BARS
Black Art; Real Stories

First Issue • Fall 2015
Mission: To showcase the writing of Black students at the University of Iowa, and to create and support a Black arts community.

Black Art; Real Stories (BARS) is an initiative to capture and share the Black voices on campus that are often muted. In our time here at the Mecca for creative writers, we’ve discovered that the phrase doesn’t always hold true for everyone. The University of Iowa is host to the world renowned Writers’ Workshop, as well as the number one undergraduate English and Creative Writing programs. However, there isn’t a common outlet for our Black undergraduates to express their creativity, passions, fears and struggles...until now. Now we put them on display.

In special dedication to Iseah Cajou. May your soul rest in peace, and continue to inspire us to dream.
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How Could I Forget
By Caleb Rainey

Do you remember saying I love you?
You were seventeen. I was fifteen. It was a month into our relationship and I had fallen like a rock kicked off a cliff headed for a pool of water. I hit the water and thought I was floating. I never realized that sinking slowly feels like being in the clouds.

I had contemplated all week on how to tell you. It was going to be my first time saying I love you and I wanted it to be perfect. I even wrote a poem for the occasion. I wanted to speak so eloquently that if you hadn’t known you loved me, after I spoke, you’d realize with complete certainty, that you loved me too.

We were watching Lord of the Rings in your room. I was nuzzling my head into your neck, searching for a way to bring up the poem I had written. You smelled like cherry almond lotion and my heart was drumming to the rhythm of love so loud I couldn’t hear the movie. You seemed to know I wasn’t paying attention; you asked me what was wrong. Fear flashed across my face. It occurred to me that you could not have the same feelings; I told you I just had some things on my mind. You pulled away from me then, looking concerned. Your favorite grey V-neck t-shirt was falling lower than usual and I could see the paleness of your breasts. I shook the observation out of my head, telling myself it wasn’t what I should be thinking about. You asked what was going on. I started to sweat. I decided that I couldn’t hold back any longer. I told you I had something to say, but I needed you to wait until I was done to respond. Your eyes showed caution, but you nodded. I spoke:

“In everything I do
I have thoughts of you.
From the smile that appears after the first teddy bear
To the kiss we share when we are married.
From that night we get wild
To our first child.
From growing old with age
To living with God on the next page.
I want to forever be with you
So I can lift you
Because Laurie, I love you,
I’ll never put someone above you.”

You kissed me then. You held onto my face and kissed me with the passion of life. I had to pull myself away. I had to ask, “Do you love me back?” You smiled then, the most magnificent smile. “Of course,” you answered.

Do you remember telling me?
You started off by informing me that you hadn’t had your period yet. You told me not to worry – the odds were slim. The next month, we sat across from each other at Olive Garden. Our section was practically empty, our basket of breadsticks already devoured. I could feel your hands gripping mine, your eyes searching my face for an answer. You whispered as if in fear our waiter would hear our secret. “What are we going to do?” you asked. I glanced around, hoping the waiter would bring out the two Zuppa Toscana.
soups we ordered; I needed more time. The waiter didn’t come. I remember sounding stronger than I felt. “We’re going to keep it.” It’s the right thing to do. After that, you sat up straighter. Your hands slid from mine. Your eyes broke contact – focused on the fork next to your napkin – your thumb rubbed against its prongs. I watched you in silence, hoping you knew of a way out. You began to nod. Slowly at first, but eventually grew into full swing. You looked up at me, and smiled that smile again. “Of course,” you answered.

Do you remember when we lost Her?

You called me, crying. I couldn’t understand every word but I managed to make out one: Blood. My body tensed. I felt my heart sink into my stomach. I asked you where you were. You let out a moan. You began gasping as if drowning on your own tears. I couldn’t find the air in my lungs. I couldn’t save you. I started a sentence, but I couldn’t finish it. You hung up.

Do you remember therapy?

You started planning our wedding, and I started to see a counselor. You wanted to get married in two years, after I turned eighteen. I wanted to die. You showed me wedding dresses. I pointed to my favorites, like you asked me to. We’d fight about why I couldn’t tell you what I talked about with the counselor. I couldn’t tell you that I had wished our baby to death. I couldn’t tell you that I was sixteen and trying to understand how I could feel relief that she had died. I couldn’t tell you that even though I’ve always dreamed of becoming a father I had prayed to God to stop it from happening. I couldn’t tell you how I wanted to love someone else. I couldn’t tell you that looking at you made me want to save you. I couldn’t tell you that I knew what you couldn’t tell me. You couldn’t tell me how conflicting it was that you’d lost something you loved, when you’d never really had it in the first place. You couldn’t tell me how ashamed you felt. You couldn’t tell me how scared you were, that you might never be able to feel like a full woman. You couldn’t tell me how you saw my eyes change when I looked at you. Instead, you’d ask me how I felt about a June wedding. I’d tell you that sounded warm. You’d ask me what kind of cake we should get. I’d tell you red velvet, since I know that’s your favorite. You’d ask me, “Do you still love me?” and I’d answer without looking you in the eyes, “Of course.”

Do you remember the end?

I stopped going to the counselor. I found a woman who didn’t look like you. She had life in her eyes, joy in her laugh, and an innocent smile. I started lying that I had schoolwork so that I could spend time with her. I think you knew. I wasn’t going to stay. When I told you I was leaving, you yelled at me. You weren’t yelling out of anger. Your voice trembled with something else – with pain. You had lost us both.

