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ANNA SCACCHI

“Chained to Hope”: A Short Story by Noni Carter

I met Noni Carter in Paris last October. We were both speakers in a workshop on “Slavery, Memory, and Literature” organized by Aarhus University and Columbia University and I was immediately struck by this young woman’s poise and academic brilliance. Many outstanding papers were presented during the two-day conference – which included such renowned scholars as Anne Bailey, Laura Murphy, and Domna Stanton, just to name a few – but hers was closely connected to my own current research on the memory of slavery and the representation of black bodies in pain, and I found it both profound and moving. Her reading of M. NourbeSe Philip’s experimental poem *Zong!* and investigation of the genealogical arc of the trope of the slave ship from Enlightenment literary works to contemporary artistic practice were deeply engaging. Particularly interesting to me was her focus on the expendability of the black body and the fabrication of blackness starting “in the belly of the ship,” as the title of her presentation said. So during coffee and lunch breaks we exchanged ideas and bibliographic tips and promised to stay in touch.

To me she was an incredibly gifted PhD student, a promising scholar, a beautiful, smart black young woman with a committed soul, but I certainly did not expect that only a few weeks later I would discover there was a lot more to Noni. I was planning to send her a follow-up message and, as I had misplaced her email address, I googled her name and this is how I stumbled on the title of a novel, a contemporary narrative of slavery for young adults published by Simon & Schuster in 2010, whose author was a teenager – she was just 18 at the time – by the name of Noni Carter. I was delighted to find that the YA neoslave narrative was another mutual interest of ours. The memorialization of slavery in contemporary children’s and Young Adult literature is a topic I have studied and written about

and I am constantly on the look out for new titles to add to my research corpus, yet I had not been aware of *Good Fortune*. It would certainly have caught my attention as I was investigating the discussion on how/what to tell children about the slave past which followed the release of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave*, a discussion that was deeply influenced by Trayvon Martin's and Michael Brown's killings. I deeply regretted that I missed it, since it offered the unique perspective of a teenager in a scene dominated by adults discussing how best narrate the past to kids.

Good Fortune, which Noni Carter began writing at 12 and completed by the age of 15, expanding it from the original short story format to an almost 500-page novel, places great emphasis on the power of education, as it was to be expected in a work by an amazingly young achiever, but the message it spreads is also about the importance of cherishing and learning from the ancestors, who never gave up hope or stopped fighting in spite of their excruciating circumstances. The novel won the Parents' Choice Gold Award and was used in high schools to encourage the young to value their heritage and believe in their dreams. It tells the story of Ayanna Bahati, an African child who is kidnapped in the early 1800 and taken across the Atlantic Ocean to be sold as a slave in the US, and follows her journey into adulthood and her flight away from the dangers of the plantation to freedom, schooling and love. Carter's inspiration came from the stories her great-aunt told her when she was a child and especially that of her great-great-great grandmother Rose Caldwell who, at the age of twelve, watched her mother sail away on the Mississippi river, because she had been sold by their master, never to be seen again.

What does it take to survive such a dehumanizing pain and stay human? This was the question that the young Noni felt compelled to try and unravel through writing and one that, in spite of her age, she was able to frame and reply to in very different terms from the college mate who inspired Octavia Butler's writing of *Kindred* – the boy who could not understand resistance except as open, armed rebellion – or from Kanye West, who has recently affirmed that 400 years of slavery “sound like a choice” and can only be explained by mental enslavement. This question is still largely behind both her fiction and her research work as a scholar,

though of course her approach has become much more complex and investigates the very definition of "human," questioning its racialized Enlightenment association with literacy.

Carter's dissertation project explores scientific and literary investments in the "human," a category elaborated and debated in the scientific work of the European Enlightenment and re-scripted in recent science fiction (in literature, visual art, and performance) of the Anglophone and Francophone African diaspora. Her most recent fictional work, a YA novel which is currently being reviewed, and a SF novella which she is pitching for publication, translates into literary practice the very same inquiries into the human, with a marked gendered perspective. This is how she described to me both works:

Womb Talk is both a historical and speculative Young Adult fiction epistolary novel following a year in the life of a young woman of color who writes to an aborted child as she works through the post-traumatic stress disorder surrounding the pregnancy, and contends with the sudden appearance of a ghost-like character that takes her deeply into the (troubling) folds of her family history, all the while trying to determine what "feminism" means for her. The novel treats many tangled, touchy topics – abortion, the loose definitions around "rape," sexual fluidity, mental health in People of Color communities, and what it means for a teenager (or *this* teenager) to navigate them all. *Expendability* is a wild dystopian sci-fi novella exploring what it might look like in a futuristic society for people of color to live out the legacies of black expendability (that began during the slave trade) and what this would mean for the way we love, nurture, and relate.

When Gianna Fusco and I started to work on this special issue of *RSA* on BLM and current forms of black activism in the US, I immediately thought of Noni as a possible contributor to the "unpublished manuscript section." And she was so generous as to grace our journal with a short story that speaks right to the concerns of this issue. In "Chained to Hope" we are presented with two characters, a young man, Xave, and a young woman, Gelé, who traverse the full spectrum of black life in the US. Xave is one of the million black inmates in American prisons legally enslaved under the 13th amendment, a number completely disproportionate to their

ratio in the country's population.¹ Gelé, an Ivy League graduate, works in a San Francisco corporate company, one of the handful token blacks the corporation hires. Xave has been sentenced to seventeen years for a crime that should have amounted to half the time, because of misdemeanors he committed when he was a gifted, inquiring, outspoken teenager but also a grieving boy who dropped school and ran away from home. Gelé is an achiever who has survived the death of her parents, her mother in Hurricane Katrina, her father of a heart attack, completed her education and landed a well-paid job away from Louisiana.

