UNTITLED LIFE PROJECT

LEMONADE

My first April in Missoula, 2017, they screened *Lemonade* at the arthaus theater. I love April and I love *Lemonade*, and it was almost my lover's birthday, our first such event together, and there had been fewer and fewer inversions lately so we were getting blue skies again and some big melts, and the overpriced vintage store across the road from the Roxy was going to sponsor vodka mint lemonades with advance ticket purchases, and all these things together seemed clearly to signal that my inaugural, punishing Montana winter, which felt like it had begun extremely soon, entirely too soon after I arrived in August, would go out in a rush of power.

A dozen of my girlfriends were there, in a giddy cluster with our free, free-poured drinks, feeling like here's finally something for us and not for this weird little town. We had mostly come from places not at all like this town, Brooklyn and LA and Denver and both Portlands, and the relief of seeing this piece in public, something loudly Black and female and arrogant, it was so exquisite. We had mostly locally-sourced dates with us, restlessly chatting and expressing their support. Mine had, I think, heard the album but not seen the videos, and there's almost nothing that gives me more pleasure than to watch someone experience a thing that I adore for the first time. The sex we had after, almost running the four blocks from the theater to his apartment, was, also, exquisite. He said the same thing to me that night as when we'd met up in New York over the holidays, both visiting separate friends but finagling one night in a spare room together: "It's so good getting to see you in your right place."

Later that *Lemonade* night, I went back to my own apartment to finish lesson prep for my morning class, still empowered and buzzy, feeling literally evangelized or reborn, and I sat down and turned on the light and there was a fucking black widow in the middle of the wall above my desk.

"And you guys," I said to my class in the morning, telling the story, and all these sophomores and freshman who usually just actively suffered through this intro to composition course while trying their best to be as unaffected as possible, they were truly into me and caring, we were feeding off each other's bleary 10am caffeine-dependent energy and they were laughing at the right times and could feel a climax coming, and I kept it up, telling them, "I felt so fucking powerful, I was remembering how incredible it is to be a woman, how incredible it is to be loud and opinionated, and like, how amazing it is to be a brown person, and then there's this tiny spider on my wall and it destroys every little bit of it."

But something had shifted; I'd lost them before the punchline.

What had happened was, my all-white classroom was stupefied by my casual acknowledgment that I am a brown person.

BROWN PERSON

My teaching was being observed that day. I was friendly with my supervisor, so after I killed the black widow (with very thick-soled Doc Martens) I did only a little more prep than usual, bizarrely glad to have this breezy, self-effacing anecdote to start class with, something vaguely narrative and teachable.

The moment I said "brown person," all my students' eyes veered wall-ward. They cleared throats, began shuffling their folders or unzipping their backpacks, pretending to look for things, creating noise around or over my words. There was so much clarity in that signal, and in its subconsciousness even more.

"Should I not have said that thing about being brown?" I asked Amy in her office after. I knew a few things about her, like that she and her husband met and lived in Chicago for many years before Missoula, and worried about raising kids in a place so monochrome, especially since they were too. She told me a story once about having to explain to her daughter that Black kids are born to Black parents: the daughter had never seen any grown-up Black people, only her friends adopted by white ones.

She said of course I should have, and I said, "I felt like I was telling them some huge secret. Like, didn't they know? Couldn't they tell I'm not white?"

But actually, people often don't really know what they're looking at when they look at me. I'm half Greek and half Bangladeshi, first generation, bronze in the summer and jaundiced in winter. I am often mistaken for the dominant minority of my surroundings: I was Dominican in Bushwick, Turkish in Athens. I thought people might assume I was Native in Missoula, but now, I think the question, or at least its nuances, occupied most people's minds there not at all.

"Sometimes you have to teach people how to see you," was the effect of Amy's answer to that question, and to a lot of ones I didn't ask her.

SOMETHING CORPOREAL

"If you met me, like randomly in the wild," I said to one of the second-year poets, just a few weeks after moving to Missoula, "would you think I was a white girl?"

He appraised me, there's no other way to describe it.