I need to know, do you remember?

I can’t seem to forget.
An Ode to my Father
By Simone Banks

Father:
Noun-
A man in relation to his natural child or children.
Synonyms-
Dad, papa, daddy, dada, pop, old man.
Verb-
To be the father of; parent, to bring into the world, to spawn, sire, breed, literary beget; Archaic engender.

I grew up in a society where the definition of a father was twisted into something lesser Than it began.
See in some aspects a father in today’s society is looked at as a man.

A man who had nothing to offer to his children so he ran.
A man.
Who was too overwhelmed.
With the pressure of a precious life.
A man.
That couldn’t handle his responsibilities,
So he took flight never to return again.
A man.
Who couldn’t give up his life for a life he so selfishly created.
A man.
Not willing to support his children.
A man.
Who failed to do the one thing he was supposed to be good at.

See I never understood the sigma of fathers,
Until I saw a card in the local Walgreens that read:
Happy Father’s Day,
To the best mother in the world.
I live in a society where a father is an endangered species.

Little girls cling to little boys who so wrongfully treat them,
Losing their innocence at such young ages...
Because they never had a father show them how a man is supposed to love them.
So they cling to these boys who turn to violence,
Trying to be this man they think they’re supposed to be.
But don’t blame them, see,
They don’t understand...
Because they never had a father show them how a man is supposed to act.

See somewhere along the line in our society my generation has forgotten the role of Fathers.
Which makes me so proud my father.
He’s the one man on earth I know will love me unconditionally.
He wasn’t like the rest.
And yes,
He may have been stressed that my mother was pregnant.
And yes,
He didn’t have all the money it took to raise a child.
And yes,
He had the chance to depart but he chose to stay to be a part of something great,
Not giving up on what he started.
Leaving a child alone in the darkness.
Was not an option.
He stayed.

And for that I am truly thankful.
See, my father didn’t have the best education.
So he bent his back backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards and backwards
And forwards...
Working towards a brighter future for me. And even to this day at the ripe age of 44 he
Still wakes at exactly 4 o’clock every morning slaving himself.
For the comfort of his own children.
He is the perfect example of father.

A man who gives up everything for his children.
Rather see us feast than feed his own self need.
Would rather sweat to his dying day in the blazing heat,
Working until days end or until he weeps,
Than watch us struggle with own needs.
Yes.
He is my father.
Yes.
I’m proud to say he is my father.
No he’s not perfect man.
But who is a perfect man in such an imperfect world.
See my father likes to be modest.

But father this is the day.
That I finally realized your importance.
That I finally understand your ways.
That I finally grasp the concept of a good father.

This is not the time to shy away.
Stop downplaying your role in this family.
Because without you I don’t know where I would be.
Without you I don’t know where this family would be.

You are a true father.
And the simple fact that you are still in my life makes me happy.
Knowing that I have a father who loves me gives joy.
You are more than just a monthly check,
That counts as the presence of a father.
You are more than just a silhouette
I will see in the distance.

I cherish those moments we have our small talks.
Or the forced fishing trips we take when you only want to spend time with me.
Or the random phone calls you make just to make sure everything’s okay.

That lets me know how much you love me.
So I guess the only thing I’m trying to say is father...
You are appreciated.
I love you.
Suburban Blues

By Ashley Lee

1624 is a straight shot down Falcon Road. Travel south on route 59 and wait three minutes in the left lane before turning onto 103rd. Green shutters, red brick, cream-colored siding, a paved driveway with a three car garage and a rusted basketball hoop. The lot has a small backyard with the stump of a willow tree and a deck coated in auburn. Planted on Naperville’s south side, 1624 rests on the corner of a cul-de-sac. Ask any of the neighbors about it, they’ll tell you about a black family of three.

WELCOME TO NAPERVILLE

est. 1831
Population 146,128
76% White (108,447)
4% Black (6,612)
Median family income: $130,164

Father as provider, mother as caregiver, youth as materialistic, competitive, culturally incompetent.

I-55 and I-294 separate Naperville from my access to black urban life. That’s 55 miles. 60 minutes. I envision caramelized yellows, coppers, cinnamons, brown sugars, and black teas. Beauty supply stores featuring young women with kinky twists and box braids and young men with fades, waves, and s-curls. JET magazines next to my grandparents’ toilet, black coffee and peanut butter toast, walking to Rainbow Cone. I seek refuge in periodic family visits to Chicago’s Beverly and South Shore neighborhoods. This is home.

You come to Naperville to raise a family. You come to Naperville for its excellent public education. Because it’s perfectly situated outside of Chicago (not too far that you are able take a short visit to the city and be a tourist for the day, not too close that you are subject to the inadequacies and inconveniences of city life). But Naperville isn’t home. The act of returning to one or two other black people isn’t enough. Naperville is isolation.

1624 is where I return to two or three times a year. I associate it with afternoons home alone, avid television viewing, Motown and soft rock. I’d like to think my parents wanted to raise me in a black neighborhood. I imagine the possibilities if they left the city of Chicago and moved to a black suburb with young, buzzing professionals and middle-class families. But I was raised in a different place, within walls where I developed an appreciation for fiction writing, an aspiration to appear like the white faces I studied in magazines, where I struggled with my rejection of self as a black racial being. Whiteness pervades this familial sphere.

