Travel and Trial:

Twelve Months Elsewhere

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on new years eve
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that falls from the sky--
your heart and skin both
change sizes during rainstorms--
your mouth is everyone's
most trustworthy
you smile
you smile
you smile and they
believe you.

How to Remember Baltimore

Walk barefoot down North Avenue;
smile at the sex workers who call you crazy.
Parallel park,
back up until you hit the car behind you.
Pull out,
slam on your brakes if it is raining
(or looks like it might rain soon).
Tell strangers where you are from
answer, *actually I've*
never seen The Wire.
Drive to Slater Avenue,
carry a picture of your mother as a child,
hold it above the cracked front
steps and surrendering
awning of the rowhouse that made her
before she made you.
Stand just far enough
from the factory where your father's
father worked to eclipse it
when you hold up your hand.
Put it in your pocket.
Collect dingy monuments
from the homeless men who sleep
between the projects and the dog parks.
Invent a partition between
the boarded up corner
stores and the mansions
where the dentists
and professors live; hold it to your chest.
You will spend your life defending
your city to people
who haven't been taught
to love it. Tell them sometimes
you swear your future is Charles Street,
a belt wrapped loose and stable
around indigence and affluence,
holding them both. Tell them
this city made you
a harbor for seagulls and b-movies,
that it ungentrified
your heart, that it and you are both
potholed
and permanently under construction. Reach down
wherever you stand, hold the grass,
rolled or growing,
the asphalt and cigarette butts, all
above you like an amulet, like the dirtiest,
most perfect birthright your city
will ever give you.

Projector

In the living room of my childhood
home, my mother shows me
a documentary on learning disabilities
in school age children.
When interviewed, the survivors
of grade school relive their traumas,
each one a veteran's war story. I nod,
a finger of adolescence tickles
the back of my neck. My mother
responds with a denial she has taught herself
since my childhood, "But Sweet Boy,
you did so well in school."

I forget sometimes she believes this.

I lead her to the basement, the boxes
hold limp bodies of evidence—C
and D-stained report cards,
my name followed by *works well*
below his potential. I hand them
to my mother, her thumb grazes her own
signature on the bottom line.

My mother will not take it.
I reach back in, exhume a folder
marked SPECIAL, I pull out the busted lip
I was awarded when first caught talking
to myself in the locker room. It fits
my face so well, I wonder if I've grown at all.

My mother will not take it. I cannot
stop. I find the jar where I've preserved
old voices—*no one expects you to be good*
at math,what kind of
retard are?—I cannot
put the lid back on. This is not the end

of the box. I want to hand her the panic-
stained sheets, the carpet-ring worn
from pacing mornings when papers were due,
a year of night terrors tucked
into a glassine envelope.
My mother will not take it.
From below, the gleam of metal finds me—I know
this one. The old projector, full of film,
aims its dull eye at me from beneath
the autographed yearbooks, letters

of recommendation, awards for German,
drama, forensics. I know the contents
of this reel. I turn off the lights, flip

the switch and my pain illuminates
the basement wall of my childhood
home. The projector beams my first
elementary school desk dumped
on the classroom floor, its shameful disarray
an effigy for the grateful others, next
the circle of seventh grade boys
palsied by their impressions of my slungdown
head and stiff, self-conscious arms, next
the fire escape where I ate lunch
my entire senior year, My mother
inserts herself into the show, stands, unblended
in front of the projector's burning eye.
Her quivering mouth lays beneath the teenage me
displayed over her. A tear runs through
the image of the floor. My mother can
not stop. I take this.

Her hands fall from her eyes, scenes
of my graduation flash across her face,
she tells me she does not think the failure
in these boxes is mine. She believes

sometimes I forget this.

Devin

On our way to the group home,
my co-teacher and I joke
about which of the seven boys
we'd take home if we could--
pluck from this place where they
learn and sleep and hope.
It is always a seven way tie.

Devin wants to write an extended metaphor,
but he doesn't know how.
He tells me his life is a pot,
the fire below roars his whole past
to a boil, the lid is too heavy to move.
I tell him he is living a poem,
he need only write himself down.
We tell the boys everybody's process
is different. They all know
we don't just mean poetry. Process:

Davonte lowers his face to the page,
a diver poised, holds his breath
and his innocence for our ten minutes.
Tyler writes five words, raises his hand,
writes, raises, repeats. Devin receives permission
to be brilliant, "*You mean I can write*
a love poem to my guitar?
That's awesome!", then plunges into
his words, surfaces after ten buoyant,
saturated moments. I do not know

how to tell the boys I have been drowning,
trying to expel a man who did not ask
before entering, a temple whose key
would never fit in his hand.