Xave and Gelé, though, are twins. Like the two brothers in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" they have responded to racism in different ways, Xave by falling in a mandated pattern of engulfing blackness, and ending up in solitary confinement, Gelé by distancing herself from blackness, though she refuses to "whiten" her black body and sometimes relapses into her southern drawl. Both however are isolated in a cage, literal or metaphorical. Life and the different impact anti-blackness has made on their existence have separated them but they are mysteriously connected, as, like the Marassa twins of Afro-diasporic religions, they are halves of the same whole and they strive to regain wholeness. When Gelé discovers that the company she works for is going into a new investing venture, the private prisons business, she is incensed as a black person but also deeply wounded, in ways that she cannot understand, as if their willing to profit from the labor of black bodies is connected to her not only historically, politically and culturally, but also on a personal level. She starts feeling sick and the memory of her lost brother, who disappeared from her life when she decided to attend an Ivy League university, hits in full force after years of fighting it back so as to cope with the "white" world. The physical pain she is feeling – something that neither her physician nor her therapist can explain – is Xave's, who is feverish and has gangrene on his hand because they refused to treat it. Her body is what tells her the truth, her black body acting as a conduit to wholeness. When they finally reunite, her brother has lost a hand and is a broken person, yet Gelé spots a humanity in his eyes, one which defies Western definitions of the human, as well as black superhero versions of it: "Not a 'Universal Rights Declaration' kind of

humanity. Not a Kantian humanity. Not even a Wakandian humanity. It's a humanity that this world has yet to know."

A dedication to three Garners ends the short story: Margaret, the fugitive enslaved mother who in 1856 killed her daughter and tried to kill her other children so that they would not be returned to slavery, whose story inspired Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; Eric, who in 2014 died at 43 in a chokehold, guilty of illegally peddling cigarettes, whose agony, like that of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and so many others, was captured in a heartbreaking video and shared on social media; Erica, his daughter, mother of two, BLM activist, who died at 27 of a heart attack. Only two of them were kin, yet Carter's dedication weaves them together into family, wonderfully chaining a long history of abuse to hope in a declaration that black lives matter.

Notes

¹ According to the NAACP, in 2014 African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional population. The 13th Constitutional Amendment reads: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

NONI CARTER

Chained to Hope

*If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your
time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound
up with mine, then let us work together.*

Lilla Watson, Murri artist
and activist

*The sorcery of law {is} most instrumental when most
fantastic and most violent when most spectral.*

Joan Dayan, *Codes of Law,
Bodies of Color*

*What is this magic that our bodies keep repeating?
What is this curse that our bodies keep recycling?*

Gelé

One: Xave

In this dystopian universe, there are no bedtime stories, no goodnight kisses, no safe zones to shield the young brown body, the rich black mind, the recuperating psyche. In this dystopian universe where the groping fingers of rainbows never bother to reach, bodies enter the world labeled “expendable.” Bodies full of life fall limp under the invidious contradictions of the penal system. Bodies circulate to help amass wealth in the pockets of the stingy.

So here’s what Xave *wants* to know: what’s one to do with criminals who are so bad, they commit crimes *almost* as heinous as the ones committed

by those who continue to run the world? What to do with all these bars holding back “criminals” whose actions are *almost* as stomach-churning as these free people’s crimes and their high-brow methods of touting those crimes high overhead? Their methods of concealing these crimes under the ostentatiousness of “philanthropic” work? Their manners of burying these crimes in plain sight amidst the addictive allure of royal weddings and such? Yes, Xave saw the whole “charming” debacle. Every channel he and his inmates flipped through that week, every news station, displaying the grand wedding of May 2018 like the spoils of a 17th-century adventurer/murderer, as if nothing of greater importance existed in this wide world.

And here’s what Xave *already* knows: The crime they claim he committed, it’s a speck of dust in the long history of unrepented and unaddressed colonial, imperial assaults on communities of color.

Xave curls into himself, lying on the side of his body in the middle of this cage’s floor. It’s a new, smaller, more damning cage, this one. Xave is thinking about this “speech” he had given his fellow inmates a few weeks ago, the TV going in the background, the guards telling him to shut his muzzle or else. He’s missing the other inmates and the corridors of the general population like he never thought he could. In here, he’s so alone sometimes he thinks the loneliness might choke him dead.

Xave makes sure, as he rocks to and fro, that he doesn’t bang his injured hand against the ground, feeling a little sick to his stomach. Feeling like some type of parasite is crawling through his belly, wreaking havoc. Xave doesn’t even bother telling the staff about his stomach bug; they’ll laugh at him. He closes his eyes, instead, to the hoary grey of the room that greets him day in, day out, like a melancholic lover, staring him in the eyes when he wakes. He clasps his shins with his arms, wrapping them tightly around his legs. The thick wisps of hair growing in on his chin scrape his kneecaps while his crooked, bitten fingernails dig deeply into the darker spots on his elbows. Lying there, he’s wishing he could be in that TV room again, surrounded by his crew, “preaching relevance” as they had come to call it in his seven years in this dump. He couldn’t help it when the “relevance” came spurting out, his version of “history” stirring on his tongue. Like they used to on his Daddy’s tongue. Like they used to in Mr. MacDaniel’s dope history class he’d taken before Mr. MacDaniels was fired for being

“too fiery,” before Xave dropped school, running from the pain at home, running from his sister’s heartbroken eyes.

But Xave’s *personal* history? They tell him it’s a car, a police officer, an attempted motor vehicle assault. Seventeen years for a crime that should have only amounted to half that time, or less. He knew, for he looked it up.

The car, the officer, the assault – these are supposed to be Xave’s memories, but he can’t find them. In between these rugged walls, time distorts itself; he measures the passage of time by the arrival of the guards who shovel his meals in twice a day. Time bounces off the chipping paint, crisscrossing through his mind’s reasoning, pouring delusion into his eyes. This distortion forces Xave to blink into the absent zones of his thoughts, makes him wonder once, twice, a thousand times, if maybe he did commit the crime? If maybe the officer’s blood stains Xave’s guilty fingers? If maybe Xave’s body is exactly what they told him it was – a waste bin waiting to collect the trash, an extraneous garbage pit accumulating the excess of other people’s desires, of other people’s shed life experiences.

What was the *mofo* doing anyway to have a car driven at him? The courts never asked that question. And cops can’t be guilty, can they? In Xave’s book of world facts, that reigns as number one.

