Crossing the post-racial color line: a 'novel' approach to exploring whiteness, blackness, and passing in 21st century America

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CROSSING THE POST-RACIAL COLOR LINE:
A ‘NOVEL’ APPROACH TO EXPLORING WHITENESS, BLACKNESS, AND PASSING
IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

by Alissa Ssendawula

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Abstract

*Muzungu* is a novel about a white woman who denies her whiteness by passing and even identifying as a black woman, even as she maintains a contentious relationship with her white mother. The plot is revealed through the point of view of the adult, “black” Rachel, but from the very beginning, much of what she gives the reader are memories from her white childhood, memories involving two key experiences in her youth, experiences that provide her with her first awareness of herself as a *white* girl. The first is her discovery of a lynching postcard in her great-grandmother’s cellar. Her great-grandmother’s callous message on the back of the postcard is as horrifying to her as the image on the front of the black man’s murder and the faces of the white people who participated in it. The second is when she and her mother relocate to Uganda, where she is the only white child in her community and at her boarding school. *Muzungu* explores why a white woman might attempt to deny her whiteness and identify as a black woman, as well as how the events in her life and her connections to her family, friends, and the communities she belongs to influence her perceptions of herself and of race. This novel draws upon the work of many sources on race and whiteness, both nonfiction and fiction, as well as from the life of Rachel Dolezal. Given that race is a social construction and that there is no biological basis for categorizing people by race, my dissertation asks whether a white woman in the twenty-first century can truly escape white privilege and the guilt it often causes simply by claiming to be black. As I explain in my Afterword, *Muzungu* reveals that the attempt to escape the responsibility of white privilege and appear to be something else requires white privilege to do so, and that Rachel’s social ties to her (white) past and the people who knew her then, as well as her memories of them, prevent her from ever being truly free of her whiteness.
Preface

This project would not be possible had I not enrolled, at the last minute, in an African American literature course a year after I graduated from college with a bachelor’s in biology. I had returned to school to pursue a Master’s in English, but first I had to take classes at the undergraduate level. I didn’t need to take many credits, and was torn between that class and a women’s literature course. A fellow (white) student suggested I choose the women’s course on the grounds that I’m not black, the implication being that such a course would have no purpose or benefit for me. She was, I think, even a bit perplexed that I was interested in taking it at all. This seemed illogical to me because I’m of the opinion that more men ought to take women’s literature courses and read more so-called women’s lit, so I decided I would take both classes, and I’m glad I made that choice. Both courses have influenced the direction of my project in their own ways, and they have influenced how I see myself as a white woman in American society.

In the African American lit class, we didn’t read canonical African American novels. Instead, we read what is known as ‘white life’ fiction: novels written about white people by black authors. Morrison and Hurston were on the list, but instead of Beloved and Their Eyes Were Watching God, we read Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination and Seraph on the Sewanee. It turns out the African American lit class was very much concerned with white people, and not just incidentally. This African American lit course was actually about white Americans, a social group that is intimately and painfully connected to black Americans. The class was about me.
The pivotal moment in the course for me was the day the professor dimmed the lights and projected images of lynching postcards\(^1\) on the large screen at the front of the room. It was a painfully emotional experience, one we aren’t equipped to deal with because America hasn’t yet come to terms with the history of slavery and genocide and its continuing impact on present lives and the structure of society. We’re also not accustomed to handling emotions in the institutional setting of the classroom. In fact, both race and emotions are more or less taboo. Nonetheless, my professor took that risk, one that was no doubt painful and terrifying for her as well.

I knew about lynchings, but until that moment I hadn’t known about the postcards. I was aware on some level that photographs were taken at lynchings, having come across one or two in a book, but I’d never really given it much thought. Very tellingly, perhaps, was the fact that my first question was, why would someone take a picture? The question should have been, why would someone participate in a lynching? It seemed too enormous of a question to ask—a response typical of white guilt. It still does. This is a prime example of the white psyche, this dim awareness, this sharp edge of discomfort. A fear of falling—not into the unknown, but into what we have suspected all along we already knew, if only vaguely.

I was to sit through this moment for a second time as a Master’s student, having enrolled in the same professor’s upper level African American literature course on whiteness. I was not any more prepared then as I had been the second time. It was as gut-wrenching and graphic as it had been a year ago.

What struck me about the photos, besides the mutilated body at the center of the image, was (and still is) the faces of the white people. None of them looked the way I felt. Not one of them looked horrified, sick, or sad. Instead, they looked proud, excited, justified, even
vindicated. Their eyes burned at me, daring me to tell them that what they had done was wrong, expecting that I wouldn’t. Their faces were so alive with a maniacal joy. They seemed to shimmer with a terrifying lust. I would read about that lust in James Baldwin’s short story, “Going to Meet the Man.”

Some of the white faces were children. Young children. Children young enough that they might still be alive today. Where were these children now? How had they felt about what they witnessed? It must have been terrifying, yet their parents had willingly brought them. How did they view themselves and black people from then on? Did it change after the Civil Rights Movement, or not? Had I ever talked to such a person? And then: might someone in my own family be in one of those postcards? It was then that I realized more fully than at any other moment: the past is always with us. It doesn’t go away. We learn from our elders, and the past propels us into the future. It matters.

Data for known lynchings are usually cited between the 1800s to the 1960s, but racialized violence and murder didn’t end there, and in fact, Michael Donald’s murder in 1981 is often cited as the last recorded lynching on US soil, a lynching that occurred a year before I was born. A 2015 report by the Equal Justice Initiative estimates that nearly 4,000 black people were known to have been lynched between 1877 and 1950 in the Southern states alone, though lynchings occurred throughout the United States. But what exactly constitutes a lynching? Perhaps more importantly, are African Americans and their communities being treated with the same respect as white people, regardless of when the last murder that can be technically counted as a lynching occurred? The answer, unfortunately, is no. The media attention on police violence and murder committed against black people and the subsequent backlash against the Black Lives
Matter movement, the high incarceration rate of black people, and the different response to black
.crack cocaine users versus white opioid users are just some examples.

It seemed an impossible task to deal with these questions from the stance of a literary
critic. Because this is such an emotional subject the likes of which I’ve had little experience in
my own life, research was necessary, questions and arguments needed to be made, but it wasn’t
enough. I needed to engage with the rich emotional potential of imagery in a more direct way
than a traditional dissertation would allow, and I needed to step outside of my comfort zone. I
needed to process my questions and my emotions by writing fiction.

Around this same time, I met my future husband, a black Ugandan who was attending
college at my alma mater in Vermont. While I was newly conscious of institutional racism,
inherent bias, and white privilege, he was not. It was I who noted the threatening stares of white
men on the main street of our small, predominately white college town, and not he. Through my
family, many of whom rarely interacted with people of color on a deeper level or even on a
superficial level, having spent much of their lives in rural areas and small towns in western
Pennsylvania and New York state, I learned how powerful and hurtful media representations of
black people are, and how important it is for white people to have the opportunity to get to know
black people—something both white plantation owners during slavery and politicians during the
Jim Crow era were aware of—but I also learned that a person’s behaviors can change, even if
their beliefs don’t always. If my husband didn’t know back then about what it means to be black
in America, he has since learned.

On the other hand, I didn’t really know how Ugandans viewed race until I traveled to
Uganda with my husband on two separate occasions. My understanding of the power and
magnitude of my white privilege grew during the brief weeks I spent in Uganda. It seemed more obvious to me than when looking at horrific images of a lynching postcard or reading academic articles on whiteness in class—which is perhaps why white people don’t take race and racism seriously, given that our privilege is rendered such that it is easy to ignore or reframe, even when we are presented with data and images. In Uganda, I wasn’t looking through the lens of someone else’s camera or reading someone else’s words, there wasn’t the protective barrier that paper inadvertently provides. I was seeing white privilege and feeling it with my own body firsthand as a “minority,” (though one with privilege) alone among people who, by simply staring at me wherever I went, made it impossible for me to ignore what made me so different. My status as a member of the racial majority in America had kept me from feeling my race privilege so keenly, but not so in Uganda, particularly rural Uganda at my in-law’s home village, where I was the only white person. While there are key similarities between the social constructed nature of race in America and Uganda, there are also key differences, which I discuss below. My personal observations helped shape Muzungu, and in some cases I even wrote scenes that were taken directly from my own experiences with little alteration, although it would be awhile before I realized the significance of pairing what I’d been learning about whiteness in America with what I had experienced in Uganda.

I first wrote about the discovery of a relative’s lynching postcard as a first-year doctoral student in Professor Schwarzschild’s Fiction Writing Workshop. It was in many ways a clumsy attempt to untangle the web of white guilt, to seek out a beginning so that I might find an ending, but it was a start.

One day I casually mentioned my story to my mother. And she, maybe a bit less casually, mentioned the discovery, made by one of her older siblings, of white robes in the attic of her
parents’ farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania. She added that there had been a rumor that her father might have been involved in a local KKK chapter. She was quick to add that there weren’t many black people in the area, so who would they have been targeting? Who indeed.

I am quite certain I wouldn’t have learned this little fact about my grandfather if I hadn’t mentioned my story and shared a certain level of closeness with my mother. My mother’s family is large and prone to gossip of a harmless sort. But *this* is not harmless. How many of us don’t know about our personal ties to America’s bloody past? Witness once again the psyche of the white mind: we know “it” at a distance. A safe, safe distance, one relegated to the past, filled with the ancestors of other people’s families. Never our own.

My grandfather died, still relatively young, when I was just a few years old in the 80s. I don’t remember much about him. I do remember sitting on his lap and being a bit frightened by him, for no logical reason, except that he was bigger than me and wasn’t my mother. He liked to put applesauce in his milk. He lived on a farm that was no longer doing as much farming as it had when his forebears built it in the late 1800s. His death came on the heels of my grandmother’s sudden death in a car accident, making it look as though he died of a broken heart. These are the things I recall offhand. They don’t do him justice, but I think they do suggest he was human.

And that’s the thing. The white people in the postcards were human, but so were the black people. It’s a terrifying thing to think about.

For the next few years, I struggled to complete the novel. I wrote hundreds of pages, I took breaks and wrote short stories, I tried writing the novel in different formats—as a collection of intertwined short stories, as unconnected short stories, as a novel. But something seemed to be
missing. Then, in June of 2015, I heard about Rachel Dolezal, the president of Spokane’s NAACP chapter, who was discovered to be presenting herself as black in spite of the fact that her parents are ostensibly white. People across the nation were in an uproar. Everyone had an opinion about it, an opinion that was more often than not unforgiving. I was intrigued. What on earth would possess someone, especially a white person, to change their racial “presentation,” to say they were one thing after being raised as another?

Unlike passing for white, there are no institutional systems that support and benefit passing for black, because there are no institutional systems of advantage for people of color. Instead of increasing privilege, a white person passing for black would, presumably, be putting many of the benefits of their white privilege, such as the ability obtain a job or find housing, at risk. To make matters more interesting, Dolezal’s parents went on camera to confirm her white heritage. What exactly was in it for them? Did they want Dolezal to go back to them? If so, why embarrass her so publically? Or were they trying to enforce racial boundaries? Clearly, some interesting family dynamics were also at play.

I began to ponder the relationship between white privilege, guilt, shame, and denial with the desire to pass for black or hide one’s whiteness in order to understand what race has become in the twenty-first century and how it impacts the white psyche.