My mother tells me about gunshots in her childhood apartment complex. She tells me her mom would leave at 4:30 in the morning and return in the evening. She tells me about her underfunded and poorly constructed K-8 education through Chicago Public Schools. She tells me basketball was her way out. This first-generation college student and recent graduate needed to take care of her mother but didn’t want to return to Chicago. Her proximity to violence, the immediacy of urban life, the closed, confined establishments, and the cycle of poverty troubled her and my father. That’s understandable. Naperville was their opportunity and 1624 was their goal. But Naperville is destructive.
SECOND GRADE. Two white girls look at me, laughing, smiling, pointing at my box braids.

THIRD GRADE. White girl points to my bra strap in class and asks, “What’s that?”

SIXTH GRADE. White girls steal glances at my breasts in the locker room. My body is on display, features envied, curiously examined.

EIGHTH GRADE. Administrators tell me to cover my cleavage and change the length of my shorts (white girls, short girls aren’t bothered with this).

JUNIOR YEAR, HIGH SCHOOL. I ask the English department chair how to incorporate more writers of color into our curriculum. I’m told I need to speak with the district superintendent. White peers tell me I’m not like the other black students. I declare in a theatre production that I am not black. I am indeed brown and most importantly, more than just a color.

I struggle to retain a solid group of friends.

JUNIOR YEAR, THIRD PERIOD, PHYSICS. Two white boys stare at my twist-out (eyes big, jaws dropped).

JUNIOR YEAR, PASSING PERIOD. White students stopping, asking to rub their fingers through my fro. I say yes.

SENIOR YEAR, SIXTH PERIOD, AP GOV. White students and an Indian student complain about an affirmative action opportunity, then look at me.

SENIOR YEAR. White mom is shocked at the car I drive, my mother’s degrees, the size of 1624.

SENIOR YEAR. I’m told my writing content is too particular and not relatable to everyone.

I return to Naperville because 1624 is where I was raised. I merge onto I-80 toward Davenport and eventually reach I-88 before turning right onto route 59. After three and a half hours, I have arrived. It’s suffocating.
Walk by any type of mall and you’re bound to run into this sort of propaganda. Needless to say, the plague is once again among us. Deadly in nature, yet oxymoronic in nomenclature. Say it once. Black Consumerism. Say it again. Blak Kuhn-soo-mub-ruz-ub m. Post Ronald Reagan the idea that “greed is good” became conventional wisdom, something as American as hot dog eating contests. However, the assertion that extreme collection and consumption of goods is advantageous only holds true under certain circumstances: when the consumer is enabled with resources to be competitive in the market and the goods they buy generate wealth for themselves and their community.

Sadly, the black community operates at a deficit in both categories at the hands of an institution which glorifies consumption, yet provides significant barriers to entry. Such glorification has become so perverse that one’s intrinsic value in society can be measured by their material wealth. We’ve become “new slaves” to “the things we buy to cover up what’s inside” (Word to Kanye). Apparently, the more we have, the better we are as individuals (an idea problematic at best). Well, what does this do to the black community? Let’s break it down. Blacks have been systematically disadvantaged since they arrived in the Americas, yet are still subject to the expectations and pressures of materialism, an extremely western philosophy. Contemporary examples include the music, fashion, and sports industries promoting lifestyles not even the celebrities, athletes and artists get to live. Therefore, we aspire towards mythical lifestyles which are supposed to be reflective of our black culture. Parts of blackness have been heavily manipulated for capitalistic domination for centuries. The mammy archetype which originated in the antebellum South still exists today in the shelves of grocery stores. Walk down any baking aisle and if you come across an Aunt Jemima product you’ll know what I’m talking about. (Not so fun fact: Aunt Jemima is owned by the Quaker Oats Company, another white-owned corporation). The jezebel archetype finds its way into contemporary music videos as dancers often times compete for the attention of rappers and are characterized by their sexual features. Even the sapphire archetype has managed to stand the test of time. Trust me, any Madea film will affirm this.
Consider this: Jordan shoes are a staple of black fashion. This can be tangibly seen in social media videos which express how highly revered these shoes are and the extreme measures used to preserve them. The association of these shoes with one the greatest basketball players of all time places them only serves to reinforce the idea. When you a buy a pair, you feel social elevation in various forms. Colloquially speaking, you feel like you got the juice. However, once you move past the veil of materialism, it’s much easier to see who’s drinking plentifully and who’s dying of thirst. The Jordan brand is in fact not owned by Michael Jordan, it’s a subsidiary of Nike, a white-owned hegemonic corporation. Therefore, every pair of J’s you buy further lines the pockets of white America (who’s using propaganda now). The true problem of this ultimately relates back to the issue of wealth in the black community. Perceived wealth is nowhere near it being actualized. We end up strutting our shoes to the houses we don’t own, the companies of our employment which we don’t own, and all around the world we don’t have a say in. That’s what consumerism has done to us. Think about it like this: You can’t find success in materialism if the materials can’t make money for you, but rather the white supremacy of big business. As a form of resistance and process to keep wealth in our communities, we as the black diaspora need to be conscious of our economic decisions. The trillion dollars of spending power we have is legitimate and certainly doesn’t deserve to go to another fat cat. Let’s not settle for the shoe when we can own the shoe company.
Plantation Pigment
By Makayla Ilynne Enchill