My job is to teach the boys poetry.
My honor is to return the favor
of their honesty, but I cannot
tell them this. I am still
unpacking the soiled laundry of assault,
still learning who to tell and how much,
but I know I cannot tell them.
I don't know much else. Everybody's
process is different.

They are better at this
than I am. Life has given

them no choice. And there is no wound
these boys have not turned
into word. When Davonte reads
about his father, the words,
"It's okay. I used to hate my dad too."
seep from Devin's lips like steam.
And when they finish, the room is thick
with survival, the air holds seven boys'
applause and tears.

It is the week of the school poetry show.
In the front of the room, Devin's process
is crumbling. He waves the half-inked page
like muddy surrender. "*I hate everything*
I've written, and I can't finish this."
I hold my breath and dive.
"*Dev, you wanna go to*
other room and write with me?"

In the empty therapy room,
Devin finishes his poem. His pain
condenses on the page, drips
from his eyelashes. He points
to a scratchout at the bottom. *"I*
can't read this. It's about my sister.
My family put me here when I touched her
the same way I got touched."
The lid drops. Still I can't tell him.
He is teaching me that we are all
that broken thirteen year old:
the man who broke me, the me
that he broke, this poet
weeping in front of me.

Devin reads me his poem,
juices coursing. He is saving more
lives than his own. At the therapy
table, we are both wet-eyed, pushing
our lids hard as we can, releasing
the old process, letting a new one
boil up.

Poem

When I was the quicksand
you built your first house on,
your limbs and passions
forgot movement.

I became mud,
punished your pores,
you could not
wash me off.

Shallow water,
I froze, flooded.
You skated,
swam away. I think

I have evaporated.
Sometimes, unknowing,
you breathe me in.

Evidence That I Have Destroyed

You would not dismiss yourself
from my body; a disjointed alphabet
of exhibits sprawled next to me
the week I spent in bed.
Phone calls I did not answer, other men
I would not see, all reminders—

an account: us at breakfast
the morning after, me laughing,
my arm on your shoulder, how
I must have wanted it.

Testimony: the friend I was staying with
offered us her bed, her whole house
after our date, she remembers my voice,
steadfast-- the couch was big enough
to hold my intentions.

Objection: in the shower, you asked
if I was sure, couldn't you just finish up
in me, Objection: you promised it wouldn't
take long, said it was rude to jack off
in someone else's bathroom. Objection: my silence
must have been answer enough.

Only you and I can recount our first night,
your fingertips on my knee as I told you
about the one man I'd ever let inside me,
how long I take to open, how you held me,
told me the moon and my smile were all
you wanted,

how I believed you.

What Nebraska Taught Me to Want
after Kevin Young

I want to never have a boyfriend
or a chance to marry one legally.
I want my dog to stay barking
and attacking the neighbors.
I wanna get stared at real hard
by gas station attendants
and eighty year old couples
every time I hold somebody's hand.
I want my back windshield cracked
and my rainbow bumper sticker spraypainted.
When somebody with a tire iron
and a point to prove
comes for me, I want him
to be the one guy
my dog doesn't bite.
When the hate finally gets me,
I wanna die
on my living room floor
under a wailing animal, alone
and illegal.

Syncopation

Every few beats,
the car alarm outside my house
synchronizes with the song
I am listening to. The song
is dynamic, it stretches its beat,
sinews pulled across the tempo.
The alarm stays steady, responds
to nothing, barely seems to notice
when they match. Darling,
one day I will stop pretending
I have been broken into. Thank you
for making music in the meantime.

Smoke/Fire

Smudging is the practice of lighting a clump of burning sage on fire inside your home to let the smoke cleanse every atrocity it holds. There is a bullet hole in my bedroom window. It was put there by my landlord, who is also my next door neighbor. The hole was not removed. The gun was returned to my landlord's closet. The body of the man who caught the bullet before my window did was returned to the ground. After the trial, my landlord returned to the home next to mine.

Yesterday, I locked myself out of my house. My neighbor helped me break back in. We stood on my porch and on my roof, ladder between us in the afternoon sun. Eight cars drove past us. I hugged my neighbor thank you when he pried my window open.

My landlord's wife owns at least one t-shirt of a wolf and an American flag. She was at least one bottle of wine into the night when I told her about a report I saw once about two men, one Black and one White, who pretended to break into a car on a public street, how many people stopped, how many police officers were called each time. She said she wasn't surprised, went back inside, locked her door.

I dream one day I wake up and find the bullet hole gone from my bedroom window. In the dream I can't tell if my memory of the bullet hole, how it got there, is gone too, or if it's just the hole. In the dream, I do not think about how the only man in this story who isn't White is also the only man in this story who isn't alive. In the dream, I walk to my window, hold a plume of sage outside it, let it bey its way to the moon.