And yet. When Xave walks around in circles in the confines of his cage, chasing the pitter-patter of his shoe-less toes, or when he lies wide awake at night beneath his damp and fetid wool blanket, sweating out his nightmares, sometimes rehearsing the pages of books he read long ago, Xave searches, but can’t find the memories of his crime. They’re not hidden among the cassette tapes of regrets that skip, rewind, repeat somewhere deep in his cranium. Nor are they filed along the petty misdemeanors he had “committed” as a grieving teenager. These memories of the felony committed didn’t belong to him. They belonged to some poor kid, maybe still stalking the streets, *just being a kid*, working out his or her damaged psyche in the best way he or she knew how. And here Xave was in the kid’s place, his two small misdemeanors – shoplifting, and something else he pretends he can’t remember – used to overlook the evidence and do away with anything fair about his trial. Sure, Xave’s done some dumb, shady things in this world. But you can’t convince him that there’s a man or woman walking this Earth who hasn’t. No way.

So here he is, guilty of being innocent. And no amount of good behavior, no amount of running what his fellow inmates had taken to calling Xave's "smart-ass Panther mouth," would change that, would bring him back to loved ones he rashly cut himself off from for silly reasons before his arrest, loved ones who he couldn't track, who had no idea he was even here, even *alive*.

Xave's body is half immersed in the funk of his urine mixed with the *whatever* that had been sputtering out of a broken, hidden pipe for three days now. The handymen failed to acknowledge it. They usually failed to acknowledge *anything* unless a brawl called for their attention.

Fights were frequent here. After all, the fellows did have to find ways of entertaining themselves; that is besides shouting in code at each other through their bars, innovating gambling games in the cafeteria, a handful of them signing up for trades for which they were paid by a private company something like 32 cents an hour. The other men were forced to vacillate between hard labor and menial jobs throughout the facility. And some didn't work at all.

Xave used to be a part of this handful of "trained" men before he was put on suicide watch two weeks ago. He had packaged fish for some highfalutin folks somewhere in the city who'd buy the goods, who may or may not have known the source of the labor. *Cheap* labor. Innocent hands offering to the world *free* labor. In the 300-something years since Xave's ancestors were forced over the oceans into this country, what had changed? These able-bodied people provided work with nothing to show for it but a lackluster speech given once a year by a white man from the company (and once in a blue moon a brother) or a bible-toting female minister, the former wearing a *Nordstrom* suit, the latter a floral-patterned dress. They'd list out the many ways in which the men's work trained them to be better people in society, better citizens of *God*.

If you mean better men like you, serving your God, I'll pass, Xave always thought to himself, arms folded, sinking down in his chair. It was all fake shit, anyway. Even when the visitors believed whole-heartedly in their speeches, still fake. Most of them knew it, too. That was the point of running a business out of a prison, wasn't it? Holding appearance for appearance's sake when behind the scenes, all they wanted was on the one hand cheap

labor, and on the other, an eye-witness confirmation of a Darwinian, European Enlightenment-inspired politics of species degeneration (or in other words, confirmation that racialized folks *were* the stereotypical “lesser than”; they *were* buffoons, hyper-sexual, dangerous, needing to be saved). If these “trained” inmates expected the hands of corporate America to generously embrace them, welcome them as truly rehabilitated men of society, they were up shit’s creek. Communities of color might hire them when they broke loose from the system. But that is if they *ever* broke loose. Xave had seen so many repeat-offenders, he was starting to believe deep down that the words “rehabilitation” and “transitional” really meant ensuring a system of punishment that would hold certain bodies in place simply because of color or class, *by any means necessary*.

In his mind, Xave sees the words *by any means necessary* flit by, and pairs them with a quote he remembers picking up from somewhere: “*We declare our right on this Earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this Earth, on this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.*”

For a moment, Xave thinks this is a quote from an NWA song. But no, he realizes; it’s Malcolm. 1965. Telling the world that if *they* had their version of “by any means necessary,” then why shouldn’t we? Xave’s mind holds onto words and dates like nobody’s business. Photographic memory, they called it. *A sick gift of a wondrous boy-god* his mother used to say before she passed.

The *something*-infested pool of wetness soaks through Xave’s slacks. He’s been in here for two weeks; half the time, they wouldn’t let him out of his cage. Instead, they’d circle back to him, making faces, watching the “suicide watch” try and break Xave even further. The guards, some not much older than him, would flaunt money and cell phones, giving themselves to hard facades that Xave knew they didn’t really own. For he could hear, on quiet days, their life stories creep across the walls, down the hallways, their uncertain whispers, their hidden whimpers about a hungry baby waiting at home. And he would listen, intently, letting the words dance into his ears.

Xave was always a good listener. It’s what Mr. MacDaniels would tell him quite frequently, the retired black football player-turned-international

studies high school teacher. Mr. MacDaniels was the best of them, convinced Xave back in the day to take a stab at the school's Model United Nations team. "You've got a brain like a sponge . . . no, a computer!" Mr. MacDaniels would always tell him during their frequent part-detention, part-"learn-to-be-a-solid-black-man" talks after school. "A heart like a camel's back. Ears like the walls of Symphony Hall. A tongue like Raid spray – sits there, bottled up, but fierce and dangerous when it's ready to go for the kill. And you, you've got to own them, Xave. Let these gifts of yours make an amazing human being out of you. Humanity's not even ready for it." Mr. MacDaniels always ended his thoughts with a deep-throated chuckle.

It's memories like this that come in uninvited spurts to greet Xave day in, day out. And he often wonders, what good are his ears, now? To pick up the echoes of grunts and curses he catches every now and again? To pay homage to the maddening dripping from that broken pipe? Day in, day out. He listens. He breathes. He recites the pages of books he's read. He breathes. Exhaling. Inhaling. Exhaling. Slower. He breathes. It's one of the many tricks he's learned, not for sanity's sake. Sanity left a long time ago. Just threw up the "deuces" sign and walked out the back door. They were tricks to stay alive.

Xave's left hand is itching like bloody hell. Itching and burning. It's a bandaged, watery mess that he suspects is beginning to smell like a rotting cow. He *suspects* for he's too afraid to put his nose too close to it and really see if that's where the smell is coming from. It's the reason he got placed into suicide watch – a tiny mouse-hole where he sits staring at the ceiling, rocking himself on the wet floor. Xave had gotten into a brawl on his way out of the bathroom, was cut three times on the side of his left hand with a knife he still can't remember seeing, it happened so fast. The man had cut right into the part of Xave's hand that meant everything in the world, where his only tattoo had been, stretching sideways from his wrist to the knuckle of his index finger. It was a girl's name, with several words written in Louisiana creole underneath it:

you are the brightest star in my sky,
precious. And your life matters.

