

The Ovation

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The poet hovered like Christ on a raging sea. The applause thanked him for his honest timbre, his story and blood.

A trail of tears began gathering underneath the claps somewhere in the balcony, on the far side. It swelled and carved its way across the upper theatre, cascaded down walls and plunged into the plush maroon carpet that padded purses and feet. People stood in the sargassum, casting their sniffs and hard swallows into the tidepools of guilt gathering around their ankles. Still, they stood in praise, relieved to be submerged into rich details of suffering so slowly, with such eloquence to guide them. The poem had ended but the poet was still there, center stage, taking in breaths. Underneath its dustless, gold-foiled ceiling the room tossed his amplified breathing up and back, adding syncopated sweetness to the story of poison.

The poet, the beloved, genuinely-from-Flint, true Black, ultra poet was tired of the hot light and his neck became a waterfall of tension. He shared what he came to share with the wearied practice of generational sadness. The clapping kept at it.

The room was a coastline of sympathy. Waves lapped up against the stage and no one was sure they could be the one to stop. He had transported them there, to his humble, crumbling town. They poured into him. This was their payment toward insurmountable

debt. They clapped and wept and admitted that yes, this was an old tragedy—all of it really. Everything he said and how he said it. They believed him; an ancient miracle.

It was even older than that. Older than when his mama got off at the train station, fresh from Tupelo, Mississippi, with a coat thinner than a veil. She lost three toes the first winter. That limp did nothing to prevent her from making it down the road, finding a factory, making a living, making him and his brothers, making sure he could eat and sleep and pack up quickly if needed. She limped through it wheezing and unashamed. It was worth it, she said. They strung her daddy up in Mississippi but her honey brown son had poetry in him and a town full of work, or that's how she remembered it. He was going somewhere.

Jennica, my goddaughter, the earliest child whose life I had an ability to directly influence was born and raised in Flint (Northside). She was sitting down. She was the only one in the whole auditorium unmoved to ovation. Her long, skinny legs sat fully crossed, folded inward. Her shoulders slumped in that perfect adolescent way. She twirled her phone around in her hand, an expert in disbelief. I looked down at her and remembered her face at 7.

I appeared in her life, first as an occasional guest. Her mother and I were in love. For a while I would drive up and we would spend the weekend pretending to be a family. All fantasies fade. But love came in and did not leave. Jennica and I bonded in a real way and children deserve consistency. I was an adult in her life that mattered and that meant

something to us all. Her mama and I joked, I needed a name--just something. We decided on Godmother. Such are the ties that bind Blackness. We don't need paperwork or blood. We barely need evidence. We absorb.

She needed special creams for the break outs on her skin. They presumed her eczema was the work of cheap laundry detergent, genetics, bad soap, whatever poverty could buy. Anything but what ran from the tap. From the bath, from the shower, from the river, from the sink, from the doctor's office bathroom. Everybody always had a headache. Everybody knew. Still, summer afternoons meant all the children on Jennica's street went house to house, exhausted from fun, laughing and cupping hands under green hoses, soaking up water and god knows the rest—trying to extend their body's capacity for play, for pretend.

The poet, under the cacophony of claps and whimpers, licked the salt from his upper lip and thought of a new poem. He looked from on high and felt the stirrings of an auction block, the makings of a pageant. Him, the one whose mama dropped bleach in his bathwater and sang him old songs to make the day go. Taught him to tell it. Limped her way into some grandchildren. Outlived two of 'em. Outlived her other sons. Outlived her cut pension. Survived and never missed a Sunday offering. Taught him how to clean open wounds too stubborn to heal. There he was, 70 miles down I-75 telling the hungry audience the truth of why she is nothing now but a headstone. Another ghost.

The poet straightened his shoulders but kept his head down, still receiving, still allowing the fervor of dried palms to generate shame. Of course, the hands, mostly white and hydrated, mostly kept, mostly okay, had stamina. They had time. This was their work to do. The poet stood. Jennica switched the cross of her legs and kept twirling her phone.

My hands could not stop. Black as they were, a thousand poems in my own chest, I could not stop. My water was dirty too but it didn't try to kill us. There was no chance that I, in a white, wallowing sea would be the Black fingers to offer permission for any of them to stop. I kept clapping.

Some "*Whoops!*" erupted for texture. "YESes!" called up to him. Pieces of his poem slid up and down each aisle, shaking their collection plates of woe. They clapped for the way he said It. Irrefutable. Everyone could agree that this was nothing less than a crime against humanity, all humanity but specifically his and Jennica's.

The poet, who said It all and said It perfectly, raised his hand and finally surrendered to the worship. He looked stage left, at his chair but the claps, claps, claps, ignored his dream of rest and kept going.

They insisted he understand their tithing was in earnest. He shifted weight onto his heels and rocked. The crowd remembered their own padded feet and shifted too. They were sweating with him. They were tired too. Who were they to seek rest, they asked through their working hands. I stood there, shiftless, exhaustion beginning to set in my ankles.

Birthdays, family days, weekends are not a full life. There are so many gaps my love will never fill. I always got to leave. This was not mine to carry so I clapped too. My eyes got hot too, threatening to add tears to the rising creek beds of guilt all around us. The poet looked up into the beaming stage lights and raised his arms into the sky, surrendering. Jennica, still crossed, exhaled deeply and rested her chin on her bent wrist. She closed her eyes.

The poet sat down, right there in the middle of the stage. He laid back and then rolled, drawing chuckles from the crowd. An interruption of business as usual.

Finally, Jennica looked at me and I looked at her and then down at my hands. People were smiling. He was playing to them, they thought. As if he hadn't done enough, this brilliant Black poet from Flint sought to bring them joy. My clapping quickened. I shot a flare up for those who believed that was the end—it was not but—*what is he doing?* I bent down and asked Jennica, trying to convey a tone of vague amusement, palms still popping together. It was my moment to catch her underneath it all, to realign myself with her story, to alight.

The poet rolled his body away from the hot lights until he reached his chair. The clapping and salt water from people's tears and sweaty brows all but evaporated into a light mist. Squeals of delight came quickly. Perhaps next a dance, they hoped. My hands didn't know what to do. He extended his torso and his long, brown arms into the

orange cushion and felt around. The "whoops!" of anticipation came in streams and the wet eyes began to see clearly again. Some people sat down, relieved. A dance after all. An encore. Jennica looked at the stage and back to me just as the poet sat up right, gripping a bottle of water that was almost empty.

The clapping was down to a loyal few. Me included. *He's thirsty*, she said to me with her head in her wrist, not bothering to whisper. She looked at me like, come on. Like, come on. And the poet walked back into the hot lights, unscrewed the top and offered us his second poem.

When the plastic crunched inward and no water remained, the claps did not begin again. The laughter did not begin again. The sadness packed up and moved back out into the lobby. The room grew dark and quiet. The poet returned to his chair, holding his plastic carcass and his crumpled poem.