This is where fiction writing comes in. While some critical thinking and analysis was of course necessary—from studying the works of critics such as Shannon Sullivan, Peggy McIntosh, Charles Mills, George Yancy, and many others, to planning an outline of a plot for my novel—ultimately, what I needed to do was re-experience and re-imagine whiteness, and by extension blackness, from another angle. I needed to use my five senses; I needed to immerse
myself in images, because I needed to grant myself permission to feel, much as the lynching postcard had allowed me to do. An exploration of the institutional racism of white privilege goes hand in hand with understanding white guilt—a powerful emotion that often prevents whites from taking an active role in dismantling the system, sometimes because they aren’t sure how to or even if their help is wanted, but also more often than not because of the fear of losing privilege and being punished for stepping outside of clearly demarcated lines of race.

Perhaps the most important lesson about race that I’ve learned during my journey from writing Muzunngu is that it can be misleading to use the terms “race” or “racism” when talking about color-based inequality and all the forms that inequality takes. Instead, I believe that “whiteness” or “white privilege” are terms that bring us closer to the truth and force us to see what it is really about much more poignantly than “race” or even “racism,” for neither race nor racism in all its forms—overt, covert, and institutional—would exist without the drive to protect white privilege. My understanding of whiteness and white privilege and the ways it informs the plot and the psychology of the characters in Muzungu is largely based on Peggy McIntosh’s seminal work, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” As McIntosh reveals, white privilege is the privilege to be comfortable and safe (191). White privilege is the ability to glide through society with relative ease and with the assumption that one has earned that sense of ease through hard work and merit (190). White privilege demands white people not to look at it as privilege, as though doing so would blind us like looking at the sun, and so we use the word racism instead—a word that usually calls to mind the sort of shocking deeds done by the likes of the Ku Klux Klan. Until I took those African American lit courses, when I heard the word “racism,” I immediately thought of black people and their struggles, though why they struggled was often a bit unclear. I didn’t think about white people. I didn’t think about myself. Like
McIntosh, I thought about it in terms of disadvantages that “they” unfortunately have, rather than as a system of advantages I’d inherited at birth because of the color of my skin. I believe using the word “racism” allows this connotation in the minds of white people to thrive, preventing individuals from recognizing their own role in the system. It could be argued that one of Rachel’s main struggles throughout Muzungu is the struggle to recognize and acknowledge her relationship to the system of white privilege, which she can never quite seem to escape.

Guilt, fear, anger, greed, lust—I needed to explore how these emotions support and work against America’s system of white privilege, sometimes simultaneously, and doing so through the lives of my characters—complicated people who are at once both beautiful and flawed, heroic and antagonistic—has enhanced my understanding of the research I’d read. It has also helped me gain a better understanding of the struggles my students encountered in my classroom as we read articles and stories about whiteness, struggles that for them were of an emotional nature, as much if not more so than it was a struggle to analyze research articles and express their ideas clearly.

The initial bones of the plot that I had conceived for my novel during the early planning stages, when I was presenting my plan to my committee, hardly resembles the novel that it has become, although some ideas remain the same, such as my decision to have my white female character’s awareness of her whiteness come to fruition through in black Africa. The plot has changed so much because I was planning it through my eyes—my understanding of race theory, my lived experience of whiteness—and it wasn’t until Rachel began to take form—through imagery and interaction with other characters—that the plot evolved through the person she became. It was a humbling experience, because I wasn’t just taking notes and thinking about the articles I’d read for a time and then going about my day, busy and distracted by other things. I
was stepping outside of the world as I knew it and living a new life, one that was like mine, but also quite unlike it. I was seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching my world through Rachel. In a sense, I was giving myself permission to willingly explore the taboo, to push the limits outside of what I was comfortable with in my own life. It was as though I too, like Rachel, was passing for something I was not.
Notes

1. Lynching postcards collected by James Allen can be viewed at https://withoutsanctuary.org/ or from the book *Without Sanctuary* (*WS*) published by Twin Palms Publishers. In addition to showing the front side of lynching postcards, *WS* also includes images of the messages written on the back, which served as examples for the message I created for Marjorie’s postcard.

2. See https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america for information about EJI’s report.

3. The definition of race that informs my work distinguishes between prejudice and racism, with the premise that racism is inextricably linked to institutional advantages set in place for whites only, also known as white privilege. Therefore, while it is possible for a person of color to be prejudiced, it is not possible to be racist, since the purpose of racism is to maintain the system of advantages, which do not exist for the benefit of people of color. This is the key difference between passing for white, which provides access to the system of advantages, and passing for black, which renders those advantages unavailable, *at least for as long as the person is perceived to be black*. See Tatum, Beverly Daniels in the Bibliography below.
“Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.”

James Baldwin

“White people are trapped in a history they don’t understand.” James Baldwin

“Home is not where you are born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease.” Naguib Mahfouz

Prologue

“I see you haven’t changed,” she says when she opens the door. It might sound like a compliment, as in I haven’t aged or gotten fatter, but I know this isn’t what she means. At all. I set my bags down with a thud and hold my arms out to her, my smile crooked and hopeful. I can’t blame her for feeling like she does. Because when she looks at me now, she is unable to see a reflection of herself. Instead, she sees a stranger. Gone is the little (white) girl she struggled to raise, by herself, on two vastly different continents.

But even so, she steps into my arms. She is, after all, still my mother.

*   *   *

My name is Rachel Leah Bareeba, but it wasn’t always so. I have changed. Before the Bareeba, I was a Jefferson, complete with a three-hundred year family heritage and American genealogy. I was born an eight pound infant, but didn’t remain one. My mother changed my diapers, until I
learned to use a toilet. I used to be a little girl, a mere child, until my eighteenth birthday. When I was three I was sure thunder could kill. When I was sixteen, I acted like I was immortal. When I was thirteen, I lay in a third-world hospital and hoped I would die. I started out wordless, now I hardly ever shut up. I couldn’t always think for myself, now I’m often accused of over-thinking. There was a time when I was content, and a time when I was not. I’d never seen a dead person, until one day I did. I used to despise the color pink, but then my mother planted pink peonies in the front yard. I knew my great-grandmother, but then she became a stranger to me. School shaped my life, and now work does, and one day death will, thought it probably already does. I didn’t know about lynching postcards until I found one in the cellar. Sometimes I’m awake, but there are times when I’m not. I was a big sister for the first twelve years of my life, and an only child for the next nineteen. I’d never been kissed, until one afternoon it just happened. I’ve been in love, but I’ve been out of love, too. I’ve been harassed as a dyke, and I’ve been praised as a wife, and I’ve experienced prejudice as a female divorcee. Suddenly, I became a mother. There was a time when I didn’t know how to use a computer, cook a casserole, have sex with a man, have sex with a woman, write a sentence, load and fire a tranquilizer gun, draw a smiley face, dial 911, palpate an elephant, or read an instruction manual. I didn’t always have breasts. My sons weren’t always here, on earth, though that’s hard to imagine. I was born here, but then I was taken there. I’ve always loved you, but I didn’t always know you. I once was white, but now I’m black.

What hasn’t changed?

1. I still don’t like tea.

2. I still cry.
3. I was born a daughter, and a daughter I remain.

Daughter: a word that suffocates, like a pillowcase pulled over the head.

Today I love chocolate, have the use of both of my arms and my legs, wasn’t constipated, laughed at a joke, had time to read a chapter in a novel, and worried about my mother, who is dying. Tomorrow I might be diabetic, lose a limb in a freak accident, have trouble taking a shit or shit too much, tell someone off for telling a racist joke, barely have time to read even road signs, and say a final goodbye to my mother.

The first time it occurred to me that a person could change, that people do change, I was already twelve years old, quite changed myself, but up until that point, my great-grandmother was always Great-gram, an old woman quick to anger or laughter who watched us on weekends and taught us to treat the homeless with dignity and respect, because it could happen to anyone, it could happen to you. She was right, but I don’t know if she realized it can happen to you even when you have a house and keep up with mortgage.

One day she changed without having to leave the kitchen.

No, wait. By that time, she already had changed, I just didn’t know about it. I was the one suddenly thrust into a moment of change. That was what made it so difficult. After I found the lynching postcard, she continued to smile and carry on like nothing had ever happened, because as far as she was concerned, nothing had. I think what really bothered me about it, more than anything, was that I was worried she hadn’t changed.

Because: the first time my great-grandmother watched a person die, she was seventeen, too young to be someone’s Great-gram, too young to know she would outlive a husband, even
her own children. As I imagine it, it’s a typical summer day, except: someone is going to die. Death is, of course, unremarkable, it happens every day, but this death was anything but. Because even though she doesn’t know the young man, she will remember him until her own death, and she will remember him beyond it, because I will remember it.

It begins with talk of a picnic—a “barbecue”—just outside town underneath the arms of a silent and beautiful tree. Everyone is going: friends, relatives, neighbors, the school janitor, children. Some even swear they saw the mayor.

She goes, although this is not the sort of thing she is used to. Or so I have to imagine. When you’re visiting from out of town, when you’re a long way from home, what else do you do but go along with the plans of the folks you’re staying with?

Everyone is going, except: black people. Save one.

For whatever reason, I imagine that, as one of the men fixes the rope around his neck, the young man’s dark eyes find Marjorie’s light ones among the hundreds of pairs of blue and hazel and green and brown eyes, and they plead with her. They plead and they plead and they plead. They plead until there is nothing left to plead for.

Murder wasn’t the only crime committed that day.

The other crime was that my great-grandmother looked.

To look is everything. This is what I believed.

It would take me a lifetime to understand there are worse things than looking, or being looked at.
If you shut yours eyes, you can just see what you want to see. Hell, people have gotten so good at seeing what they want to see, they don’t even need to shut their eyes.

This is something my great-grandmother said once, and because I was just a child who hadn’t yet built a relationship with either the past or with reality, I thought it meant you could be in more than one place at a time. On some level it probably does mean that, too. But it wasn’t quite what she was talking about. So you see, I thought I understood, but I didn’t. I hadn’t changed, not in that way.

Naively I’d assumed it had something to do with the milky cataracts gradually sliding over her pupils like a cat’s nictitating eyelid, because this was when she was beginning to lose the ability to see what was right in front of her, literally. Including me.

All she would have had left, I’d assumed, was her imagination. This was before I understood what memory means.

I was still the Other Rachel back then, the Rachel who didn’t know who she was or that she changes and could even own the change, the Rachel who did what she did because it was what other people expected of her. Mostly, she didn’t do much at all. She was good at school, she fancied herself a high IQ. She wasn’t well liked. In fact she didn’t even like herself very much, either. So bland, so whitebread, all but invisible, though she hated being visible once it happened.

And yet it was around this time that she began to think of the world, the inner world of another person, that is, as something made of layers—like horizons of soil—one stacked on top of another. You can’t see all the layers unless you chip away the upper horizons with special tools, or if something catastrophic happens, like an earthquake or a sinkhole. Sometimes things
come to the surface when this happens: a very old fossil, a fragment of bone, a forgotten doll, the
cracked skull of a child. Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t there.

Sometimes you can see the change, but sometimes you can’t.

