prey.

Is rising up too much to ask
On a July night like this one,
Wearing rage on our bodies
As we do on our Facebook pages?
Are we all so weary, so unsurprised
That a march is unattainable,
That the fury of our solitary brains,
Our fingers whipping across the keys
Are the most we can offer up
In the name of solidarity?

If it were the sixties, millions would have marched.
If it were the nineties, streets would have burned.

But it is 2013. The numbers ring apocalyptic.

Sidewalks are bare. Windows so dark
It seems all souls have departed.

I am Trayvon Martin
We are Trayvon Martin

The cries, once smothered by sirens,
Forced entries and the clink of handcuffs
Around the smooth wrists of brothers and sons
Stand no chance against this silence.
Boarded windows splinter open.
Potholes yawn. They will swallow
These cries by morning.

These homes, vacated of hope,
Will soon be yoga studios and
Montessori schools. And finally,
The fight - the few voices still
Murmuring over candlelight

In buildings slated for demolition
By winter - will drift to places still
Worth fighting for. I cannot tell
Whether or not they will be missed.