Maybe the mirror was being too modest with me.
Maybe momma was being too motherly as she spoke the tired cliché to me that I
Knew all too well.
I was always four shades away from the perfection that I prayed for.
And the bible hadn’t seen my face in two years, so I guess that was Gods way of
punishing me.
Cursed me,
Indefinitely
With this onyx black facade,
That rustic brown that draped over my body,
Housed my external.
I wish I could be happy.
I wish I had a penny for every time I could stop wishing
But shit that’s just reality.
By the age of twelve I memorized four brands of hydrocortisone by heart.
Cosmetics... Limiting
This be no apothecary
Mixing the darkest shade with the lightest to make some unappealing mixture that
still didn’t compliment me.
I be tired of
Makeup artists offering me unwanted suggestions like she be this color.
I’m sorry, but no you can’t help this hurt.
This be internal.
This melanin grew malignant over my body, one that I was aware of but didn’t quite
Call my own.
I prided myself in performing every home remedy for skin lightening cream, for
Black girls like me.
Lemon juice laminated over this skin like a protective layer,
Insecurities that I endeavored not to meet again because I swore I put all of that
Behind me.
I be working on self.
I swear the sun was the devil, and I was my own worst enemy.
Inhibition encompassed my being.
I attempted to surpass that.
Imprinted in me was my immigrant father, Kweku Sakina
Passed down that plantation pigment.
He told me that I glistened like beauty
Because I...
I be queen.
I put my crown back on.
Cause for a minute,
I forgot who I was.
Who knew?
That in between the forevers
There was physco-induced confusion
You forgetting us
You forgetting me
You forgetting you.
Who knew that in between the forevers
There was me hating you
Me hatting us
Me giving up
Me loosing.
Who knew in between the forevers
You and me would be just in between,

Far from infinity

And wondering where our forever went.
I remember waking up one morning knowing I would die. 
I woke up 6 minutes before my alarm clock went off, 
And watched the minutes count down thinking that’s how I wanted to go. 
Calmly, 
Without the terror and deep questions 
Did I love, Was I loved, Did I make a difference?

I got out of bed and got dressed without showering. 
Yesterday’s pants because the belt was still in them, 
And as I stood in front of the toaster waiting for the poptart. 
It hit me, 
Not the existential crisis I was expecting, 
But the most profound compulsion.

I didn’t want to see the Eiffel tower or watch a sunset. 
I wanted to see everyone I loved or said I loved, 
Not for the last time, 
But for the first time. 
Again, here, free of the past.

If God allowed, 
I would get on the Blue line train from Potomac Ave, 
And see Chelsea two seats ahead of me, 
Checking her make-up in the reflection of the train window 
Accented by the fleeting lights cast on the passing tunnel. 
And when she looks in my direction she wouldn’t do that dumbass eyebrow thing. 
And she wouldn’t lift my arm over her shoulder to pull her close 
Because I was always too much of a pussy to “take initiative”

This time I would wait a few stops and tap her on the shoulder 
And I’d say “How you doing?” 
And she’d say “Good.” 
And I’d say “You look good” 
But she wouldn’t laugh because that wasn’t our thing yet. 
Because she hadn’t spent the night at my crib. 
On the 4th of July when I was rolling hard as shit and 
We took the 30 bus all the way back from Friendship Heights 
Past the white people, past downtown, past the monuments, past the Gardens.

A pause,
And then the angry, dumbass eyebrow thing.
The arch of her eyebrow that asked questions I wasn’t prepared to answer
And demanded an intimacy I couldn’t give.
Because I hadn’t gotten naked in front of her, and
She hadn’t told me she loved me
Even though we didn’t fuck that night
And technically I had a girlfriend
But you know she’s not my real girlfriend.

So I’d ask more questions.
I’d ask her what her name was, where she was headed
If she was still in school
If she knew the light-skinned rapper she was feeling more than me
Would have a seizure
And choke to death on his own vomit.
If she knew I’d be the one calling to tell her that
2 blocks from Columbia University,
Outside of a church I was too scared to go in because
Deep down I was happy to be the one to tell her.

I’d ask if she had man or not, if she had plans or not, if God put me in her plans or not,
And she wouldn’t catch the Kanye lyrics because she never did.
So, I’d ask if she meant it when she said she wanted to be a stripper.

Or that she’d marry me if she was still single at 30
To which I replied I would even raise her kids
Because she’d probably have a kid by then.
I’d ask for her number and she’d probably say No,
And I would get off the train and get a sandwich or something.

Coming off the elevator at Dupont Circle
I’d buy a Newport from the homeless guy selling newspapers
With the change I didn’t put on my metro card.
A block away I’d see Jamal walking towards the D2/D6 bus stop,
He’d try and bum a cigarette from me
And I would tell him
“This is my last one, but I’ll give you the deuce if you want it”
And he would wait.
Never taking his eyes off the cigarette
Watching the flame eat it down to his allotted portion
And I would smoke it as slowly as possible
Resisting the urge to ask if he remembers.

If he remembers the pink-purple blotted squares
No bigger than a pinky nail
That let us talk to God and watch flowers breath
Through an ever changing kaleidoscope.

The metallic taste and numb tongue that let us know it was synthetic
And the time we ate uncooked egg rolls off the kitchen floor
And watched old Disney channel movies
As his ceiling fan grew limp and spun
Like a giant, dead jellyfish above us.

Instead, I would give him the half cigarette as promised
And for a while we would watch the buses
Come and go, one after another
His bus, then mine, then his again.
Thinking about how different things could be if one of us got on.
Because maybe what was lost, what was missing, was on one of those buses.
Dropped out of a back pocket absentmindedly,
And all we had to do was call WMATA and see if it was at the Lost and Found.