I have been an expat for most of my life. I have seen Africa. You Americans don’t say
the name of a particular country, you say Africa. Hear the power in the name. I’m still gripped at
the throat by it. My eyes were closed, my mouth sealed, the words thrust up from deep inside me
breaking against the back of my teeth in waves. The truth never had a chance. You see what you
want to see.

The truth is so sordid, so two-faced, so American. Great-gram had watched her cousin’s
town go ape-shit crazy and lynch a man for the crime of being black, and then she would write
about it, what would be known to history as a lynching postcard, and send it to her beau (my
future great-grandfather). Life would sweep them off their feet, the American social landscape
would change subtly, and that weird night at a cousin’s was relegated to the recesses of silence,
of spider webs and dank cellars. Memory.

I took it out of the cellar. That Other Rachel took it out of the cellar.

So in comes the Other Rachel: killer of her brother, killer of the dream. A murderer in her
own right. She would waltz her way into her great-grandmother’s past like someone who thought
she knew what she was doing. Like someone who thought she knew right from wrong. Like
some ignorant prick dancing on a dead person’s grave. Typical white girl shit.

She would find the lynching postcard, and she would tell: No one.

And then one day, because this is what happens when you kill your brother with a twisted
ankle, your mother says, without looking up from her book, which you see has the words “East Africa” in the title: we are moving. You look at her innocently. You figure she means something a little more local. Seattle maybe.

But no. Your mother looks over at you, dead serious with icepick eyes. She says say goodbye to your friends. We’re starting over. In Africa.

It was starting over. Shit. You don’t move to Africa and expect life to go on like before. And then, sure enough, one day the Other Rachel woke up, different. Changed.

Observe the innocent white girl. And by innocent, I do mean ignorant. Her name is Rachel Leah Jefferson, descendant of pilgrims, or so her mom is always saying. She is days from turning thirteen, a number she is too logical to consider unlucky, though she still thinks her life sucks. There isn’t a thing special about her. You wouldn’t remember her if you saw her on the street. But she’s hiding a lynching postcard in her pants pocket.

She’s about to board a bus, one there’s no getting off of. It’s hot and dry, and people—black people, to be precise—are everywhere, but she is unbearably lonely. There’s nothing remarkable about her looks, which are average, or her clothing, which her mother buys secondhand. She is unremarkable, except for her exotic whiteness—a power she does not yet understand. An immortal power taken for granted. She is almost a teenager and the entire world is crammed inside her narrow head, she is the entire world, and like a bomb she’s waiting to go off.
Part I

Rachel Jefferson

Mom never did dress like other moms, even before Africa. You never saw her in jeans or pants of any kind. She was tough. You’d have to be to do battle with blackberry thorns and mow the lawn in a denim skirt. She would say things like, women in sweatpants had “let themselves go,” and I always pictured women in sweatpants frantically escaping some obscure prison in the middle of a cornfield somewhere, just going. She also scoffed at women in power suits. She wasn’t fooled. She knew a suit didn’t give a woman power in the workplace or anywhere else. And short shorts or miniskirts—don’t get her started on someone dressed like a skank. “A piece of work,” she’d say. “That girl is a piece of work.”

_So how does a woman get power?_ I’d asked her one day. I really wanted to know, and I didn’t see why it couldn’t be possible. I was about seven or eight at the time, just young enough to still hope it meant something along the lines of Power Rangers or She-Ra, and just old enough to know how dumb that is. “She gets her power from God,” she’d said. “God is all you need.” I remember being very disappointed.

Mom’s idea of a well-dressed Mom or woman of any kind is blouse buttoned up to the Adam’s apple and skirt with hem line kissing your ankles. Pantyhose should not be visible because legs should not be visible. _Why wear pantyhose at all, _I’d asked. She said I was too young to understand. I was always too young to understand. All her shoes are flat-heeled, because she would never wear high heels. High heels make boys like you, or so Jill says, and
that’s why her mom won’t let her wear them until she’s eighteen. My mom says she won’t let me wear them until I’m dead. Sometimes she forgets I’m a card-carrying tomboy.

But in Africa, Mom went and traded all her blouses and denim skirts for outfits called *kitenji*. She’s gone local. *Loco*, if you ask me. There’s no law that says you can’t dress in your normal clothes here, so why bother changing? Now her neck and some of her chest is exposed, and the skirt hugs her legs tight, revealing the curve of her hips and butt. She must hate that. And the colors—red and yellow, royal purple—are so not Mom at all. Gone are the shoes that never showed a toenail, donated in favor of handmade leather flip flops that slap her bare feet. I can’t get used to the sight of those feet, pale and swollen in the heat, like grubs.

Because it’s so hot here, she pulls her hair in a ponytail or a braid, making her face look too round, too unfamiliar. Every time she looks at herself in the mirror now, she stares for a moment and then says, “I look like a hippie.”

She’s changed not only her job but our whole lives: this is supposed to solve everything. Instead of being a hospital receptionist, now she makes money as an English teacher at a secondary school and volunteers at Home Ministries Africa orphanage, where she sings to the children, teaches Bible verse, counting, and the alphabet. This is her favorite part of the week. I can tell by the way she hums as she gets ready, even though she never seemed to enjoy doing these things with us.

Mom never dressed like other moms, but now she doesn’t even dress like Mom. And to top it all off, she’s getting rid of me.

* * *

9
I stare out the open window at the army of men and boys standing at attention and waving fistfuls of cheap plastic watches, chewing gum, and baskets of fried grasshoppers, imploring my dear mother in broken English to think of her little girl, to buy her a treat, which she does not do. These are the first fried grasshoppers I’ve ever seen, and when I look into the bowl I’m caught off guard by their narrow, browned bodies, stripped of wings and legs, and for a moment I see, not grasshoppers, but the bodies of black men, stripped of clothes and dignity, hanging from trees. I turn away sharply, afraid I might vomit in front of these men, who laugh at my discomfort.

“The young madam does not like grasshoppers, eh?”

“What’s wrong with you,” Mom says irritably. The heat makes her irritable.

The name of the school where she’s dumping me is Saint Margaret’s—a girls-only Catholic boarding and day school in Kampala. A Catholic school—what hell. I wanted to go to Aga Khan School, a lot of foreigners like me do, and it’s a really good school, but it was expensive and Mom thought I should be at a less prestigious school, one where I would get to know the “real” Uganda. Only poverty is real here, apparently.

One suitcase. That’s all I’m allowed to take. When I complained, Mom accused me of being spoiled. “Most of your classmates won’t even have the one suitcase.” She says it like she’s annoyed with me, like it’s my fault they don’t even have one suitcase, and I resent her for this. I fill most of the space with books and pog caps, but Mom makes me take a Ziploc bag of bathroom stuff, quinine, and vitamins. She also gives me two rolls of toilet paper, which is a weird thing to bring to school with you, but I’m too mad at her to say so.
I’m wearing a blue button-down blouse and a knee-length denim skirt with black stirrup pants underneath. Mom wanted me to wear a dress, and this was a tomboy’s compromise: a dress and pants hybrid. The pants are useless though because they don’t have pockets, so I hide the postcard in my copy of *Moby Dick*. Mom told me to put my suitcase in the compartment under the bus with hers, but I tightened my grip on the handle and joined the line waiting to get on. I heard her grumbling behind me, but I didn’t care.

When the bus starts moving, people push the windows closed because of the dust, and the equatorial air becomes heavy and stale with the smell of armpits and sweat, and my nausea returns. The grasshopper men rush off to swarm the next bus. We sit in the back row, which extends from one side to the other, where the emergency exit door is supposed to be. Mom falls asleep and begins to snore, softly, her lips parted to reveal the sharp line of her small teeth. Her head sways with every bump in the road, but the rhythm of her breathing never changes. Now that she can’t see me looking at her, I look. I’m surprised to see strands of silver in her long brown hair, but somehow, they make her look more beautiful. The softness of her neck is exposed, there are two little hairs, nearly translucent, growing on the end of her chin, and there’s a network of fine lines crisscrossing her neck like tiny ropes.

A black man in the seat next to Mom has on glasses and a suit with briefcase on his lap. He talks to the black woman next to him until he falls asleep, his head leaning closer and closer to Mom until it finally comes to rest on her shoulder. I glance over at the woman, who is looking at Mom with intense dislike, and I feel suddenly naked and exposed.

I take out the diary she gave me for my twelfth birthday and try to draw the basket of fried grasshoppers, willing them to be nothing more than grasshoppers, but there are too many
holes and bumps in the road and my pencil bucks and jumps so much I give up and slide the
diary back in the suitcase.

Eventually we reach the bus station in Kampala, which isn’t really a station in the proper
sense of the word because there isn’t a building, just rows and rows of buses parked out in the
open. The man who fell asleep on Mom’s shoulder wakes up on her shoulder like nothing
happened and guides his woman friend down the aisle and out the door. Mom takes my hand in
hers and holds it, tightly. We walk through the crowd, our arms brushing against the bodies of
men and women, some of them young, some of them old, some with baskets of fruit on their
heads, some with black plastic bags dangling from their wrists. Mom stands on her toes and
scans the crowd for a taxi. A woman with only one arm stares at me as she walks by with a live
chicken dangling upside down in her hand, like I’m the weird one. Two children in tattered, dust-
stained clothes gallop past us, knocking my suitcase and hooting, nearly throwing me off balance
as I sidestep to avoid a deep pothole.

Finally, we come to the edge of the bus park and see a row of cars parked haphazardly.
We hurry over to one, but a man in a suit beats us to it. The driver of the car next to it rushes up
to our side.

“Fifty-thousand shillings, madam,” he says quietly, his lips barely moving, his eyes fixed
on an invisible point above Mom’s head.

Mom folds her arms across her chest and lifts her chin, a stance I know well. “That’s too
much. You’ve raised the price because you’ve looked at me and said: there is a muzungu, let me
raise the price because she doesn’t know any better. Twenty-thousand shillings.”
The man smiles. “No, no, that is too little, madam.” He leans against his car and pulls a cigarette out of his jacket pocket.

Mom’s mouth opens, but nothing comes out. She looks at people getting in the other taxis. “But you don’t even know where I’m going,” she says, her voice high-pitched.

“There are two of you. I will take you both for forty-thousand,” he says and then he opens the door and slides into the driver’s seat as though my mother has agreed, which she has not.

She looks down at me like she doesn’t know what to do with me. “Well get in the car,” she says, so I do.

I put my suitcase on the seat next to me and reach for my seatbelt, but there isn’t one. “There’s no seatbelt,” I say to no one in particular. “It’s missing.”

“St Margaret’s School, please,” Mom says in an official sort of tone, the kind she used at her job back home.

“I said I haven’t got a seatbelt,” I say louder.

“For heaven’s sake, Rachel,” Mom says as she turns in her seat to glare at me. “It’s Uganda.”

The driver turns the radio up. I roll my eyes and look out the window. A group of children no older than Kindergarten-age have spotted me through the window and are running alongside the car, parentless, shouting My muzungu and candy.

“Look, Mom,” I say, “Maybe we should have brought candy.”
“The poor things,” Mom says sadly, “They should be in school.” She puts a hand on the shoulder of the driver’s seat. “Did you attend school?” she asks. He makes a grunting sound that could be a yes or a no.