White People Using the N Word: A Flowchart

Are you White?
If YES: Don't fucking say it.
Do you have Black friends?
Don't' fucking say it.
Do you only say it when they're not around?
Don't fucking say it.
Do you think I don't mind 'cause I'm White?
If NO: Don't fucking say it.
If YES: Go fucking fuck yourself. And don't fucking say it.
Did you not mean it *That Way?*
Do you believe there is any way other than *That Way* that our skinny, pale lips can mean it?
Has any Black person EVER told you it did hurt them physically every time?
Have you ever asked?
If NO: Ask. While not fucking saying it.
Do you still think it's funny when overgrown fratboys co-opt their version of somebody else's culture?
Did you think your gang sign" would distract us?
Don't fucking say it.
Are you the last White guy I went on a date with?
Shouldn't have fucking said it. And thanks for dinner.
Are you the white Midwestern assclown who yelled it from your jeep at my Indian brother-in-law?
Shouldn't fucking said it. You're welcome for stopping at your tires.
Would you take this seriously if a White man wasn't saying it?
Don't fucking say it.
Do you have a *hood pass*?
Don't fucking say it.
Do you believe there really are *hood passes?*
Don't fucking say it.
Were you just quoting the lyrics? *Don't*
Did you pronounce it with an *a*, not an *er*? *fucking*
Do you recognize your ability to level a human? *say it.*
Are you willing to crush history and spirit?
Say it.
Wanna see how far we've come?
Say it.
Curious where our tolerance for oppression lies these days?
Say it.
Think we don't all live out loud? That we can't hear you?
Say it.
Certain nobody values the safety of an entire people more than your access to any word you please?
Say it.
I dare you.
Say it.
See what happens.

Dad, Age 76

In the 1950's, my father shuttled lunches
to his black commanding officers
from the diners in Ft. Bening, Georgia
that would not serve them. In the 70's,
M\my father was one of two members of his family
to attend his cousin's interracial wedding.
In the 90's, my fathere infused me with as much smug
self-righteousness as he could. In a diner
with my family on the day after the presidential election,

2012, a week after the lights and comfort were returned
to New Jersey's waterlogged elite, my father tells us that
that the liberal media is spinning
Hurricane Katrina to look worse than Super Storm Sandy
because of their agenda, that Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton
are racist for only supporting one disaster's victims,
and not another. I am reminded of an 84 year old white man
named Skip. He heard my best friend read at a conference once,
told her she was surprisingly eloquent, but should consider
cutting all of "that negro stuff" from her work. "We get it", Skip told her.
The hope my friend derived from this conversation
was that Skip just needed to die. And he probably would soon.

I don't know what Skip is made of, but there are six feet, two inches
of decency levied inside my father's skin. My father
shed neither an eyelash nor an ounce of his love for me
when I told him I was gay, my father was flattered when I told him
he should be played by Morgan Freeman in a movie, my father
has asked me why there are no Miss White America pageants
or United Caucasian College Funds before. My father
was admitted to the hospital for severe heart palpitations
three months after my breakup with a black man
he was ready to call his other son. And at a diner in Baltimore,
I have never been so aware that I do not
want my father to die. Not soon. Not ever.

My father's social circle hasn't extended past the walls
of his house in the past decade, and my mother
is so grateful for the beating of his heart that she does
not call out the hate issued from his lips. I do not want
my father to die. Not without being challenged.

When my sister and I convince him that only scrutinizing
some people's motives can, in fact, be racist,
and that when groups of people
are oppressed in the exact same way, they have every reason

to look out for their own, my father sighs, no remaining traces
of smugness. He says, “Why do we have to black people
or white people? Why can’t we just be people?”

I have to tell him that we’re not there yet, there is work
To be done and no shortcuts to take. And I know that this
may be the last part of me my father takes with him
when he exits this place. If I have my way, he won’t go
anywhere until I can tell him, “Dad, you donated me
a prickled tongue. I have used it to scrape the worth
out of more people than I am proud of, I am trying to let it
rub just a little loving discomfort to any skin
I think is ready for it. Dad, I’m going to push you hard
and piss you off, but you’re ready for it.

I have no say in whether and when you will go,
but I have to believe that you are becoming the father
I most want to take with me for the rest of your days
and every one of mine.”