But maybe it was never for either of us to find.
Because nobody teaches black boys how to be alone,
And looking at the bags under Jamal’s eyes
Would remind me of the time
I broke into his house at 3 in the morning and his Mom found me
Wrapped in a blanket behind the dryer.
And she asked me what I was looking for.
She asked if her son was looking for it too
And she gave me $20.
And 2 days later I was on a bus to New York

And I didn’t help Jamal find it.
And it felt like the last time for too many things.

Expeditions made to depths we didn’t understand.
Because we were promised something better
And I saw it once.
But it was so warm and wet
And sweet
I thought I would die if I ever held it for too long
So we would sit together in a room that could be any room
And I would lie about how good it felt
To drown in T.V static brought on
By the ups and downs,
The silence that really wasn’t silent,
But enough to keep the thoughts quiet.
And nice.
Because all I ever wanted was for us to have nice things.

Still I didn’t tell him I found it,
One night hidden in my own thoughts
And forgot it the next morning
Like the face of a stranger
Passing only seconds ago.

But I saw it,
And at the moment
I knew I didn’t want Jamal to find it.
To leave me alone
Chasing shadows formed by the fleeting lights on the passing tunnels of my brain.

So this time I would ask Jamal where he was going.
He’d say school, I’d say the Palisades.
All he would say is “True.” and he would dap me up
Still thinking he probably knew me from a party or something.

He’d get on the D2 and I’d get on the D6.
And I’d ride it past Dupont, past Georgetown, past the school,
And to the woods where nobody would find me.

Except Emma would already be there,
In the clearing.
Laid out on a big rock
In the middle of the river
Bathing in the single beam of sunlight breaking through the trees
Wearing a mismatched set of bra and panties
With eyes like burning turquoise
Waiting for me like she was always waiting for me.

And I would strip down to my boxers
Dipping my feet in the water, and she’d light a cigarette for me.
Because she has “seen me around sometimes”
And she was always too kind to me.
And I’d tell her I wanted to close my eyes for a while.
Because being black was a little too hard right now
And she’d wait until I was a little less tired,
A little less angry,
And a little less inclined to use my skin to keep her out.

And every now and then a hiker or jogger would come past
And I’d remember where I was,
And how naked I was.
Because this was before I began writing on myself,
Things not even I believe,
But she could trace the words and numbers on my chest and stomach,
As though they were already there if she wanted to.
Because she always believed the lies and the lies I told myself.

And we would sit for a while,
A long while
Not talking about anything we needed to talk about
Like how we probably aren’t going to go to Brown together,
Or how I’m not moving to Minnesota to live with my uncle and work at a bike shop,
Or how I tell people she isn’t really my girlfriend
Or the girl that looks like a young Claire Huxtable,
The brown one not the light skin one, that I let sleep in my bed sometimes.

Because I was never good at saying good-bye.
So behold the master of excuses,
An idiot savant,
Born from an inability to hold on to the things I would later mourn,
The things I let slip through my fingers
Out of fear I would choke the life out of them
Only to learn some people want the life choked out of them
But only if it’s you doing it.

Instead we just sit for a while,
Until the Sun goes down and it’s too cold not to have any clothes on.
And the water is cold.
And her Dad calls
Because she is going to need a ride from the train station back to the suburbs.
And we would walk back to the bus stop
And I’d be happy to be with her but too tired to show it.

Exhausted,
I’d get on the 30 bus and take it all the way back home.
I’d watch the passengers go from all white, to oreo, to all black.
And I’d probably fall asleep and wake up one stop past mine like I always do.

Getting off the bus and coming around the alley
I would see my Dad on the back porch
In his underwear reading a newspaper
Like father like son.

I’d light a cigarette and just watch the man.
Because I don’t think I’ve ever met Victor,
The man,  
And not the man who loves me more than life itself,  
But the man who dropped out his sophomore year of college  
To work at the airport handling luggage  
Because his pull-out game was lacking one time,  
And he resolved to do the right thing.  
Because he's always did the right thing.

The man with seizures,  
Seizures I gave him when I didn’t go to Chris’ funeral  
And told people he was in my prayers when he wasn't.  
Which God didn’t like because it was petty.  
Because he was a Gemini just like my Dad  
And shit they even look alike,  
And sometimes God is too poetic.

So I’d stand for a while watching a man read the newspaper  
Or pretending to read the newspaper  
Because he wasn’t wearing his glasses.  
Until he looked down at me, through me, offering only a quick nod of the head.  
And I’d decide to walk around some more  
Until I was outside the Harris Teeter  
Your Neighborhood Food Market  
And remember the time  
I came stumbling from the train station.  
Fucked up on things I bought in a bathroom  
At a concert I was supposed to be working  
At 3 in the morning on a Tuesday.

And he was standing there  
Waiting outside the Harris Teeter.  
And when I walked up to him he swung.  
Not hard,  
But hard enough to wake me up  
Only,  
I was too coked up to feel it.  
And then he swung again,  
And I raised my arm to block him  
And he told me to swing back  
And I didn’t.  
And an hour later I found myself  
Jumping out of a taxi  
With the soundtrack of an irate Nigerian man playing in the background  
Outside of Jamal's house
And then inside Jamal’s house.