The car moves slowly. People stroll out onto the road, cars honk. Boda boda taxis, which are really motorcycles, zoom around us, obeying their own traffic rules. Police officers direct the traffic at intersections, the darkened traffic lights suspended on poles uselessly. A man steps onto the road nearby, and at first it looks like he’s going to cross in front of our car, which is stopped in traffic, but instead he grabs the handle of Mom’s door and stands there, smiling foolishly at her, his hand still on the handle.

“Oh,” she says.

The whites of the drivers’ eyes flash in the rearview mirror as he looks over at Mom. “You should not have your purse on your lap, Madam, it will get stolen.”

“Right,” she says, and slides the purse down between her feet. I shove my suitcase to the floor and feel my face growing hot. The man, who looks old enough to be Mom’s father, continues to smile at her like he’s waiting for something. Mom presses the lock on the door, but nothing happens, the mechanism’s broken. The taxi inches forward, and the man walks next to us a few paces, his hand still on the handle, but he lets go when the traffic speeds up.

“What was that all about?” I ask.

“Don’t you have a book to read or something,” Mom says.

In my head I say: no, madam, I don’t have a book, but look at this postcard. Wouldn’t you like to read it?
Like every place here, St. Margaret’s Secondary School for Girls is hidden behind brick walls and metal gate. A prison. She’s sent me to a prison.

A uniformed guard waves us in. He looks military, or like a police officer, but without the AK-47. “He probably has one in his booth,” Mom says. The school isn’t one large building like schools usually are in America, but several crumbly, depressing-looking brick buildings. It’s the dry season, and doors are propped open with rocks or firewood. Fat-bodied flies dive-bomb at our heads, ducking in and out of doorways, slapping against walls. The windows are mere holes in the walls, with only wooden shutters painted in school colors—green or red—to keep out the rain. Nuns in blue habits walk the paths so slowly you’d think they were standing still. Little girls who look seven or eight leave a building together, moving slowly as the nuns, placing foot in front of foot as though feeling for the roundness of the earth beneath their thin-soled shoes.

When we enter the main building, everyone stops what they are doing to stare at us. I’m not even exaggerating. The girls start whispering behind cupped hands, and for a moment I think they know about the postcard, but then I hear the word muzungu. The mothers stare for a long moment, their dark eyes inscrutable, and then—as though an invisible signal passed between them—they avert their eyes, and I’m reminded of the way a flock of birds move as one.

But the girls don’t look away. I look back at them, at all those eyes, nothing but brown eye upon brown eye, my face burning, and I’m surprised by a sudden hatred, white-hot and unforgiving—like the equatorial sun—burning in my chest. It lasts only a moment, but I’m left feeling exhausted and empty, like a hollowed-out shell on a beach.
Mom doesn’t seem to notice anything. She strides up to the end of the line in front of a man at a beat-up wooden teacher’s desk, her kitenge flapping against her legs, which I’ve decided definitely are bare of pantyhose, and stands there casually, as though deserting me is as routine as tooth brushing.

The whispering turns to chatter, not all about muzungu, but I still feel their eyes. I look down, at shoes. Mine are a pair of white Keds stained red by dust—the mission didn’t warn us about red African dust and white American clothing—but they look new compared to the shoes of the older girls, who wear scuffed-up black strap-on dress shoes. A lot of younger girls aren’t wearing shoes at all. These girls mostly come from the village—rural communities where running water and electricity don’t exist, never mind shopping malls.

When we get to the front of the line, the musajja, or man, greets my mother and then, by way of acknowledging my presence, asks if I’ve gotten my uniform. I look up at Mom. She hasn’t said anything to me about a uniform. I feel a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and realize of course there would be a uniform. Every school I’ve seen from the windows of taxis and buses were filled with uniform kids, the girls wearing either one-piece dresses in bright solid colors or blouses with knee-length skirts. No pants.

Mom does not return my look. The musajja tells her which building to go to for the uniforms, and that I will receive any books there might be during classes, assuming all fees have been paid. Mom pays, because even though school is mandatory in Uganda, it isn’t free, not even public school, and the musajja finds our name on a list and checks it off.

I’m still hearing that word, muzungu, buzzing in the air around me like a hive of angry bees.
“What are they saying?” I ask the musajja. “What is that word everyone is saying when they see me?”

He looks up at me for the first time, as though surprised to find that I have a voice. He studies me through the lenses of his glasses. He looks truly baffled, but then his serious face breaks into a smile. “You must mean muzungu, yes?”

I nod.

“It means white person. But do not worry,” he says when he sees the look on my face. “It is not a bad thing. It is a compliment.” Mom takes hold of my hand, gives it a squeeze. A warning.

“Ay,” he grunts and removes his glasses. “Her hair,” he says to Mom. “It will have to be removed.”

“I beg your pardon?” Mom says, her voice high and thin.

“Hair, madam. We do not allow it, here.” He waves lazily with his hand. “It must be cut off.”

“Mom, don’t leave me here,” I say and immediately feel embarrassed. I grab my hair and hold it behind me, like I think I can keep it away from him, like he isn’t bigger and stronger than me. I look right at him. “It’s mine,” I say. “You can’t have it.” He doesn’t return my look.

“I was unaware of that policy,” Mom says curtly. “Perhaps you can show me a handbook?”
Tears blur my vision. I want them to stop ignoring me. I want them to look at me. “It’s my hair,” I say loudly, louder than I’d intended. There are more giggles, and the woman behind the desk at the line next to ours notices me. Finally someone notices me. She leans over and hisses, “That policy is for black girls, John.”

*John* shrugs. “It is okay,” he says to Mom.

I leave with Mom feeling like something huge has just happened, thought what exactly, I don’t know.

We walk to the dorm so I can choose a bed, the only space I’ll have all to myself, and drop off the suitcase. I’m in the Crested Crane house. They do the house thing here, very British. As we are about to go inside, I glance over my shoulder and see a white girl, or rather, a girl who looks white. Too white. She’s leaning against a tree watching me. I stop and stare. Her hair, which is a mass of thick dreadlocks—a hairstyle frowned upon by most Ugandans—is as white as an old woman’s, though she looks my age. Her face seems blank as printer paper, but I notice a trace of sadness in the way she holds her body, like its thinness is too heavy for her. She walks toward me, and I hurry into the dorm.

I’ve just seen my first African albino.

Skeletal bunk beds loom at me from shadows, the only source of light coming from four windows. Girls are everywhere: flitting across the room, leaning against walls, sitting on beds, fidgeting in the narrow spaces between the beds, giggling when they notice me. Most of the beds are taken, but Mom finds one in the back corner, by one of the windows. I’m glad to be next to it, I’ll be able to see to read, and am surprised no one has taken it, when a fly buzzes in and lands on the bed.
I unzip my suitcase and pull out the mosquito netting, which will have to be hung from the ceiling and draped around the bed like a canopy. I inspect it for holes; already I’m becoming more Ugandan. Mom is saying something, but I don’t hear. I find myself wondering if Albaino Dreadlock Girl is a Crested Crane too, but I don’t see the glow of her skin in the dim room.

“Rachel. Are you listening to me? I’m telling you I have to leave now.”

When I’m sure no one’s looking, I slide *Moby Dick* under the mattress of the top bunk. I climb the rickety ladder and crouch in the middle of my bed; the ceiling is low and there are spiders. I hang the mosquito net with a pushpin.

Mom sighs. She does this a lot lately. “Don’t forget to get your uniforms. There are two of them.”

I lay down on the thin foam mattress inside the tent of mosquito netting, my back to her. I hear a bird that sounds like a baby crying. The locals call it *impa’baana*, which means “give me children.” They’re as common as crows here. I don’t know why, but its cry makes my skin crawl.

“You have to talk to me sooner or later.”

From my view out the window I see another brick and tin-roofed building, and through one of its windows I can just make out the dim shape of what looks like a bunk bed.

I feel a hand on my arm, the mosquito netting pressed between our skins. I shrug it off and slide closer to the edge of the bed on the other side. The sweet smell of a cooking fire reaches me, my stomach growls. It must be almost time for dinner.
“You’ll see us at Christmas. During winter break.” She snorts. “Well, I doubt it’s called that here.”

Us. For a moment, I think she means her and Christopher. But she’s talking about Frank, the Ugandan man she’s been seeing. I’d noticed a man who looked like him at Christopher’s funeral back home, though Mom hadn’t bothered to introduce him to me.

“Don’t forget to write, okay? I want to hear all about your experiences here. It’ll be fun. A life-changing experience you won’t ever forget.”

I turn over and look down at her. She looks small and ghostly through the mosquito netting, and sad—a sadness I haven’t seen in her since we got here. From my height on the bed I feel suddenly bold, powerful. “How would you know?” I say. “You never even really left Bellingham, ever, until now. I hate it here. I’ll find a way home without you. I’ll move in with Great-gram. She wouldn’t ditch me here,” I say, though I’m not sure it’s true.

“I know this is hard for you, Rachel, it’s hard for all of us. I’m doing the best I can. Do you understand?”

I pick at a speck of lint on my blanket. I understand more than she realizes. “I don’t give a damn,” I say.

I hear her take a deep breath. “Okay. I’m going to leave now. We can talk about this more, in our letters. And Rachel, don’t forget who you are. Don’t forget where you come from.”

Right, I think. The stupid Pilgrims. Big deal.

When I look up she’s already walking away from me, and I want to call out to her, I open my mouth to speak, I want to tell her I’m sorry.
But the words don’t come.

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Instead, I get a memory.

“What was your Great-gram saying on the phone that was so interesting?” Mom says. Her eyes are narrowed in suspicion, though her tone is light. I look down at the round stones of my knees and pick the pills that have formed like tiny snowballs on my white winter pantyhose. “Great-gram says you can make up your own world,” I say. Mom shakes her head and laughs, just like I knew she would, though she rarely laughs these days. I certainly never do.

“Playing God,” she says. This answer pleases us both, but in different ways. For her, it puts her grandmother’s blasphemy in its place, but for me, it elevates my great-grandmother, a gray-headed goddess, who calls me beautiful as though she really means it, as though saying it might make it true.

“It sounds fun,” I say.

She regards me for a moment. “Listen, Rachel,” she says. “We are the descendants of the first Pilgrims. Our ancestors crossed seas of sharks and nursed on winter’s frost so we could be where we are today. Don’t you forget it, okay? They came here so we could grow under the light of Christ. Anything else is fairy tales.”

Her words like poetry, and for a moment, I want to believe her—I do believe her.

After spending Sunday afternoon at Great-gram’s, we are heading home on the bus, since Mom sold the LeBaron, its malfunctioning robot’s voice reminding us the door is ajar still echoing in my head.
The windows of the bus are masked by fog, the air ripe with the smell of urine and perfume. Mom sits straight and tall, studying people with her ardent blue eyes, sheer and cold as thin ice, Anglo-Saxon eyes, her knee bumping my calf now and then, the material of her flower-print skirt making my skin itch through the rip in my pantyhose. She’s like a magician when reading people and I try to be that good, too. She is impervious, and despite all that has happened, God is on her side, so she is going to be a missionary. Soon we will swim through our own sea of sharks.

We wear our Sunday best, though it is secondhand from the Salvation Army because Mom doesn’t believe in letting things go to waste. My dress is gray with ugly pink and purple flowers and a pink bow in back; it is reminiscent of Easter Sundays and smells like mothballs. There’s a small hole at the hip, just big enough for my index finger. It’s a thrill to think Mom missed it. Mom calls me a tomboy because I hate dresses and wear pants on all six non-holy days of the week. My mouth is tough, chapped, almost always a straight line.