Part One: Going Places

When I held you in your bed
and told you we weren't boyfriends yet,
I meant that it's been too long since
I've enjoyed stroking someone's belly
for me to want to go anywhere.
I meant I'm not going anywhere.
I meant that 1300 miles ago,
I left an old lover who hasn't spoken
to me in 16 months, another who stopped
touching me before my lips
could wish him a happy anything.
I used to think it was easier to be me
than anyone else on Earth, and I was just
doing it wrong. When I tell you I don't think
I can commit just yet, I mean that I wonder
if being me is the second hardest job there is,
I wonder if being the one loves me
is the hardest. Soon I will have
to tell you that 6 weeks is too soon
to call me your love. I don't know
what I will mean then. The last time
I went home, an ice storm stroked
the interstate's belly, when my car left
its shoulder, when the median jostled me
still, when the driver behind me
did the same only without surviving, the accident
meant to tell me I'm not going

anywhere. The last time I tried to move
on, somebody didn't ask before taking
the same thing I know you are waiting for.
That night, not going anywhere meant play
Dead until he's finished. Yesterday, and by that
I mean 20 hours before these words
found my mouth, I mean the thirteenth
of this month in this year, I was fetal
on my living room floor, the dog whining
above me. That hour felt like paralysis,
like a history of lovers who won't touch
or talk. I don't think you feel like this, but maybe
it's too soon. When I say it is too soon,
I mean that when you were sick 19 hours ago,
a pot of soup on my stovetop and a drive
to your front door were the two things
that unfurled me from the floorboards,
I mean that I wish I could have met your parents,
that sometimes when I hold your hand,
I feel like I have. Soon is a promise, every bit
as much as a guard rail or a base board,
soon means I know I don't know my heart yet,
but you're welcome to stroke its belly.
I know my feet, look at them,
planted, I am not going anywhere,
look at me, hold my hand, I am not
going anywhere.

Into Safety

The only man I saw die
may or may not have filled
his blood with poison,
probably wasn't escaping the law
when he left this earth in front of me.
I will not ever know.
I will not ever want to.

Standing in a tree lined median
inside Iowa's best rendition of November,
I was too grateful that the newly fallen ice
and the shoulder of I-80 West
had spared me after a three hundred yard free fall
in a station wagon with a panicked foot on the brake,
my panicked terrier in my lap,
to question the choices of a man
less lucky than I was.

I know this is rare. I am a white man.
We like to question motives.
It is hard to think of motives
five minutes reborn
from avoiding a grove of median trees
at sixty miles an hour.

The man I saw die hit the same sharp turn
on the interstate that I did. He was a little faster,
a lot less buckled and nowhere near as privileged
as I was. He was fifty feet from me
when the windshield of his truck
birthed him midair and deposited every part of him
but his life on the frozen ground that held me.

Only then, after a two thousand pound pickup
landed closer to my flesh than to safety,
only when looking out at a freeway full of metal
flying over unplowed ice, only when waiting
for the police in an open field surrounded
by fear without friction did I realize
I was not safe.

There is a version of the accident
I have started telling my white friends.
In this version, I make the dead man black.
He was not in real life.
In real life, all that matter
are his fatherless children
and empty spot in his wife's bed.
When I tell this version,
I am always asked, *Do you think he was drinking*
before the accident? Was he speeding
to get away from the cops?
In the version where the dead man is white,
everyone is too sad for the loss
to ask any questions.

When I tell the untrue version of the man I saw die,
I am reminded of how few miles separate that Iowa median
from that small town in Missouri, from each of those streets
in Chicago. I am reminded of how lucky I am
to only feel unsafe at the hands
of an interstate who doesn't care what I look like,
a dermis of ice that will never ask about my rap sheet,
how an eighteen year old black boy on foot
and white man inside a ton of metal were both launched into death,
how the white man's will always be the gentler of the two.

In Our Being
after Audre Lorde

For those of us who love wrong
and often, keep loving. It's
how fear is undone.

For those of us who were taught
that our hearts were the most visible
garments we put on in mornings,
that strangers and would-be assailants
know us better than we do, your heart
is not the bold print message
on your least favorite t-shirt, your heart
is not the embarrassing haircut your mama
made you get in seventh grade, your heart
is not somebody's map to your weakness.

It is your heart,

slippery with intention, soaked
in memory and ambition
somebody else might call blood.
It is bigger than blood. It cures
the fear your body loves you
enough to pump all over your insides,
it is the liquid of your identity,
a fluid reminder of the rapture
you deserve, the antidote for a disease
you will never spread. When someone tries
to cut you

the whole world will heal.

Part Two: Moving Day

Lover,
I am moving.

This living room is as empty
as my heart has been,
the boxes ask to keep twelve months
of promises,
this litany of trashbags
has suffered a year
of unpackaged heartbeats, dust covered betrayal.
Lover, you are moving
your way through me, unpacked
my trust from a box somebody before you
put together wrong, Stay holding me,
kiss in permanent marker--
everyone who sees me knows
what my contents are.
My love, moving used to mean
paint my failures on the cardboard of my skin,
used to mean let only the backdrop change.
My love, there is litter behind me
that once looked like loyalty
Lover, I relocated into wreckage.
You were all I could exhume.

Lover, I am moving.
The living room gapes like your smile,
holds me like the road will,
does not want these boxes anymore,
has relocated a new promise,
knows that we will find it.