So I’d sit on the curb watching the flame of my cigarette eat it down to the filter. Thinking about how many times I found myself sitting on a park bench
Waiting
And waiting for the Sun to rise and reset the day
As the nice people begin to appear
To exercise
To walk their dog
To go to work.
The nice people with places to go and people to see
Carrying more than confessions and apologies in their messenger bags and purses
And how nice it felt to pretend to be one of them.
Thinking about why I couldn’t just let the nice people be.
Why I couldn’t be nice like them.

Until it was time to go.
Calmly,
Without the terror and deep questions.
As a writer I thought words would be my first resort. I was wrong. For the expressions I hope to relay on this page comes only after the drought of my tear ducts, and the fighting of the urge to do nothing at all. But Iseah, my dear friend, our words now serve as your memorabilia, and the vessel for your immortality.

As I write this, I realize this entire piece will be a poor attempt to capture our brotherhood, because no sentence can accurately describe our bond. No phrase can express the feelings of elation that stormed over me whenever your face appeared in front of mine; or the extent of your embrace in the hugs we exchanged. My brother, we’ve had countless moments together, many of which I will keep silent from the world, so that they may be shared as whispers when we meet again. But for those I will not bury with me, I promise to share with the world in some way or form. It was you that told me upon reflection of our high school days; “We have so many stories together...if we don’t tell them, they mean nothing.” I wouldn’t put it beyond your wisdom that this is the moment you were alluding too.

But to tell you the truth Iseah, I’m not sure how to do that. I’m not sure how to tell the story of our first drinks, and almost being killed by so and so’s father for sneaking through her window at 3am. I’m not sure how to explain to the world our after-class discussions about *A Separate Peace*, and me admitting to you that I was the Gene to your Finny. I’m not sure how to paint the picture of our 2am conversations in my basement, plotting on taking over the world by dropping our first mixtape because of the few likes our song got on Facebook. We called ourselves *The D.U.O*, standing for *Divine Under Obstacles*, raving that conscious hip hop was back. And years later when we laughed and reflected on our stupidity...I couldn’t admit out loud that I still thought it was a pretty cool name. I don’t think I’m capable of capturing all the scoldings from our teachers for talking too much, or laughing too loud, or not knowing the answer because our attention was focused on the doodles on your paper of all the teachers who scolded us. I don’t know if I could snap shot our conversations around C****’s ass, your perverted fantasy stories with your feet fetish, and the amount of stutters you mumbled when it came time to actually spit your game. I’m not sure if I can truly show the world a glimpse into our phone calls at 5am, venting to me about the crazy love triangles you were in. I doubt I can portray our days at work, with the prolonged breaks, giving out free groceries, or challenges to get the numbers of many mothers that came on through. It’s probably impossible to describe our freshmen fashionista attitudes when we both agreed to do away with Jordan’s, though we never really stuck with it... But still we’d rock the skinniest jeans we could find, and shopped for clothes that were just different enough to make us trendsetters, but similar enough that we wouldn’t be labeled fuckboys. To our credit we were never labeled fuckboys, but we were deemed as the goofballs and nerds who dreamed too big, but jokes on them bro we glo’d up. There’s no way I can detail our cheating of laps at tennis practice, the secret impersonations of our coach, or our strategy to scare white opposing teams by purposely acting out the stereotypes, though we didn’t have a dangerous bone in our body. I don’t think I’m capable of describing to the world the excitement of receiving my little black robotic baby boy for our class assignment, and naming him Iseah as I promised to do with my real first born. My fake baby book was way too detailed, decorated in block letters with little Iseah’s birthdate, birthplace, pictures and occupations of his parents. I wonder if Ms. Vogel still has it. I highly doubt I can describe the meaning behind our “Day
and “Blvck Skins” bonds with me, you, Zach and Tirelle; and how we promised our kids would be the reincarnation of our younger selves. I’m not sure how to explain the devastation I felt when you moved to the rival high school, my 6 days a week of seeing you now divided in half. I’m not sure I could highlight the excitement I felt 2 years later when we discovered that we were going to be neighbors for a short period of time. One thing I know for sure is that I can’t capture how smart, ambitious and full of life you were. How big your heart was. Or how much you inspired me to dream…How much you inspired me to write.

We lost touch at one point, our brotherhood brought into question. Those times I refuse to bring to light, because last night upon hearing about your death those were the moments that I had immediately forgotten. The love was always there, though our communication was not the same. We disagreed on a number of things, and our circle soon grew smaller, for a moment you left on the outside. I then left again for college. As I became busier and came home less often, our phone calls turned into conversations through direct messages on Twitter; telling me about how proud you were for my accomplishments. That you missed the old times when we were young and naive. That you cleaned up your act and things were finally looking up...about how we would reunite on Thanksgiving break and that you wanted to read my newest work. I promised you a few weeks ago I’d send them your way...I never did. Because like the selfish person I am, I became warped in my work at school, losing sight of the fact that it all means nothing to our ultimate goal. That it all means nothing if I shrug off the people I love. That it all means nothing...because what means everything to me I now realize are the ones I love that I never call to say I love you enough. I never told you I loved you enough...and to be frank I don’t know how to show how much I do in the stories I write. But I’ll try. I’ll try for you... I’ll try for us. Because if I don’t tell our stories then they mean nothing...even if I’m the only one who reads them.
The Burden of Forgiveness
By Matthew Bruce

As I scrolled through my Facebook timeline desperately searching for anything that would help me process the murder of nine innocent men and women at the AME church in June (probably my first mistake) I remember seeing a headline for an article that just completely blew my mind.