On these bus rides there are sometimes black people, at least, this is how we think of them, as black, though they’re as variable as any group of people. Some are dressed for church in long coats, skirts that go past the knee, dark solemn colors and no-nonsense winter boots that are necessary more for cold than for snow, which rarely falls here. Sometimes Mom asks the well-dressed blacks about their place of worship, as she calls it, and tells them about ours. Others look poor and secular-looking in faded jeans and puffy jackets. Sometimes they seem to shout at one another, at other times, they are eerily silent. Occasionally Mom will smile at them, make small talk. Others are lanky as teenagers though they are old, with narrow muscles hard as flint, wearing nothing but t-shirts and torn jeans and clutching a small brown paper bag between the
knees; these men my Mom associates with prison—not necessarily the literal kind, but the kind of one’s own making. “Winos,” she’d say, shaking her head. “Lost souls.”

Then there are the ones my Mom has no words for. She does not look at them directly, so I do. I don’t see them often, but when they’re there it’s hard to miss seeing them, these women bright as parrots. They wear African print cloth of various patterns and colors, loud ones, like yellow and red triangles or purple and green wavy zigzags, and huge earrings that pull the earlobe, or sometimes a wax-print cloth wound around a head of hair. They might wear green eye shadow or plum lipstick. They cross their legs and hum loudly, sometimes even saying a few lines like “baby baby” over and over again, their heads bobbing to the beat, a song only they can hear, their magic being that they seem to belong to another era.

That is the kind of person I like, the kind that sings on buses. They have a certain presence, the power of confidence, and a profound knowledge of who they are and where they are going. They don’t care what other people think of them. They pulse with life, they scintillate. I assume they have reinvented themselves, though what exactly it is they have invented or changed from is unclear. I assume that someday, when I am older, I will know, and that I too will be free to reinvent myself.

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So I’m left behind with the girls, Ugandan girls, but I’m not used to girls, never mind ones with Ugandan customs. I feel younger than I am around them, like I don’t know what to do. I knew my role with the girls at our school at home, even if it sucked, but here, I don’t even know the rules. I sense that if I do something different, it will result in some unforeseen catastrophe.
A girl named Vicky is nice to me. Really she has no choice, her bed is the top bunk next to mine, and because of her close proximity to the only (real) white girl here, the other girls treat her with almost the same standoffish, giggly reverence. So Vicky and I eat our meals together, and we sit side by side when we study.

Vicky takes it upon herself to educate me about boarding school life. According to her, she’s one of the luckier girls because she lives here in Kampala, a mere twenty minute drive from the school, and can go home on weekends if she finishes her chores first and comes up with money for the *boda boda*. She promises to take me with her one of these days, but she never does go home, none of the boarders. Her house, she says, is big and has two stories, somehow this is significant. She’s a tall girl with a high-pitched, horsey laugh, and already the front of her shirt is beginning to strain at the chest. Her hair, like everyone else’s here, is shaved close to her head like a boy’s. In fact if it weren’t for the dresses it would be really hard to tell who is what. Vicky is always talking about this or that weave she plans to have done to her hair, when she’s older and done with school and can grow it out. She asks me how I’ll do my hair when I’m older, and I tell her I don’t know.

Vicky has three older sisters and two younger ones, but she’s the only one in school right now. Her older sisters have finished, one because she got pregnant, and the other because she had to get a job. Only the oldest one finished all the way through. They wear dresses when they go dancing on weekends of course, she says, but they wear pants sometimes now, too. She asks if I will wear pants when I’m older, and I tell her all I used to wear at home were pants, until I came here, and this seems to impress her.
I show her my pogs, but she isn’t interested. Instead she gazes unseeing at the older girls, who play netball—a game like basketball—and talks about men. She says the word men like it’s candy, a smooth, sugary word rolled around the mouth. We aren’t supposed to be outside of the compound because of men. The walls keep girls in; the walls keep men out. We are bereft of men here, in this school of dresses and gossip and talk of future hairstyles. The guard and the priest are usually the only men we see, but they don’t live here like the nuns do, and are as remote and mysterious to us as stars. The nuns remind us again and again about the dangers of men, who want one thing and one thing only from us, these shadowy wraiths who seem always to lurk just beyond our vision. I have trouble reconciling these invisible men with Christopher and what I know about my father, a man who, though he’s still alive, is no longer any more real to me than the nuns’ men.

Vicky talks about boys in her neighborhood, boys whom she says like her. She talks about dirty poor ones she wouldn’t let touch her for anything, not even if they offered her purse or shoes, not that they could afford to, and she talks about boys who have kissed her, and even stroked her on the knee. They should always have something to give you, she tells me, wisdom gleaned from older sisters. She’s spied on an older sister and her boyfriend, saw how he bounced on top of her with his pants around his ankles and made strange noises, like pigeons, deep and throaty. Her sister claims it feels good, but Vicky isn’t sure, she’s always lying to her, and she wants to find out for herself, first.

We are sitting on the lawn outside the dorms, under a tree laden with red flowers. She looks at me intently. “What about your boys,” she says.
“My boys?” I say. I want to laugh, and yet I sense that how I answer the question matters, that I might become more than just my white skin and my foreignness if I give the right answer, but I can’t come up with anything. Who would I talk about, anyways? Jeremy, who liked to burp in a girl’s ear just to hear her shriek? Arthur, who once made a chocolate cake with Christopher but put hot sauce in it and tricked me into taking a bite? Kevin, who, like most of the boys my age, acted as though I didn’t exist?

“My brother’s friends Arthur and Gabe and I used to play pogs and ride our bikes down really steep hills,” I say.

“But what happened when they kissed you?” she says, her eyes strangely alive.

I wrinkle my nose. “They were my little brother’s friends,” I say.

She looks away again, bored.

For a moment I think about showing her the postcard. She wouldn’t think I was boring, then. I would tell her I have a Great-grandmother who was a racist murderer, a KKK grandmaster, and it was no big deal, really, she even sent a postcard about it to her boyfriend. I look at her watching the game and imagine the look she would give me, and my breath catches in my throat, I can’t breathe. I get up quickly and walk away, down the length of the football field and back to the door in the wall, and I don’t stop until I reach the dormitory. It’s dark inside, and for a moment I can’t find my way to my bed. When my eyes adjust, I climb the ladder and yank _Moby Dick_ out from under the mattress and flip to the middle of the book, to the chapter where a giant squid appears, fooling the crew into thinking it’s the white whale. The postcard is still there, exactly as I’d left it.
Later Vicky tells everyone *Muzungu* has never been kissed by a boy, has never worn a dress until Uganda (which isn’t true, unfortunately), grinds her teeth at night, and owns strange objects that look like some sort of witchcraft. The pogs, probably. She gives the impression that I’m slightly mad and perhaps a little dangerous. She doesn’t talk about me like I’m not cool though, but like I’m a rare and exotic pet—a rattlesnake, or a tiger. The other girls listen, enthralled, and watch me like they expect at any moment I’ll bare teeth at them and growl, like a thing untamed.

For a moment I dwell on the image of myself growling at the girls and laugh.

At night I lie in the top of my bunk bed and scratch and dig and scrape at the skin on my arms and legs until they’re raw and red and bleeding, like the carpet burns I used to get from horsing around with Christopher when we were little.

*  *  *

Stairs are becoming too difficult for her, even with the cane, but still I hope she won’t make me go down there. She takes a cooking pot out of the cupboard and holds it out to me. “Run down and get some potatoes, maybe six, will you please?” she says. I take the pot, silently. I notice the “please,” a word she never used before the accident. I open the door to the cellar and look down. It’s dark, too dark. The last time I went down there, Christopher had dared me to go without turning on the naked bulb that hung in the center of the little room and to steal something from one of the boxes, boxes that shouldn’t have been there because Mom was always harping at her about the dangers of moisture and mold.

“You go down there,” I’d said.
“You’re scared!” Christopher had sneered.

“I am not!”

“You are, you wuss.”

“Shut up, dickhead!”

So I descended into darkness and reached for the nearest box, opened the flap and touched something soft and hairy. I screamed, the light came on—blinding me momentarily—and then I saw Christopher galloping down the stairs, all arms and legs, impish delight on his face.

“What is it? Did you touch a mouse?”

But it wasn’t a mouse. It was a doll bigger than Barbie, with dark hair, scary eyes, and an old-fashioned dress that looked painful. Christopher pointed at its face and made machinegun noises. I didn’t care. Dolls were useless. They all ended up decapitated, hung from a tree and stoned, or converted to a superhero with hair chopped off by Christopher and his friends. So I’d come to see dolls as something undesirable.

It’s like I can still hear him. Christopher and I didn’t believe in ghosts, but now that he’s dead, I’m not so sure. I can imagine him, down there in darkness, waiting to leap out at me, his eyes wild and his curls on end like electrified. But then I hear Great-gram coming back, probably wondering where her stupid potatoes are, so I turn on the light and run down the stairs. I find the bin of potatoes and drop them into the pot as fast as I can. One of the potatoes misses and bounces into a dark corner. I know I can’t leave it, Great-gram would know the runaway potato
was me. I find it beside an open cardboard box. This time I look first, and all I see are photographs and papers and envelopes. No mice, no scary dolls.

I grab a photograph, tuck it in my waistband, and take the stairs two at a time. I forget the potatoes and have to go back. I try looking at the photograph on the sly when I’ve finished helping out in the kitchen, but Great-gram catches me reaching into my pants and tells me not to be nasty in public. When we sit down to eat, I feel the curve of thick paper against hipbone, and I feel the pang of Christopher’s absence keenly—I so want him to see I’m no wuss.

After dinner, I sit alone on the double bed in the guest room. The sheer size of it, without Christopher to steal most of it, makes me feel small. All throughout dinner, which was quiet except for the drone of the radio, I’d imagined what might be on the photograph: Great-gram as little girl, or even better, as rebellious teenager? Or maybe an old beau, a best friend, or the beach at sunset. Maybe it was one of those creepy old-fashioned family photos, where everyone dresses in their Sunday best, arranged on the porch steps precisely so, not smiling like they’ve just returned from a funeral.

If only.

It’s a postcard, but not the kind you think of when you hear the word.

The air in my lungs hardens. I can’t breathe.

I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.

I can’t breathe because the black man in the center of the photo can’t breathe. He hangs by his neck from a tree made of light and shadow. Circling him are men, women, and children. They leer at the camera, they leer at me. I fling the photograph away, hard, but it zooms back at
me like a boomerang and lands at my feet. I feel pins and needles in my fingers, like my hand has been asleep all this time and is finally waking up.

I put my hands around my neck. I think about squeezing, but I can’t.

I sit there like a stone for hours, or it may be only minutes. The wall across from me is the same blue wallpaper but now I see the sepia shadow of the black man there, as though he were standing with his back to the sky. Even when I close my eyes he’s there, looking at me, only I can’t make out details about him—except for the rope against his Adam’s apple. And that tree. I don’t know how such a tree can be so tranquil and so lovely, but it is. Slowly, I slide from bed to floor and force myself to look at the photograph again. It’s facedown, with words trailing across it like a line of ants:

Dear Henry, August 8th, 1929 Mr. Henry McCormick

Cousin Edie took me to this lynching. 1324 E Illinois St

The police say they don’t know who did it, Bellingham, WA 98226

but everyone knows. I guess they don’t care.