Now damaged. Now gone, a few chunks of broken, hanging skin left in its stead. Xave didn't even care to undo the bandage and look at what wasn't there.

No one would come out and admit who did it, Xave knew. But Xave wouldn't rat for the life of him, not in here. *That* was a dangerous road to walk, no matter how incensed he was. To expedite the investigation, they claimed in the paperwork that Xave tried to harm himself. Skipped any surgery to save (business) dollars, gave him some bandages, burning alcohol, shoved him behind these new bars.

Xave hears the man in the mouse-hole far down the hall begin his daily routine of counting backwards from seventy. He did it every time he sensed a guard coming their way. Xave never knew how the man could tell exactly when the guard would show, but sure enough, the man's at 10 and Xave hears the slow footsteps echoing down the hall. He pulls himself to a seated position, crawls over to the bars.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" Xave shouts at the guard.

"What?" The guard bites back, pausing in front of Xave's cell.

"I need to see a doctor. Please."

"Whatchu want with a doctor?"

"Something's not right with my hand."

"Lemme see it." The guard leans closer to the cell. Xave is hesitant, wondering if this is a trick. He cautiously extends his left arm through the cell. No quicker had Xave offered the guard the target than he slapped Xave's hand back in the cell, continued with a chuckle back down the hallway.

It hurt like hell.

Two: Gelé

Gelé glances back over her shoulder, past her cubicle to make sure no one's sneaking peeks at her computer screen. It happens at a competitive San Fran job. Especially when you're one of a handful of People of Color in the company. Your co-workers either pretend you don't exist, or they're patronizing, their glances revealing that they somehow think Affirmative Action got you here, that Affirmative Action is synonymous with Black Excellence.

How stupid and uninformed, Gelé always thinks, catching these glances with the edges of her eyes. It especially happens when her southern drawl kicks in when she's slightly heated. Or maybe it was her thick thighs, the way she wore her hair wild and free, as if they thought no one taught her how to "whiten" herself, tame her "kitchen," fix her posture, limit the hip-movement in her gait, all for the sake of decorum. Gelé knows she doesn't really fit in this corporation; the clinical cleanliness makes her feel isolated, caged almost. And every once in a while, copious waves of loneliness corner her, cause panic attacks that make her feel like she could choke on the lonely and die.

But how could she complain? It was good money.

"Damn," she mutters, massaging the sudden ache that's hit her for the umpteenth time in the side of her right hand where the bones of her index finger meet those of her thumb. A few weeks ago, she was out at a bar, a sharp pain tore through her hand, though there were no visible signs of trauma. Ever since then, she's felt this mysterious aching.

Mental note, she thinks to herself as she re-adjusts both hand clothes that she ties around her palms every morning, *stop by Walgreens, pick up some liquid minerals for this muscle pain*.

Gelé lowers her short, business-pink acrylic nails over the mousepad, glances back once more, then types the words "CCA investing" into Google's search box where some scientist Gelé doesn't know is gesticulating.

CCA: Correction Corporation of America. Or CoreCivic.

Gelé pauses before the screen, feeling like she's dangling her heart over boiling water, and quite unsure as to why. I mean, the *crap* her company had pulled today was enough to make any "woke" person of color incensed.

But when Gelé learned the news, it felt personal in a way she couldn't put her finger on.

Gelé had stepped into the office that morning, 7:45 sharp like every morning, her face a mask, her feelings buried at the bottom of a deep crater inside of her. She can't afford *feelings* at this job. At 8:06 on the dot (she knows because she had been staring at the clock in the right hand corner of her computer screen, wondering why time wasn't moving more quickly), a message appeared in her inbox – a general message from the company that ran down the weekly engagements. She opened the mail and found her eyes lingering on one piece of information that hopped out at her like the old jack in the box her mother gave her when she was a baby.

Now here Gelé is, two hours later, still staring at the computer screen, wondering why this nonsense the company was engaged in felt like more than a target on her racialized community; it felt like a shot to the heart . . .

But why?

Xave is flashing before her eyes. She's remembering against her will her Daddy who died eleven years ago. She's remembering the tune he made up for her and Xave, a tune he'd walk around their humble little house whistling:

Twins don't break,
an' they don't lose!
Chained together,
forever fused!
Don't need no hope,
ain't got no blues.
Twins win I tell ya,
an that's the news.

Gelé hardens her mind against the melodic memory; this was a past she had given up when she entered corporate, running from the holes she couldn't fill. Why had this news about CCA been a trigger?

She inhales, then lets the breath go, sending her mumbles "Correction my ass" riding the tail of that breath. When the wave of emotion dies down, she tries to settle herself, but the wave's post-crash ripples have only pulled her deeper into its waters. No choice but to swim, now. So she

swallows back her soppiness, and begins to research about CCA, pausing at an Angela Davis quote:

“Colored bodies constitute the main human raw material in this vast experiment to disappear the major social problems of our time. Once the aura of magic is stripped away from the imprisonment solution, what is revealed is racism, class bias, and the parasitic seduction of capitalist profit. The prison industrial system materially and morally impoverishes its inhabitants and devours the social wealth needed to address the very problems that have led to spiraling numbers of prisoners . . . ”

“Who decorates their palms with scarves? You’ve got to explain this to me one day.”

Gelé whips her head back, the bottom edges of her kinky blowout brushing up against her shoulder. It’s only Ra. She notices the way her hands are slightly trembling and scoffs quietly at herself, clasping them tightly together. She doesn’t bother responding to his millionth request to know what she’s hiding beneath the colorful hand wraps. She claims that they help with her sweaty palms, but Ra can detect a lie from a mile away. She doesn’t bother showing him the small tattoo across the side of her hand or explaining where it came from, how it got there. It’s a memory she hides, not only from the world, but mostly from herself.