“Charleston church shooter hears victim’s kin say, ‘I forgive you’”

To me this is mind boggling, befuddling, baffling, bewildering. Now, just to be sure I want to put this in context. This man sat for an hour in the study of scripture with 10 other people having written a manifesto about the inferiority and inhumanity of what he called “niggers” and proceeded to gun down nine innocent lives, telling the tenth woman “I’m going to let you go so you can tell people about what happened here.”

What he did amounts to not only terrorism, but also the theft of the most valuable thing each of those nine families possessed; the life and existence of a loved one. Gone. Pilfered. Plundered. Pillaged. Never to be had again for as long as time and space exist. Let that sink in.

Then I thought about what my response would be. What should my response to the theft of the life of someone I held dearly in my heart be? Here were some of theirs.

“I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you”
“Have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but God forgives you, and I forgive you.”
“As we said in the Bible study, we enjoyed you. But may God have mercy on you.”
“God forgives you”
“We enjoyed you”
“May God have mercy on you”

This makes no sense unless you begin to think about the dynamics of race in America. You see, one manifestation of white supremacy is the forbidding of black rage and the insistence that black people be held to a higher moral standard. Instead of addressing this man as a hell-bent terrorist who methodically planned and executed a mission to purge the earth of what he thought were inhumane and inferior beings that were raping his women and taking over the country; he was treated as an innocent soul who had somehow made a mistake.

The disturbing reality is that this is what has become expected of black people. It is why we (as an American conscious) accept MLK and vilify Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. Martin Luther King reacted in a passive, non-resistant, non-threatening way to oppressive violence. It is obvious to see why this would be welcomed by the mainstream. When Malcolm X and the BPP reacted with resistance to violence, (actually the norm for
most American systems), they were treated as threats, radicals, militants, extremists, and agitators.

In actuality passive resistance is only expected of black people. President Obama tweeted about the calls for forgiveness: “In the midst of the darkest tragedy, the decency and goodness of the American people shines through these families.” In reality, this reaction to terrorism is about as un-American as it gets. We didn’t react passively to Pearl Harbor, Lusitania, 911, the Boston bombings, Benghazi, the list goes on. When Americans are attacked by people with political motives we move swiftly to defend ourselves and eliminate the threat. As we should, “self-preservation is the first natural law” as Malcolm would say. However we as black people have been programmed to accept and pardon white violence when it is directed towards us. It’s why they label those who display violence towards police as “thugs” for example.

This amounts to a neutralizing agent that makes it impossible for black people to feel or react with anger towards white brutalization. We must realize this.

This is not to discredit the solace that these families may feel that forgiveness brings to them. However we as a people need to be doing what any sensible nation would be doing and that is asking critical questions. What can we do to protect ourselves against what is inevitably the next act of hate? How are we preparing to protect the next batch of innocent lives targeted for theft? How will we make ourselves safer?

Until we answer those questions, God have mercy on us.
Excerpt from "BE" - (1st Draft): Opening Scene
By Shawn Boursiquot

FADE In:

EXT. MAJOR MARK PARK, JAMIACA QUEENS, NY. NIGHT.

The Sailors and Soldiers Monument is illuminated by red and blue lights. Yellow tape surrounds the area around it, a crowd of thirty or forty now gathered. Two police officers stand in the center of the crowd. Everyone’s breathing is condensed, forming a fog like figure in the huddled group of men and women standing in the light rain. Chatter can be heard amongst the upset crowd, along with commands from the police officers telling the crowd to clear out, but to no avail.

Detective MICHAEL SIMMONS is a Black man in his mid-thirties. He’s a relatively tall and athletic man, dressed in a shirt and tie. MICHAEL walks over from his police car to the crime scene. He anxiously squeezes his way through the crowd of people. Amongst the noises in the crowd a man yelling “You got another one huh? You got another one!?” can be heard off screen.

MICHAEL
Watson! (He calls his name while moving through the crowd) Excuse me. (Beat) I said Excuse me, back it up people! Watson!

MICHAEL finally arrives to the center. He nods to the other officers and medical examiners. Body is not shown.
Chief WILLY WATSON is a white man in his late fifties.

WILLY
Michael, thank god.

MICHAEL
What the hell’s goin on chief?

WILLY
What do you think? We got to get things settled before it gets out of hand.

MICHAEL
It’s not already? Look, we have to act fast but smoothly, we don’t want to get an even bigger rise out of these folks... God damn it, this can’t be happening right now.

WILLY
Keep your head, detective...we both know these things happen-
MICHAEL
This isn’t... You can’t just (sigh) You call for backup chief?

WILLY
Riot control is on their way.

MICHAEL
You don’t think that’s a bit excessive at this point and time? Like I said we don’t-

WILLY
Look around (beat). Another dead kid, you really think we won’t need em?

MICHAEL remains silent. CLOSE SHOT of MICHAEL’S face. He attempts to look away a few times, but finds his eyes glued on the body in front of him. A disturbed look plagues his face though we’re kept from seeing his line of vision. CLOSE UP remains on his face for entire conversation up until cut scene. He is unable to turn his eyes away but still directs his comments toward WILLY.

MICHAEL
How old?

WILLY
No ID on him, but he’s a young one for sure.

MICHAEL
Any possible leads as to who he is?

WILLY
Nothing solid...But by some folks reaction some people seem to know him.