I know I don’t. The picnic afterwards was grand.

Wish you were here, I’d give you a good time.

Yours,

Marjorie
Hairs on the back of my neck rise. Lynching. I know I don’t. Marjorie. I look at the date and do the math in my head. Seventeen years old. The age I’ll be in five years. In the bathroom I throw up, frantically, as though I can’t get the chicken and the potatoes out fast enough. I rinse my mouth, and only then do I look in the mirror. I barely recognize the girl who returns my gaze. Her blue eyes are bloodshot and bright like the belly of a flame. I turn away from her and run from the postcard, from the house, from Great-gram, who stares at me vacantly from her post on the porch swing. I hear her voice slapping against my back, Rachel, where are you going, but I keep going. I leave 13th Street and head down the hill on Bennett. I used to think the street was named after Great-gram, though of course it wasn’t. I hear laughter in my ear, then her voice: There isn’t a thing named after me. I guess they don’t care. I know I don’t.

I run the six blocks to Boulevard Park. I run through traffic, over the steel arms of the train tracks, through blackberry bushes, and down a cliff that shivers with loose rock. I run until I reach the edge of America. Water soaks through the canvas of my Keds. I would swim, but I know the April waters of Bellingham Bay are cruel. I stare at the adamantine backbones of Portage and Lummi islands, and the part of the mainland that juts into the sea, where Lummi Reservation is. I’ve heard many people born there never leave, and I wonder what that would be like. To be a different girl—not Rachel Leah, but Leah Rachel—living on the reservation with mother, father, brother. Leah Rachel’s mother would never make her move far away, and her brother would still be alive.

And her great-grandmother’s home would be no place for a postcard of a lynched black man hanging, like a question mark, from the arm of a beautiful tree.
I look at the water lapping at my feet and see fragments of my face, when I realize the postcard is still on the floor in my room. Guilt hits my spine with a jolt, and I have to grab a boulder for support, but what’s done is done. “Christopher,” I whisper, my hot breath lashing against my cracked lips. “Did you know about that, too?” Somewhere above a gull cries. I squat in the sand just beyond the tideline and sift through the smooth rocks and broken shells, but find nothing interesting. I was never as good as Christopher was at finding beauty in small things. There could be a diamond under my nose and I would never know. He always had the keener eye for such things.

At last I look to the sky where only the coldest blue remains, a sky so cold just the salt-licked horizon is ablaze, lit from within by a deserting sun. A fist of light hits my eye like a hole punched through a wall. Swaying, I lower myself onto a log, and the sinking sun explodes on my head. When the tears cease, I walk uphill in the dark, the stars to my back and my eyes blasted, to what’s left of home.

When I wake the next morning, I almost forget, but then I reach in the pocket of yesterday’s pants for my Chapstick and feel a corner of the postcard—a corner of her—nick my finger. I slide my pants on and sneak down the stairs to the kitchen. It’s cold, the window above the sink wide open. I walk to it, hugging my arms. The curtains billow around me. The room is silent; the radio hasn’t been turned on yet. I don’t know where Great-gram is. I push the window shut with a thud. When I turn around, she’s there, shuffling slowly towards the sink, her short hair standing on end like exclamation points.

“It’ll make you stronger,” she says as she turns on the tap.

She turns quickly for a woman her age and looks at me, surprised by my tone. She waves her hand at the window behind me. “The cool sea air,” she says. “It’s good for you. Should we make pancakes?”

I tell her she doesn’t know what’s good for me, and then, because the cool sea air is better than this, I run out the door, I’ll run all the way from South Hill to our house in Happy Valley, and I know I’ll have to sit outside and wait for Mom to come back from wherever she is, from wherever she spends her weekends, but anything’s better than this.

* * *

I don’t see Albino Dreadlock Girl until the second day of classes, in English with Senior two girls—eighth graders in American. The nuns say I know more English than Ugandan eighth graders and can help them. Or is it that I must help them? I think I know more English than the nuns do, too, but they don’t say it.

When I walk in it goes quiet for a creepy long time like it always does now when I show up. I sit next to her—Albino Dreadlock. It seems expected. I don’t know her name, and she doesn’t tell me. Instead, she opens her book, the same at every seat—Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*. I don’t open mine. I’ve already read it.

Girls peer coyly over uniformed shoulders, giggling. I roll my eyes at them, and then I ignore them.

The wooden bench I share with Albino Dreadlock creaks every time I just think about moving, and it’s hard as rock. I don’t know how I’m going to sit here for forty minutes and concentrate, it really hurts my butt. It’s the same in every classroom, there’s no relief. I think
about writing that in a letter to Mom: this school hurts my butt. If my life were a novel, the writer would probably say ass, not butt. I’m not allowed to say ass, I’ve been forbidden by Mom, but since she isn’t here now, so I say it in my head: This school hurts my ass. I like how it sounds.

Ass. It hurts. My. The benches probably hurt the asses of the others, too. I hope so.

What else would I tell Mom? The walls are red with Ugandan dust: like everything here. I’m going to go the same way. A mosquito bites my neck, red blood, I swat at it lazily and think about asking for more quinine, since that was stolen, too.

The teacher, a nun old as Mom, saunters in and writes a name on the chalkboard, *Sister Theresa*. She turns slowly on her heel and predictably, her eyes get stuck on me, birdlime Rachel. Heat rises to my face. When the sister calls out our names, she stumbles over mine, pronouncing it *Laycho*, transforming Rachel into something new—as though rearranging the very atoms that make up sounds, syllables, the letters themselves—and creating an alternative grammar, an alternative me.

She says we will read the first chapter together. The girls in the front row go first, a paragraph at a time, tonguing the words slowly as though savoring them, often stumbling over them.

I finger a “C” carved into the edge of the table. It stands alone, embedded among the wood grain, immortal. Christopher used to carve tree bark into “C’s.” We read *The Jungle Book*, was it really only a summer or two ago? I got it for my birthday, and when I told Christopher about a boy who lived with wild animals in the jungle, he wanted to read it, too. It was his idea to act out the coolest scenes—he was always Mowgli, swinging from trees branded with C’s,
because, he said, only a boy could play a boy’s part, and I was almost always the bad guy, like Shere Khan. It was pointless to tell him Shere Khan was a boy, too.

He runs and jumps and climbs like Mowgli until he reaches the end of a branch, the end of the tree, the end of the story for him—unless—his hands clinging to the limb above, his naked feet balanced on the narrowing branch, the branch so narrow it’s narrower than a boy’s foot, narrower even than air, and suddenly he lets out a “whoop” and pushes off with those pale naked feet and swings himself to the neighboring tree, where I—Shere Khan—am waiting to kill him, but I don’t have to, his feet catch on the branch above me graceful as a bird’s but the branch is bad, it’s too weak, there’s a loud crack. I think he tries to grab onto a limb, onto anything, onto me, his hands whipping up the air around him but it’s too late, Mowgli is falling, my brother is falling away from me. I do nothing but open my mouth to scream only instead I hear a roar, the roar of a tiger furious that the kill has been denied him.

Something jabs me in the arm. It’s Albino Dreadlock’s elbow. Everyone is looking at me, which is normal, but something about it feels different, and then I realize: it’s my turn to read, I’m supposed to be helping them, I must help them. Sister Theresa’s mouth is turned down, her eyebrows nearly touching the white cap of her headdress. “You, girl, are you sleeping? In Uganda we do not sleep during class.” She strides back and forth at the front of the room, restless as a hen. The girls don’t dare giggle now, though I know they want to. Albino Dreadlock has to show me where we are, turning the pages of my book with a loud snap. I sigh dramatically, and then I read. I read loudly so I don’t have to hear the giggling in my head. I read clearly and carefully, I emphasize. I change my voice for each character, I read more than one paragraph, I scintillate.
I read and I read and I read, and no one, not even Sister Theresa, stops me.

And as I read, another voice in the back of my mind says: why not? Why not become Laycho, an alternative me, why not shed this old skin, this larval stage?

*  *  *

Vicky points out a beautiful girl as we line up for water behind the dorms one Saturday morning before chores. When she says her name she says it in the same tone she uses when she gossips with other girls about me.

When it’s my turn I rub my hands in the pan of cold water and shiver. “Wash your hair and leave it down,” Vicky says. I roll my eyes but obey her anyway.

It’s Vicky’s plan to use me to get close to her, to talk to her, to be liked by her. Her name is Christine Nandawula, a prefect, and perfect in every regard, or so I’m told, and she’s a year older than we are, her body already molded into a woman shape.

When I’m finished, my hair limp and dripping down my uniform, Vicky takes me by the hand. It’s sweaty.

“She is muzungu,” Vicky says suddenly, with reverence.

“Who is? The albino girl?”

We walk into the cafeteria, and it’s so dark that for a moment I can’t see.

Vicky laughs. “Banange. My friend. That girl is from Tanzania. I am talking about Christine.”
“But she’s black, Vicky.” I say irritably. Only a real *muzungu* could end up with a lynching postcard in her pocket.

She squeezes my hand, hard. “She is a black and *rich*. She came to school with three pairs of shoes. And her house has a second floor.”

“I thought your house had a second floor,” I say.

Vicky pulls me away from our usual table with the other Crested Cranes and over to Christine, a girl who actually looks like a girl, though her head is shaved like everyone else’s. Like a queen, she’s surrounded by older girls, all of them gazing admiringly at her as she talks. They turn as one to look at us, to look at me, their heads moving gracefully on long thin necks like gazelles.

I wait for Vicky to say something, but she doesn’t. The girls laugh, but not Christine.

“Can I help you, dear?” she asks gently. She looks at me as she says it. Her eyes make you want her to like you, to approve of you.

“Stolen!” Vicky blurts out. “Her things!”

“Ah, your things have been stolen?”

I shrug. “It’s true.”

“I am sorry to hear that, my dear. I hope you will not judge all Ugandans to be thieves.”

“You are a prefect!” Vicky says, her voice still embarrassingly loud.

This time Christine laughs, too.
“Uh uh! What do these girls think? That you are a witchdoctor? That you can magic the muzungu’s things back to her?”

“Shush Margaret, my dear,” Christine says, and then she holds up a tote bag. “I keep all my important things with me,” she says, “So they do not get stolen. You see?” We nod quickly, grateful for this bit of advice, and I tug Vicky, certain that these older, elegant girls, these almost-women, want nothing to do with us, but Christine isn’t finished.

“What is your name? No one seems to know. All I hear is muzungu this and muzungu that, and I think, but she must have a name!”

I shrug, roll my eyes. “Rachel,” I say casually, but I’m eager to hear her say my name like they do here, to pronounce this other girl into existence.

She nods knowingly. “Laycho. Like in the bible. Nice to meet you, Laycho. I will see you around, I am sure.

* * *

Everywhere I look there are girls, like clones with their identical uniforms and hair: girls gossiping, their shaved heads bowed towards each other, girls giggling, girls praying, girls complaining, girls playing ball or cards, girls eating, girls learning, girls watching me. Christine appears from this sea of clone girls, a familiar face.

“Laycho, O gamba ki?” she says and folds her legs beneath her carefully, like all the girls do here, and leans on one arm next to me.

Vicky stares at us. She isn’t the only one.
I smile, try to think of something cool to say, but my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth like bread and peanut butter.