Ra glances at the computer screen Gelé thought she was hiding, then pulls his hands up into a prayer pose, leaning in closer to whisper, “That’s some bullshit, ain’t it? The company’s fucking new investing venture?”

Gelé half smiles at Ra, always amused when he code-switches at the job, reminding her of back home in Louisiana.

“Yes, it is,” she replies.

Ra grabs the vacant mesh chair at the cubicle behind her and slides his nose into her business, like a nettling little brother. That had become Gelé’s nickname for him: *Nettling bro-femme*. He preferred the *femme* part of the nickname, she liked the spicy directness of *nettling*. And the “bro” sat comfortably between them, gesturing towards the unspoken bond Gelé and Ra had formed the first week she arrived at the job, new to San Francisco, new to the corporate world.

“What have you found?”

“They’re putting 100k in, Ra! Investing 100k in the prison industry,” Gelé tells him, trying to keep her voice steady and quiet, but feeling it take

on its own life, like her hips in last week's pair of jeans. "Do you know what that means? That means more bodies. That means potential profit stripped from our communities and placed in the hands of those who don't need it, who *shouldn't have it!* That means more lies. That means *more* prisons being built in the wake of *more* schools being torn down, no improvement to the systems, and no interest in the care and keeping of my brothers and sisters trapped in the cycle."

"Or more of the world spinning on the same axis that it started on when ole boy Columbus sailed the waters in 1492," Ra adds, his left eyebrow raised acrimoniously.

Gelé nods, shuts her eyes and massages the edges of her nose to keep from crying.

"It just . . . it just disgusts me. And sometimes, Ra, I feel like a sellout, you know? Sitting here making money, talking the right talk . . ."

. . . *and forgetting about him*, Gelé thinks to herself. Forgetting about her other half who she hasn't seen for almost eight years now. The last time they spoke, a heated argument about her going far away to an Ivy League (for which Xave had pretty much written her entire common app essay), Xave disappeared, first not returning her calls, then dropping his service altogether, leaving her wondering if he was dead or something worse. Ever since then, she's been fighting like hell to make it out in the corporate world, fighting to get here, forgetting that *getting here* meant placing the past in a duffle bag like a dead body, and tossing it into the abyss.

She feels herself tear up, knowing there's no sensible connection with this past and her company investing money in CCA, hoping to exploit black bodies for more bank.

Ra looks from her teary eyes to the hand she's massaging.

"You okay?" he asks her.

Gelé sighs and nods. "This is all just bringing up stuff I don't want to think about. And anyway, Ra. You lost your 'caring for others' privilege this week. Remember? We agreed to two 'are you okays' per week for you. You met that quota Tuesday morning. So you're officially banned from asking *anyone* if they're okay until next week."

"Oh please. Like you count, Gelé."

"Nah Ra, sorry but I *do* count. You need to focus on *your* needs a little

bit more in this place. Otherwise, when you look up, you'll have people mopping the floor with you. Or laughing when they ask you to sweep it. I know you got all this curly hair, mixed as you are",? Gelé says, reaching out teasingly to pull at one of Ra's light brown strands, "but to them, you're *still* black. And how many of us are there now? Three?"

"Five, actually. Out of eighty six employees," Ra responds with a look of disapprobation.

"Uh-huh. Exactly."

"What's going on with your hand? You keep grimacing?" he says anyway, ignoring her tirade.

"Don't worry about it."

But Ra worries. That's what Ra does. That's what Ra says beautiful black femmes do; especially those who are expected to be resilient when sometimes what they really need is the time and space to process their own trauma. Black femmes who "fail to be seen with any clarity or insight," Ra often tells her, quoting his new favorite academic, Kimberly Juanita Brown. Black femmes whose beautiful faces are disproportionately screwed under the weight of humanitarian hype and flashy images of a master race and culture saving the poor, starving world. Black femmes who keep on holding up the world, even when their own brothers turn from them, make them into foils towards their own masculine liberation, "i.e. *Get Out*," Mr. TV-buff Ra would tell Gelé, time and again, like a young spoken word artist clinging to her last refrain.

"Leave my good, innocent TV watching *out* of the political arena, will you!" Gelé would reply.

"The representative *is* the ultimate political, babe. Think meta, for me," Ra would respond, continuing on with his rant about black femmes invisible on TV or bastardized and repeatedly erased like a predictable plot, like a *Jessica Jones season 2*, black femmes killed off and used towards white women liberation. "I mean," Ra would say, "we might as well be calling this movement . . .

#*Metoo*butNOTYOU

. . . with the exception of Lili Bernard and a few others, right?"

“What does *that* have to do with anything, Ra?” Gelé would say, trying to get in a word or two, but Ra would race on, telling her how *Black Museum* and *Black Panther* got it right, but how long must we wait to make serious, every day, unexceptional *space* for her, and not just the mixed curly haired black femmes, but the dark coiled and kinky haired black femmes. And space for their daughters who, despite media’s failures, will grow up fierce as hell anyway, who’ll take on the world whether we watch, or whether we ignore . . . ?

All of this is Ra’s politics, anyway, not hers. Though he *did* have quite a few solid points.

Gelé sighs, lets the ruckus in her chest settle like she’s used to doing in the workplace, knowing a little liqueur could help. But it’s only 10 a.m. She’s got, what, eight more hours on the clock before she can even begin to move in that direction?

Then all of a sudden, Gelé’s stomach churns. Ra’s talking, but she loses his words, focusing on trying to stop herself from doubling over, thinking maybe it was the beginnings of a bad diarrhea episode. Bile collects in her mouth; Gelé feels like her nose is pressed against a rag wrung with her body’s liquid excrements. The feeling, the smell, the *sensation*, it all passes just as quickly as it came. But she’s left with the memory of it. She tries to stop herself, but groans anyway, feeling sweat accumulating between her thighs.

“Whatsup with you?” Ra asks.

Gelé blinks up at him.

“I . . . nothing.”

Ra gives her the quizzical I-don’t-believe-you look. “Maybe you got something from your weekend escapades?” he says, lowering his voice to emphasize the scandal dangling from his words.