MICHAEL
He give you a reason?

WILLY
Who?

MICHAEL
The asshole who did this shit, did he give you a reason?

WILLY
Responding to a robbery call. Suspect was on foot (Pause) No weapon found.

MICHAEL shakes his head in disbelief, his face is blank of all emotions.
INT: TURK’S LIVINGROOM.

TURK is an African American male in his mid-forties. We never receive a clear view of his face. He speaks matter-of-factly and with a level of sophistication. His apartment is neatly furnished, with a large collection in his library from Latin to Afro-American literature. His floor is carpeted and living room decorated with African art. One is a small sculptor of an ape holding a baby in his lap, the parent ape’s right fist raised. It is placed on one of his book shelves. Turk is dressed in his work clothes which entails of a shirt and tie, though his tie is loosened and sleeves rolled. No shoes, only silk socks. He sips on a glass of whisky.

SPADE is a Jamaican American, 18 years old, dressed in casual clothes.

The two watch the T.V screen attentively, though Turk is seated and SPADE is standing. We see the crime scene on television, the broadcast zooming in on the dead body, the face of the body still hidden. Breaking news appears at the bottom of the screen.

SPADE
What we doin ‘bout this Turk? We doin something aint we?

TURK
Maybe... Maybe not.

SPADE
Fuck you mean?..You serious right now? Are you fuckin serious, you seeing this aint you? It’s not some random-

TURK
None of them are random.

SPADE
You know what the fuck I mean Turk! That’s our Brother on that pavement for Christ sakes!

TURK
Calm down. Now I know how you’re feeling, but we stick to the blueprint. (Beat)Got that?

SPADE
Jesus Turk-

TURK
I mean it. We operate the same under any condition, you know this. I warned you emotions will run high, but when the time comes, no matter who gets lost in the process (pause) we don’t stray from the game plan.

SPADE
This is the time Turk. You always talkin bout it, but this is the time!

TURK
Believe me I feel the same as-

SPADE
Do you? I’ve been fuckin’ with you for this long Turk, I never thought I’d see you just turn your back.

TURK slams his drink down and shoots up from his seat in one motion. This is the first time we see him lose his cool.

TURK
Don’t you ever say I’m turning my back! I literally lived my entire life for this! But if we act on sheer instincts we fail. We stay organized just like the enemy, or else we lose.

SPADE takes a moment to reply, calming himself down though still struggling to cope. Deep breathes; squeezed fists etc. He takes TURK’S glass off of the table and gulps the remaining whiskey. He winces.

SPADE
Drummer boys Turk. That’s what we do. At least let them test the fields.

TURK
(Ponders for a moment, sipping his glass.) Do you really think we’re ready Spade? We can jeopardize everything.

SPADE
Yes Turk. We’ve been waiting on this...you’ve been waiting on this. Just give me the word Turk. Give me the word and I’ll send em in.
EXT. MAJOR MARK PARK (CONT.)

MICHAEL is accompanied by other officers trying to control the yelling crowd. There’s more of them now, many young adults, though still peaceful. A small riot control team is there to aid the officers.

MICHAEL
(Hand is over his holster.) Get back! Everyone step back and go inside of your homes!

MICHEL is helping escort the medics to their vehicle, but when he gets there he is confronted by a young man who deliberately stands a few steps away from him.

MAN
Fuck you sell out!

MICHAEL
Back up!

MAN
Uncle Tom.

The MAN spits at MICHAEL’S feet. MICHAEL grabs the boy by his collar, his eyes wide with a face of fury. WILLY attempts to pull him off, but struggles to do so. He eventually separates the two.

WILLY
Hey, what the hell Mike! We don’t need more trouble.

MAN
Yeah, listen to ya massa.

WILLY
(To Man.) You shut the fuck up! (To Michael) And you, go over there!

MAN
You have no idea huh?

WILLY
Enough kid, get out before you’re in the back of that van.

MAN
You have no idea who you killed do you? (starts to laugh). Oh my God. (Starts yelling) You have no idea that you killed our
brethren! There’s no way you all get out of here alive tonight.

MICHAIL
To hell with you!

MAN
Eat one Benedict.

WILLY
Move Michael! Get back over there. (To man)
I’d shut my little mouth if I were you.

MAN
You’d love to keep me silent now, wouldn’t you?

MICHAEL goes over to help control the crowd, yelling for them to go home. After a while he hears something. He glances up. He peers through the crowd but can see no one though a low chant can be heard. “...gently calling.” He tries to ignore it but hears it again. He stands straight now, still seeing nothing he runs to the center once more and steps onto the old civil war monument. The noise from the crowd gradually drops. “I hear those Black voices gently calling” is heard off screen.

MICHAEL
What the...

The crowd is silent. The camera focuses on a group of men and women in black hoodies approaching the crime scene. A woman is holding the sign that reads “Are you Ready?” and man holding another sign that reads “No Revolution comes without bloodshed,” in red lettering on black backgrounds. Their chants are loud and clear now.

PROTESTERS
I hear those Black voices gently calling.

MICHAEL is in a daze; confused. The camera zooms in on the sign that reads “Are you ready?”

PROTESTERS
I hear those Black voices gently calling.

Screen goes Black. We hear the chant clearly one last time.

PROTESTERS
I hear those black voices gently calling.

FADE IN:

*12 MONTHS EARLIER *

30 | Black Art; Real Stories
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