“What is this game you are playing?” she asks as she takes the purple slammer from my hand and fingers it.

I show her the pogs, how to stack them in a tower and hit it with the slammer. She tries a few turns with Vicky, but it doesn’t hold their attention, there’s a man hurrying across the lawn at the other end of the compound.

“Who’s that?” I ask, and suddenly Christine and her friends jump up and sing “Be Thou My Vision” like real singers, with real singing voices.

“Praise God, girls,” the man says and claps.

When he disappears inside the administrative building, they stop without finishing all the words and giggle and push each other.

“The nuns are going to be after you for singing at a strange man,” I say to Christine teasingly.

Everyone laughs, even Vicky.

“He is not a strange man, he is our music teacher, Mr. Kabumba. We are in chorus. You should join, Laycho, it is a good time,” she says.

“He is so good looking,” one of her friends says.

“Does the muzungu sing?” asks another. “Do they sing in America?”
“Banange, you know they do, you have heard of Whitney Houston,” a chubby girl says.

I feel myself turning red, though I’m not sure why.

Christine takes me by the hand. “Let us hear you sing. Sing like you are singing for your America,” she says.

“Oh,” I say. The girls all look at me expectantly, eagerly. The wind blows loose strands of hair from my face, bringing with it the sweet smell of cooking fires. I take a deep breath and start singing the Star-Spangled Banner in a high-pitch voice that doesn’t sound like me. When I get to the line about rockets and bombs, I fall silent. The girls stare at me, open-mouthed.

“Bombs?” one of the girls says. “What is that you are singing?”

Another girl laughs. “Ay, Mukisa, it is the American anthem, do you not know anything?”

“If you join our choir, Mr. Kabumba can teach you how to use your voice,” Christine says.

“It is time for dinner,” the girl called Mukisa says.

“Yes, let us eat,” Christine says, and her friends get up and walk leisurely in the direction of the dining hall.

I scoop up the pogs she won and hold them out to her, like a peace offering. “You can have them. That’s how the game works, you keep what you get,” I say, but she isn’t interested, she doesn’t want them, and because Christine doesn’t want them, Vicky decides she doesn’t want hers either, even though she kept some from the other day. Suddenly the pogs seem like
nothing more than pieces of cardboard, flimsy, gaudy things you would throw in the trash, a mere child’s toy. I scoop them up in my hands and study them. One has a witch’s face, another, a bottle of Coke. Some have swirly patterns and cartoon characters. One says The Bomb on it in jagged red letters. They’re about the size of a Kennedy half dollar and the colors are vibrant, like plastic baby toys, they’re so vibrant my eyes start to water. I stand up to take them back to the dorm and hear a gasp behind me.

“Banange. Oh my goodness, muzungu, we need to get you to the washroom,” Christine says in an authoritative voice.

I don’t understand, and say so.

She whispers in my ear. “You have got the blood, you know,” she says meaningfully, “on the back of your dress.”

I grab my dress by the hem and twist it around to the front so I can look. There’s a dark streak of red, like a gash.

Christine says something in Luganda to Vicky. She looks down at the ground and kicks at a pebble. “No,” she says

“What?” I say.

Christine puts a hand on her hip. “Alright. You can have some of mine, but you should see the nurse. Vicky, you go and fetch the water.”

We hurry to the latrine, with Christine and Vicky right behind me so the others won’t see. They giggle the whole way there.
I find an empty stall and drop the pogs down the dark hole, a few at a time. They tumble down like leaves, and I think of Christopher, how fall was his favorite season.

I know I should write a letter to Mom about today, but I never do.

* * *

My other uniform is dirty from playing netball, so I put on a t-shirt and jeans. It feels so good I do a little dance and a twirl. Christine and Vicky stare.

“You look so different,” Vicky says.

“Well I liked the dress better, you know. If your hair was not long, you would look like a boy.”

“I like the dress better too,” Vicky says quickly.

I scratch my arm and lay down on the bottom bunk bed, which no one uses. I can feel the postcard in my pocket. Suddenly I feel very tired and wish they would go away.

“Banange, I wish I could have long hair,” Christine says, and then I feel her fingers in my ponytail.

I move my head away. “I’m really tired.”

“It is the bleeding,” I hear Christine say. “She needs her rest.”

And then I am alone.
Rachel Bareeba

Before my mother took the Other Rachel with her to Uganda, I never thought about whether or not I was happy.

Rachel Jefferson

I sit alone at the front of the bus, behind the driver, a book about the geology of the Cascades open on my lap, but I’m not reading it, I’m looking out the window, watching the snowbank rise the higher we go. My little brother Christopher sits in the back, where the cool kids are. His is the loudest voice on the bus—I can recognize it even if I can’t always make out the words above the other voices. He talks so fast he sounds, at least from a dozen seats away, like an auctioneer. He’s probably telling one of his jokes. He works on them at night, in bed, often testing them out on me.

This is how it is with Christopher. At school he’s the class clown, the outgoing one, the cool kid surrounded by a ring of admirers, both male and female. Always in detention for this or that, yet he’s smart—his teachers complain about his antics one moment and compliment his schoolwork the next. He could be top of his class, but he won’t let himself achieve nerd status, not publicly. That’s my job.

But at home, when none of his friends are around, Christopher is a nerd, too. He has a collection of rocks, crystals, gems, and fossils so extensive half of it has to be organized in shoe boxes and arranged alphabetically under our bunk bed. He can tell you everything about the rocks in your backyard, and about the ones not likely to be there, too. He has a photographic
memory, and he speaks the scientific names of rocks like it’s his first language, his mother tongue: adamine, cymatolite, kinradite, lapis lazuli, thorogummite. The geology book in my lap is his. It’s a difficult read for a ten-year old, but not for Christopher.

Something slams into my shoulder, hard. It’s Jill. She looks at me slyly and holds up a paper fortune teller, the kind where you choose a color and then a number, and a flap that unfolds to reveal a new secret, until by a combination of choice and luck you reach your fortune at the center. They’re all the rage at school right now, and sometimes a girl offers to read my fortune, so I know how they work, though I’ve never made one myself.

She flashes her green and red braces at me. “Choose a color, Boofy,” she says.

I pretend to think about it. “Yellow,” I say.

“Y-E-L-L-O-W,” she spells slowly as her fingers work the folded paper origami, making it open and close like the mouth of a baby bird.

“Now a number.”

There’s a 5, a 6, a 7, and an 8. I choose eight. Her slim fingers work the fortune teller eight times, slowly, as she watches me through hooded eyes. This is a moment of suspense and she’s making the most of it, and then she asks me to choose another number. This time the highest number is four, and that is what I choose. She unfolds the paper and reads my fortune.

“Today is your lucky day.” She flips her brown hair over her shoulder. “Now you do my mine.”

I take the fortune teller in my buttery fingers.
She knows this fortune teller by heart, I can tell by the way she’s staring at it, she must have made it herself, and she’s hoping it will land on a particular fortune. I work the paper tremulously, quickly. Maybe it will say she’ll make a new friend.

When she chooses her second number, there’s a look of triumph on her face, and she yanks it off my fingers and opens the flap.

Without looking, she says: “A cute boy likes you—I mean he likes me—and wants to ask you out. A boy wants to ask me out.”

My heart sinks. So that’s what this is about. Christopher.

She sidles closer to me, until our hips are almost touching. She blinks long eyelashes at me. “Who do you think it could be?”

I shrug. Christopher’s book falls shut on my lap.

Her eyebrows lower. “Well who do you like, then?”

I trace the letters in the word “geology” on the cover. “No one,” I say truthfully.

She rolls her eyes. “Come on! I’ll tell you who I like if you tell me who you like.”

“I already know who you like. You like my stupid little brother.” And in that moment, it occurs to me: I’m not like the other girls, though how or why, I don’t know.

Her cheeks redden, but she maintains her poise. “Maybe I do, and maybe I don’t.”

“Fine.” I turn away and look out the window.
The bus rounds another hairpin turn and there is Picture Lake, though it’s hidden beneath several feet of snow. Children in neon snowsuits glide down the steep banks on sleds while their exhausted parents look on.

“You’re nothing like your brother,” Jill says in an oddly adult tone of voice.

And I think: how would you know?

“Why are you reading that book? It looks so boring.”

I smile. This time the triumph is mine. “It’s Christopher’s book.” I catch the surprise in her eyes before she regains her composure. “Of course it is,” she says smoothly. “He’s so smart, like really smart, not like the boys in our grade.” She says this almost like a challenge, as though daring me to defy her. She does not say anything about the intelligence of girls, and this stings.

“You have no idea,” I say softly.

Her eyes harden. I blush and look away, wishing she would leave.

Instead she leans into the aisle and looks at her friends: three girls who are huddled in a seat a few rows back, whispering behind their hands and giggling in our direction. “Hey guys,” she says in a high-pitched, sing-song voice. “Boofy has a crush! Do you know who it is? It’s her brother!” For some reason, she makes air quotes when she says brother. The girls squeal, and I’m reminded of piglets, like the ones we saw at the apple farm in September—noisy, pink-skinned, and fat with life, yet somehow so fragile-looking. I sink down into the seat. I long to be home, curled up in bed with an endless pile of books about detectives, dragons, horses, ghosts, outer space, anything. Christopher probably heard Jill, she has a big mouth, but I know he’ll
understand. He knows what it’s like for me. And he thinks Jill is a dumbass. This alone comforts me.

Jill mutters something low and threatening in my ear, but all I hear is “Your mom” and “those men,” and then I’m left alone again, with that familiar feeling of relief and wariness in the pit of my stomach.

In the bus driver’s mirror Jill’s reflection giggles into Alison’s ear. I try reading the geology book again, but the words don’t come. I realize I can’t hear Christopher anymore. All I can see is his head, from the chin up. He’s smiling his lopsided smile, the one that makes girls like Jill write sappy, unoriginal love notes in giant pink handwriting, with hearts over the i’s; a one-way transaction studied by Christopher with the dispassionate curiosity of a scientist. “What do you think she’ll do when I don’t write back?” he might ask me. Or, “How do you think she’d react if I told her I’m going to ask her friend to be my girlfriend?” I rarely have the answers. Such girls are as mysterious to me as they are to him.

Mom shaved his head last night, against his will. He likes to wear his springy dark curls long and untamed, like an Afro—hair so different from my blonde, poker straight locks that people are often surprised to learn we are brother and sister.

I remember I had been excited about skiing, but after the incident with Jill, I wanted nothing more than to go home. There was a slow-moving van in front of us, and I remember hoping it would break down so we would never reach the lodge. I can still picture that van clearly, a shiny blue and white Volkswagen with a bumper sticker that read: “My other ride is the sweet pickle bus.” To this day, when I see a Volkswagen, I’m brought back to that day on the
mountain, a day I’d rather not remember, because Jill’s homemade fortune teller was wrong. It was not my lucky day, though I suppose I was luckier than my brother.

*  *  *

When I walk through the door to my math class in t-shirt and jeans, Sister Imelda, who is seated at her desk, regards me from behind the thick lenses of her glasses. I scratch my arms and stare back. The bench I sit on is hard, like the church pews at Truth Tabernacle. Everyone is quiet, quieter than usual, church-quiet, and the sound of singing reaches us from somewhere down the hall, though I can’t make out the words. I look at potted plants lining the windowsills—aloes and jades and others I don’t know the names of. It’s the only classroom I’ve been in with plants, or decoration of any kind. The Sister clears her throat. When I look back, I see a fly land on her shoulder and turn circles on the blue fabric of her sleeve. Her eyelid twitches, like hiccups, but she doesn’t blink.