"No," he said, "your hair's too good to be a white girl."

We were walking toward the Higgins Bridge, and the wind off the river was picking up my non-white hair and throwing it into my eyes and whipping it back again as I tried to face the poet and grin all pleased at him. Already I knew I was meant to despise this poet, the goofy Odysseus of our program, who went and wandered around writing conferences trying to have affairs while his girlfriend prepared to move to Missoula for him. Instead I felt indifferently amused by him. He was 6-foot-3, 22 or 23 to my 29 when we met, and it was like watching a big Great Dane puppy who keeps tripping over his paws, can't learn from experience.

I'm also horrified to think about how complimented he would feel to know someone called him Odyssean in an essay. I suspect this characterization — the conqueror, an object of fascination, beholden to his own mythology well above duty — is exactly how he desires to be seen, and it feels vaguely dangerous, or at least irresponsible, to give a man like that so much validation. But validating someone doesn't mean you have to like it.

Back in 2002, one of my favorite songs was "I Want to Save You" by Something Corporate, and for years (I mean including this year) I would always scream the part of the bridge that begins, "And she wants someone to see her," scream it on the highway going from my parents' suburban house into pre-renaissance Detroit to see shows at the Shelter, or down North Woodward to Birmingham, where my friends and I would go to drink endless chai coolers at Java Hutt, the all-night coffee shop, and smoke pre-addiction cigarettes on the sidewalk, spreading out on the stoops of the locked daytime businesses, forcing couples leaving their late movies to step over or around us, conspicuousness the whole goal. We sipped those icy drinks outside in every weather, some combination of us girls and the boys who were our crushes or crushees, learning to roll loose tobacco, trying to blow smoke rings, bringing with us our notebooks and starter DSLRs and pretending at higher purposes. But all we were doing was standing on the sidewalk, was proving the barista knew our names now, was trying to know for sure that other people could see us.

Like a lot of people, I was miserable for most of high school but I adore its artifact, the cinematic reconstruction it's allowed to have from a far vantage. Simply: The way I can now see myself in those days is so tender, so romantic. I was already writing things down then, and it's gross to say so but I would do things, certain kinds of things, with a deeply self-involved import, so that I could tell it better later. I'd drive with the heat blasting and the sunroof open during light snows, listening to The Cure or Interpol, imagining what people stopped next to me at lights would make of it. I would take often circuitous routes to get places so that I could say things like, "I took Long Lake," and seem like I had reasons for being in the old money parts of my greater hometown area. One time senior year I skipped first period so that I didn't have to wait all day to buy the new Bright Eyes double album. I brought an old Walkman to play it on and everybody mocked me for my outdated methods. But I took it with a smile; it was an aesthetic choice, a commitment to the music.

I remember realizing eventually that the corporate part of Something Corporate's name referred to the older thing: a body, something coming into being. The sum of parts. I told all my friends who liked them. No one else had picked it up. This whole situation, what it affirmed to me about my own mind and abilities, delighted me. My whole narrative of self back then was dependent on these kinds of artificially weighty understandings and all the ways I'd loudly use behaviors to try to express a personality, to make the impression of a self obviously chosen and defined, hoping it would in turn be obviously recognizable to others.

Which is all to say that I could see, that Missoula day at the end of summer, that the second-year poet was young enough for those things to still be in play, and to settle meaningfully upon him like a mantle, and maybe I took up a little bit of it too, enough to briefly ignore that I was not supposed to make allowances for this kind of man and to instead think about the kind of figure we must have cut walking out onto the bridge, him lithe and tall and pale, walking backward for a while to satisfy his long stride and still talk to me while I dragged my good big hair out of my eyes, my skin still summer glowy, tattoos all down my bare arms.

Both of us pretty, happy, careless, shining, easy. Would we make some passing driver jealous, or lusty? Or sad at what they thought we had and they lacked? I don't know that every writer is a narcissist, but I can be, and that poet is, and there we were in a pure moment of ravenous and recursive meta-reflection, two little magpies spying a glint on the water.