She laughs a little, swatting at the air. “Come on, Ra.” He knew good and darn well that twenty seven year-old Gelé, with her serious attachment issues and her slew of men, was as careful as careful could be. “I didn’t get anything from *anyone*. I just felt sick for a couple of seconds. Like a stomach bug came and went away again.”

“Well, all seriousness then. Maybe you need to go see a doctor?” Ra says

this as he stands and stretches. "I'll see you at lunch, gotta get back." He winks at Gelé, walks away.

"Maybe," she responds belatedly, to herself. Gelé straightens up, stares at the information on the screen. Without thinking, she finds herself untying the cloth on her right hand; it's the first time she's done this in public in years. After four long years of hoping, worrying, searching for signs that Xave was alive, delaying her studies, of falling in and out of depressions, she needed a way to cope, to forget. So she found the cloth, and hid the tattoo.

Now, with it uncovered, lying bare underneath her gaze, she fingers the words written in Louisiana creole under Xave's beautiful name, whispers them under her breath:

your life is the dark matter of my world
precious, mattering the most

Gelé glances out the tiny window to her right, watching the bustle of people in the streets blur. Her desk catches a tear; she's wondering: *if* Xave is alive, where could he be?

Three: Xave

Xave hasn't been this agitated for a long time.

He's finally off suicide watch, feeling split between two different sentiments. On the one hand, his body doesn't feel right. He's feverish and more fatigued than he ever remembers feeling in his life, weighed down by headaches every time he goes to stand up, on the verge of passing out.

But on the other hand, his spirit's been feeling . . . *things* he hasn't felt in years now. Things he can't seem to shape in his mouth. But if he has to articulate it, maybe he'll call it . . . *life*? Yes, life. Life in his spirit while the life in his body feels like it's leaving him.

It was seeing her this morning that threw everything, Xave knew. He was standing in front of his reflection, musing in detached observation at how scrawny and thin his face had become. Like a sudden realization that

someone was standing in a room you thought was vacant, he saw her, to his left, right beside his reflection. He saw her face, her bright brown eyes, staring back at him, intensely as ever. Then the rest of her manifested – large chest, torso, her generous thighs folding into themselves. He had instinctively laughed aloud without realizing he was laughing. A memory that should have flaked off his brain long ago had slipped back in. It was a memory of him making fun of her, telling her she was turning into a chicken with her chicken legs.

Then she was gone, replaced by a sudden sting of life that had grown the size of three skyscrapers in those few seconds. It was the feeling of sensing what she felt, though he couldn't explain how. Xave had seen too many "impossibles" to feel like he needed to explain, anyway. Gelé was there, with him, for those few seconds. What else mattered? The person born the same day as him, whose first cries raced from infant lips at the same time as his, who learned to walk on the very same day, who uttered the same first words, he had seen her again when he thought he never would, flesh and bone, staring at him.

Xave had felt himself reaching for his tattoo in that moment. But he met the hard bandages of his putrefying wound instead. He remembered. After their parents died, he and Gelé had snuck on a bus when his Uncle was sleeping, crossed state lines, and joined a *Black Lives Matter* rally. Pumped with adrenaline from the crowd and the shouts and the feelings of being wronged, they had found a tattoo shop, seared their bond on their hands forever.

Since seeing her in the mirror, Xave's been walking on clouds. So much so that when he struts with his food tray past a guard in heavy conversation with a female corrections officer, and catches their dialogue about the backwardness of immigrants and about how they thought that children at the borders being separated from their parents was a "necessary evil," Xave sits his tray down, turns to the two of them, gives them a piece of his mind.

The guard steps to him, "You better shut your trap."

And Xave, feeling like pre-prison Xave, the freedom Gelé had let him taste that morning running through his bones, tells the man, "Don't tell me to shut up, you racist –,"

The guard curls his fist, slams it into Xave's jaw. Dares Xave to hit

back. Xave falls back, then down; his body slumps. He touches his mouth, sees a little blood, a chipped tooth. Nothing more. He tries to lift himself, but can't; his arms are too weak. He's suddenly dizzy, feeling chills running up his arms. So from the floor, he gets ready to bad-mouth the guy again, but sees out of the corner of his eyes a few half-interested glances, coke cans raised to parted, amused lips, and remembers where he is.

Xave shuts his eyes, leans his spinning head against the leg of a table, giving his strength over to the silence that has glued itself to his lips. No one can hear him in this hell hole. No one is coming for him. No one even knows where he is. Not even her.

Xave thinks to himself *W.E.B.* And not the intellectual either. *Why. Even. Bother.*

Four: Gelé

Pre-dawn. Long before the morning birds find their voices, Gelé feels her eyes flutter open, a bodily instinct as she half-awakens from a series of grueling nightmares. Her jaws are dangerously rigid, tightly shut like they had been at the end of her dream where she stood next to an electric gate, naked, enslaved, with a muzzle over her lips.

Panic sits in her chest, frozen like a thief disguised as a friendly neighbor. It only slithers back, away from her body, when she realizes that her jaw isn't actually stuck; she can move it. Without thinking, Gelé pulls maniacally at one of her cuticles that's been aggravating her ring finger. She pulls down, down, too far, until the skin rips and starts to bleed. Blinking wide awake, now, Gelé yanks her scarred hand from the relentless grip of her fingers, thrusts the bloody nail in her mouth against the soothing ridges of her tongue. She does it to keep from moaning. She glances in pathetic disgust at the *Tinder* date who's lying with a pale, bare, hairy leg sticking out of her taupe-colored blankets, half of his rubicund buttocks showing.

Gelé slips her finger out of her mouth just quickly enough to shoot an imperceptible "uggh" at his sleeping body before softly pulling her own out of the bed. She shimmyes her hips back into her jeans she'd walked

out of in her midnight carousing, and into her black slippers waiting by the door. Groggy and disoriented, walking the tightrope between her dreams and her reality, Gelé shuffles her way to the kitchen, coughs into her elbow, and cradles her throbbing palm, noticing for the first time not only the stiffness, but the acute aching she now feels in her jawbone. Like she punched *herself* in the jaw during her sleep. Weird.

Gelé sifts through her cabinets, looking for ginseng tea, then heats the stove so she can warm herself a cup. Thinking maybe it just might pull her back into herself. For she's been off, lately, *really* off, her body running every which way, feeling feverish without her thermometer actually proving it, her thoughts racing to places she thought she left behind.

