

getting on their level

i let the n-word slip real quick from my lips in my classroom
i ain't really mean nothing by it,
but i get real passionate when i explain what my momma went through
and why my grandmother moved north
and how this country really ain't safe for niggers or niggas
and how it connects to today, to the students in front of me.

and when this happens
and i climb on a student desk,
leaning forward and looking each of them in the eye,
they listen.

morning ritual, interrupted

i make sure the street can feel the bass
as i turn into the parking lot at my school.
ain't no secret Meg is on my playlist

and i car-twerk, wiggle, and rap along
like i am somebody
to be both feared and wanted

but tomorrow, i am the one afraid
before i even wake up and know that will not happen,
that will cruise to city sounds and car honks instead

know that i will beg whichever god got time for me
that the only lead found in my school after a called-in threat
is in the pencils.

even the shoes feel different

as i squirm my feet in
lace them up
and walk across the unmowed lawn to my car

the last time i wore them
a child died,
and the dusty gray and blue shoes kept the memory i want—
i need—
to forget:
the stomach in my sneaker
body doubled in prayer and preparation.
him, ashen-faced and catatonic
on the makeshift camp nurse floor
then him gasping, mouth searching

i keep the girls calm,
lie, and say i don't know why we are sequestered in cabins
then quiz them on their vocabulary, play a game,
and instruct them to pack up

i know something they don't—
and they know it.
the way i keep checking my cracked phone
use the dusty walkie as a lifeline
check eleven times that it works.

it worked—
silence is an answer too.

control

my students dissected sheep hearts in science class
and i feel for the lamb plucked from the world early

or maybe it was a sacrificial thing,
after all they hear is “no”

when this was a guided activity until the end
and they got to prod around,

mash and knead things to their liking
reminding me of them begging to control their environment

to keep their phones in their pockets,
to leave the classroom to work in the tower

to walk around the building without being in line
for the locks to come off the bathroom doors

for the first real time.
they have already lost so much.

two friends and a handful of teachers later,
we are all tongue-tied and tired.