When the water's heated and the tea bag seeps, Gelé searches mindlessly to find something else to busy her hands with – anything, really, to avoid lingering on the images that slithered into bed next to her via her nightmares. She settles on re-organizing the mail on her countertop, switching the TV on, cutting it down low.

But inevitably, Gelé's shadows begin to bellow and yield to the weight of her jittery nerves and thunderous imagination. And these shadows, they're louder than any distraction she can cook up for herself. Pieces of the conversation she had with her doctor a week ago come chasing her woozy mind:

Gelé, the conditions you're describing – aching limbs, sharp muscle pains in your hand, feeling nutrient-sapped, the smells you've been experiencing, the fevers, I have nothing to tell you. We ran all the tests, and all I have for you is the usual. We'll keep working on your weight. And your blood pressure is tipping to the high side of the spectrum, but nothing to worry too much about. Maybe you should take a little break from work?

Oh please. Gelé didn't know what the word *break* even meant. Compliments of a father who literally worked himself into the stroke that took his life.

Thinking of her father while she sat in that doctor's office, Gelé had wanted to ask her doctor about the bodily rage that accumulates, piling up generation after generation in the blood stream. But she couldn't manage it; instead she found herself staring at the doctor's shoes, thinking that the doctor's funny glances at her *really* must be the doctor's way of silently

telling Gelé: *This pain you're feeling, young black woman, I can't see it. I can't diagnose it. It doesn't make sense to me. So it must not exist.*

Then, two days ago, Gelé's therapist left her weighed down in the gunk of her feelings when she said, quite directly and simply, "You can't run around the past, Gelé. It'll bind your feet in a trap, trip you before you figure out how to catch yourself."

And then . . . there was Xave.

Flashing through her mind as if she had seen him just that morning. Chasing her into her dreams, through her dreams, out of her dreams, into her waking thoughts. In her nightmares, his body was distorted, disfigured, carved into. It reminded her somehow of a short story she had read in college several years ago, Kafka's *The Penal Colony*. She had written a paper on it, comparing Kafka's antiquated system with America's penal process. Her biased professor almost failed her for it. Maybe that's what pushed her into finance.

Gelé lifts the cup of tea to her lips, nearly scalds the taste buds off her tongue. Waiting for it to cool, she leans her tired body against the windowsill. The first bird begins to chirp outside while her memories have her bound, victim to their adulterous embraces. She's thinking about a story Xave used to tell her. Back when they'd sit on patches of dry wood, listening to roosters cackling in a neighbor's secret grove. Xave had just learned what the word *capitalist* meant, and had gotten all hype about it. For Gelé, it didn't matter what millions of explanations her teachers gave her about that word, that word didn't mean anything to her. Not until college. Not until Marx. And even then, no one had done a better job at explaining than Xave. For he didn't try to make sense out of it like everyone else. Xave made nonsense out of it, brought it back to slavery, brought it back to *colonialism* – another word Xave had taught her in the decadent verdure of their backyard. All of this before his academic interests took a turn.

Gelé wipes a tear, sees them standing there, kids in the backyard, steps away from the river, finding solace in their games a year after losing their mother, two years before losing their dad. Gelé remembers the angular shape of Xave's arms, his animated smile, the scar on the side of his eye. With one of his ginger-colored hands, he clasped her shoulder, a roguish

look in his eye. She remembers the way his knuckles were *really* ashy that day, looking greyish white like the color of a ghost's coughed up placenta, postmortem rather than postpartum.

Xave told her that there once was a boy. Standing before this machine.

"Imagine a gigantic machine," he told her, "feeding, can't stop feeding, can't stop feeding! It's an ugly mess. Can you see it?"

Gelé nodded at him.

Xave went on to tell her that this machine, it wanted nothing more but to keep eating, swallowing, eating. It was made of fake jewels and sparkly things; it attracted people from all over the world to participate in its magnificent feast. But the boy wasn't fooled. He saw the machine's darker side. He saw it eat his ancestors, then saw it coming for him! The boy swore he'd kill it. Swore it on his life. Swore all the way up until the moment he stood eye to eye with the machine, up close and personal with the beast.

There was a problem. A true conundrum. The boy *couldn't* kill it. Why? Because somehow, the little boy realized that the machine was made with *his* skin. That it was functioning by virtue of *his* organs. That it borrowed *his* eyes to see, used *his* legs to walk. It was the biggest contradiction the little boy had ever faced in his life.

Xave's story ended there, right there, on that big fat question mark. Gelé remembers hating so much that she implored her brother to make up something more satisfying. Xave refused. Told her that he wasn't telling her a story, he was defining for her a system. That was all.

Suddenly, Gelé hears a voice echo beside her eardrum. It's abrupt, close, much louder than her memories.

"*Chained to you,*" the whispers says.

Gelé gasps, her tea mug slipping from her hands. It falls with a clatter onto the counter, cracking up the center. Gelé turns, 360 degrees, sees nothing, sees no one. But in her mind, her nightmares are re-appearing, clear as day, and dark as night, running wild in her head like the untamable roots of her hair. She sees the bones of her brother making up the bars of a cell, one *she's* locked inside of.

Gelé squeezes her eyes shut, willing the images to disappear. But as she does so, she hears the whisper again.

"Chained to hope."

Again, she spins around, a 180 this time, to spot whoever it was that had spoken. But she knows this time she won't see anyone. She already feels her panic subsiding. For she knows that voice echoing in her cranium. She knows it well.

It's Xave's voice. Clear. Direct. Close enough, she could kiss his cheek, touch his skin, jump for joy.

"Don't run from me. Don't look away from me," it says, a final breathy whisper on the air.

Gelé lowers herself in her seat, unsure of what's happening, but willing to ride the waves of this craze as far as it will take her. Especially if it will pave the road, take her to him.

"Xave," she whispers to the day that must have sensed her breaking, for it is asking to join her so it might break, too. "Tell me where you are!" she bellows, giving the rising sun the strength of her longing.

And for the first time in years, she detects something of a real answer, bouncing back to meet her.

Five: Xave

"You looked away. I thought you said you wanted to see", the doctor says, chuckling as Xave blinks his eyes open, trying to come to. But Xave's brain keeps weighing him down with a memory he can't explain.

Ring . . . Ring . . .

"Xave?"

"Gelé? How are you . . . how are you . . . here?"

"I found you."

Xave shakes his head and tries to come back to the moment. Something serious is happening. Something terrible. What is it? He remembers the doctor saying that he might run out of anesthesia before it took effect, to brace himself for the pain. But Xave had been knocked out during the entire procedure. He tries, again, to fully rouse himself, but his dreams keep repeating variations of the same dialogue:

Ring . . . Ring . . .

“Xave?”

“Gelé?”

The feeling is returning to Xave’s limbs. He can hear his heart beating like a dying animal’s fighting for life. It’s the same feeling that waved goodnight to him as he drifted off, hearing the phrases *gangrene* and *have to cut*.

Cut what?

Xave is confused.

He blinks around him, sees the vermilion blood-soaked towels. And something fleshy sitting haphazardly in the bucket beside his head. Is that

...

. . . is that his hand?

It’s his hand!

Xave doesn’t think it’s possible for his heart to beat even heavier, but here it is, doing just that as he chokes on the spit collecting in his dry throat.

“Okay now settle down,” the doctor says, putting an arm on Xave’s shoulder. “How’d you find your way into this mess?”

Xave searches for his voice; when he finds it, he tries to hide his emotion from the man, this stranger. “No one would listen when I said I needed surgery,” Xave coughs out.

“I didn’t mean the hand, son. I mean this shit-hole.”

Immediately, Xave turns his face away, shaking the doctor’s existence from his mind. Thinking instead of his hand.

His hand.

Gone.

What else could possibly matter?

But just when misery promises to steal his last breath, Xave opens his eyes, feels his heart settling as he remembers. It *wasn’t* a dream. That ringing, that voice . . .

Ring . . . Ring . . .

“Xave?”

“Gelé?”

It was real. Xave’s breath returns as he blinks into the ceiling,

remembering. Remembering her voice. Not years ago, not in his mind, but there, real, on the phone, was it yesterday?

Xave looks back at his hand, and thinks about one of the Haitian men he knew growing up in Louisiana. The man once told him that in Voudoun, when you ask for something, expect to lose something else in return. That's the pact you make when trading off with the spirits.

Maybe that's what this trade off had been. His hand for his twin.

Yesterday morning, the guards told Xave he had a phone call. Something he *never* had. He heard her voice on the other line, a voice he could spot anywhere as if it were the mesmeric melody of his soul mate. Well, it *was* the voice of his soulmate.

"Xave?"

"Gelé?"

It must have been five whole minutes, he listened to her heavy breathing on the other line, wondering at the perspicacity that had led her to him. He felt like it couldn't be real. But no mistaking that voice. It was his sister's.

"How are you . . . how are you . . . *here?*" he mutters into the receiver.

"I found you."

"But how?"

"I don't know. The tattoo? I really don't know, Xave. I felt you call, I think? I followed your voice and the things my body told me, the *truth* it was telling me, then I . . . I *saw* you somehow."

"You saw me?"

"Kind of. Like a dream, maybe? I saw bars. I saw . . . a cage. I did some guess-work, a little research, a little serendipity. I followed my feelings. Hey Xave?"

"Gel?"

"We're gonna get you out, we're gonna get you out, we're gonna get you out," she started to mumble.

And Xave could hear her smiling through the phone, through her tears. For the briefest of moments, Xave felt himself smile, too.

Six: Gelé

A mural stretches across the wall at the building's entrance. It highlights the majesty of a bald eagle with humorously drooping wings. Gelé sees her face oddly reflected in the chipping paint. As if her face had been etched into the concrete long before the drawing. Long before this symbol of Independence and freedom rang out in all its contradiction. Long before "America" even began.

"Ain't my America. Or *only* my America. Mine and my native brother's and sister's," she whispers to the painting, suddenly thinking of the trip she took to the South of France in a car ride with two charming Tunisian brothers, who, yet and still, had bugged the hell out of her in their last few moments of exchange. They'd asked her where she was from. "The US," she replied. "No, but like where are your *parents* from?" "The US" "No, but like your lineage? Vous êtes d'où?"

"America, goddammit! First boat, first ride". That's what the world could *not* understand about the magic of black *presence*. We have always only been everywhere.

Gelé's hand is wrapped in a sling tied around her neck. She had had a severe attack of pain the day before in her wrist. Ra had driven her to the hospital, all the while telling her he didn't believe in any superstition, and he *certainly* wasn't religious. But if straight-pathed Gelé wanted to lose her mind just this once, he'd accompany her on that rollercoaster so he could play that card if he ever needed to in the future.

Of course, the doctors found nothing. And Gelé knew why.

Something must have happened to Xave's hand.

Gelé shoves the other jittery hand into the shallow pockets of her blue jean overalls. Ra hands her one of the ham and turkey sandwiches they made this morning. She shakes her head, knowing she won't be able to stomach it.

In the front office, Nat King Cole's voice drifts towards them, heavy like water in the air, singing out the refrains of some speculative future. Gelé wonders if he actually ever knew.

"And I think to myself, what a wonderful world."

Gelé signs a few papers, walks into the waiting area. Sits. Waits. Crosses her legs. Waits.

Swallows.

Waits.

Fidgets.

Waits.

Pulls out that sandwich and takes a bite.

Waits.

Until

Gelé's eyes collide with his.

He's standing in the doorway looking nothing like her brother.

But looking everything like her brother.

"Xave," she murmurs.

His eyes are like a canvas, wide, suggestive, innocent but hard. Like spurts of color on an empty page, his eyes hold the weight of the promised world. In their deep groves, she sees broken. But she sees something else, too. Something that reminds Gelé of their mother's eyes. Their mother who washed up on shore after the big hurricane.

Gelé thinks she spots a humanity in those eyes. Not a "Universal Rights Declaration" kind of humanity. Not a Kantian humanity. Not even a Wakandian humanity. It's a humanity that this world has yet to know.

For:

Margaret Garner.

Eric Garner.

Erica Garner.

And the millions more.