I know why she’s just sitting there, why she’s hesitating. Should she cane me, the muzungu, as she would if one of her black students came to class in street clothes?

A girl somewhere behind me giggles nervously, it sounds like Henrietta from my dorm, and Sister Imelda blinks and gets out from behind her imposing teacher’s desk, slowly, deliberately. She stops at my table and looks down at me so I can see a reflection of my face in her glasses. I’m pleased to see I don’t look scared.

She closes her eyes for a moment, and I imagine her counting to ten like Mom used to do when Christopher and I were little.

She puts her hands behind her back and clears her throat. “What is your name?

More giggles.

Sister Imelda raises an eyebrow. “Are you trying to be smart with me?”

I feel the blood rush to my face.

She sighs, though her face softens. “Why are you wearing those clothes? Do you really not know our dress code?”

I look down at my hands on the table, and am surprised to see they’re balled up into tight little fists, the knuckles a harsh bone-white.

“You will stand outside the door until I come for you at the end of class,” she says and turns away, dismissing me completely.

I walk slowly out of the room and lean against the wall. At the Truth Tabernacle School back home, the walls of the rooms and even the hallways were always papered with student artwork, but here at Saint Margaret’s, except for peeling paint, dust, and scuff marks, the walls are blank. I listen to the girls chant the times tables. I already know those, so I recite in my head the perfect squares up to a hundred. Then I try to remember as many of the digits of pi as I can, but can’t remember more than fourteen of them, so I give up.

I feel a tap on my shoulder and see black shoes. I look up at Sister Imelda towering over me, and I’m surprised to find I’ve sat down and fallen asleep.

She signals me to follow her. I guess she’s taking me to the headmistress, a nun with a reputation for being fond of her cane, which she hangs on the doorknob of her supply closet in
her office, or so I’ve heard. Girls walking to their next class watch us from the sides of their eyes, they know what it means when a student and a teacher walk together between classes. The sweet smell of burning garbage fills the air, reminding me of the first few days at home—our new home—when Frank told Mom the only way to get rid of garbage in Uganda is to burn it. She’d gotten angry at him and accused him of not telling her how difficult life is here. When she noticed I was spying on them, she looked frightened and then angry again and stormed into the house.

Vicky walks by and raises her eyebrows. I shrug. She’s been caned twice already, once for talking during class, the other time for not cleaning the latrine when it was her turn. But Sister Imelda walks past the principal’s office and into the teacher’s lounge, a place students don’t usually go. I stand in the doorway and watch as she makes a cup of tea, her back to me. For a moment I wonder if she’s going to make me a cup too, but she doesn’t.

“Please, Rachel, come in.”

I take a step into the room. There’s nothing special about it—it’s just a couch and armchairs arranged around a large round coffee table with a small kitchenette off to one side, but it has that off-limits feel to it, like the darkened bedrooms of other people’s parents.

She looks down her nose at me, which is longer and narrower than the noses of most of the Ugandans I’ve seen, and tells me to sit.

She sets a plate of cookies on the table between us. My mouth fills with saliva. I reach for one, I haven’t had much sugar in months, but then I hesitate. Is it okay to eat a cookie when you’re about to be punished?
“I am not going to beat you, Rachel, not today, though I am going to write to your parents. They are here in Uganda, yes?”

I exhale loudly. I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath. “My mom lives here.”

Sister Imelda sits down across from me and arranges her dress over her knees. “I brought you here to talk with you,” she says and looks at me expectantly.

I look back at her, unsure of what to say or do. The bell clangs, the next class is about to begin. Doesn’t she have another class to teach?

“I have heard you are a bright student. Would you like to tell me why you are not in uniform today?”

I close my eyes and lean back. The feminine cramping beneath my navel has eased, somewhat. When I open my eyes again, she’s still there, watching me, waiting.

“I hate dresses,” I say.

She laughs, loudly, and I jump at the unexpected sound of it, the irresistible musical joy. But she stops abruptly like a person who’s just remembered something and becomes serious again. “I never liked dresses either.”

I snort. “But you’re a nun. Nuns are always wearing dresses.”

“Well, it is known as a habit, but yes, a dress, and a rather complicated dress.”

I watch her carefully. I’m still not sure what she wants from me, why she has me here, but I can’t help myself, I’m curious now.
“Do you ever get tired of wearing it?”

“Oh,” she looks at the ceiling, “Sometimes, yes, I suppose I do.” She takes a sip of tea and watches me over the rim of her mug.

“So why do you wear it, then?” The words come out before I can stop them, and I wait for her to tell me off for being impertinent, but she doesn’t.

She sets her mug down on the table. “Well, nuns wear dresses, as you have said, and I have always wanted to be a nun. So I wear the dress.”

I nod. It makes sense, I guess. “Are you happy?”

Sister Imelda looks into my eyes like she’s trying to figure me out, and I become aware of my heart, of its insistent knocking. “I place my faith and my worries and my sorrows with God. I find my joy with God,” she says.

“You’re telling me this so I’ll wear my uniform, even though it’s a dress,” I say.

Her lips quiver. “I brought you here, Rachel, because yes, I do hope you will wear your uniform. I cannot guarantee other teachers will not beat you if you do not, and if you break the uniform rule repeatedly, you will be kicked out of this school, I have seen students sent home for lesser offenses. But I also brought you here because I know what you are going through.”

_No you don’t_, I think. I slide my hand in my pocket and touch the postcard.

“You see, I too have been far away from home. In fact, I have been to your United States of America.”

“You? You’ve been to America?”
“I am a nun, my dear, sometimes I do work in other parts of the world. I know what it is like to be far from home.”

I look down at my hands. They look small and pale against the dark blue of my jeans. I try to imagine Sister Imelda in Bellingham, incongruous with her inky black skin and blue habit, looking down her long shiny nose, standing straight-backed next to Mom and Great-gram. Mom would be wearing one of her denim skirts, of course, and Great-gram would be wearing her old lady pants, the blue afghan around her shoulders, and the pink plastic bucket for razor clams in one hand. I wonder what she thinks of America, how different it is, with its careless extravagance, but I don’t dare ask.

“How would you like to go and live with the family of one of our day students?”

I look up at her. She watches me like they all do here, though not unkindly, her dark eyes lit up behind her thick-framed glasses, and something deep inside of me decides that I like her, that I will wear the dress for her. This seems to please her, and I return to my dorm to change.

After a week of classes, it’s decided that I should be moved up a grade level, and my new math teacher, Sister Sarah, has eyes that look like a house in the night with no lights on.

Day after day I walk past Sister Imelda’s classroom and look through the doorway, trying to see if I can catch a glimpse of her as she might have appeared in America: a tall dark woman, her arms toned, her middle plump and matronly, she is standing in a crowd of people as pale as peeled bananas, just standing, looking down her nose at America, watching it rush onward, her hands behind her back, a fly walking circles on her sleeve. She turns to look at me, the glare from the sun on her glasses white and strangely luminous in the dim room, like headlights. I see her at my age, a mere child nearly disappearing in her nun’s habit, flanked by medicinal plants
fat with aloe juice. Why do I watch for her now? Why do I care, in any way, what she thinks about my home—America—what she thinks about me?

*   *   *

The first time I tasted matooke wasn’t in Uganda, it was in our own kitchen. Not long after Christopher’s death, a Ugandan woman named Nakato appeared at our house. *A friend I want you to meet*, Mom said. On one of those visits, when they thought I was outside, I overheard her say *You have to be strong. You still have a child to take care of.* It wasn’t until later that night, as I lay in bed, that I understood *a child* referred to me.

Once, Great-gram stopped by when Nakato was visiting. She sat by the door, saying nothing. The radio was playing, and when *Rockin’ Robin* came on, Nakato took Great-gram by the hands and pulled her up. I flinched when their skins touched and reached in my pocket to make sure the postcard was still there. Great-gram held Nakato’s arms and smiled. And oh boy, could they dance. There I sat on the sofa, invisible, watching those wild-haired women, who in those fleeting moments ceased to be anyone I knew. When the song ended, Great-gram turned to me and said, “I bet you didn’t know your old granny could dance!” and shrieked with laughter.

*   *   *

The heat unfurls and expands into vast clouds that seem to press down on the flat of my skull like a hand. Big drops of rain pelt us like marbles; we shiver gratefully in our uniforms. We stand under waterfalls that rush down rivets in the tin roofs and shuck the layer of red dust from our arms and legs. When we walk to class, we wear our coats over our heads. Puddles form thick and bubbling with red mud. Before long they froth and swell with mosquito larvae; soon they will take to the air with an incessant whine. The nuns close the wooden shutters on the relentless
beating, and it is even darker in the classrooms than before. The school looks like a building left over from a hurricane: everywhere there is water, mud, bits of trash, chaos. Nuns huddle under the eaves of the roofs, hands on their hips, sighing and inspecting paths and doorways, roofs and walls.

Christine goes barefoot to save her shoes. Her tote bag isn’t big enough for all three pairs of shoes, so she puts a pair in her locker, and they’re stolen that same day while she’s in class, agriculture class, she knows exactly when they’re taken because she rushes back to her dorm between classes to check on them. At her request Vicky and I scan the feet of the other Crested Cranes, she’s sure the thief wasn’t from her own house, but the shoes are never seen again, they’ve been swallowed up by the abyss of the boarding school black market, no doubt sold to a street vendor on the Outside. She cries when we tell her we haven’t seen them because her father will beat her when she comes home at the end of the term with only the two pairs.

Easter is almost here. The third grade class at the Truth Tabernacle School back home will have cut giant Easter eggs out of white paper and colored them with crayons to hang from the walls of Yeager’s toy store by now. People vote for their favorite egg by dropping a coin into a coffee can. The winner gets a free toy from the store, and the money goes to charity. The year Christopher’s egg won the money was donated to “the children of Africa.” On his egg he had drawn Jesus as a superhero, flying through the cloudy heavens, his arm extended like Superman, his long golden hair and a pearly-white cape fluttering at his back. Near the top and the bottom of the egg was, at first glance, what looked like a typical Easter egg pattern of ovals and lines, but I knew they were really UFOs. Christopher had once read a comic book about Jesus as an alien from outer space and couldn’t stop thinking about it for months, to Mom’s despair.
New clouds billow and form on the horizon, and at night lightning flickers inside them, but the rain has stopped. The puddles shrink and harden until they’re baked by the sun and Christine puts her shoes back on. Vicky produces a length of rope, I don’t know where it came from, and teaches me how to play “bladder.” We take turns jumping rope with it, and every time one of us stumbles or misses, we have to wind a length of it around ourselves, loop by loop, around a foot, up a leg, across hips, so that the jumping becomes more challenging, more fun. My calf muscles burn with joy, my body hasn’t felt like this since skiing at Mount Baker.

Our other game is dodgeball. When a ball turns up, usually made of black garbage bags or *matooke* leaves, we form two lines in the narrow strip of yard between the dorms, Crested Cranes on one side, Bushbucks on the other. The air is warm and humid, like a sauna. The skirt of my school uniform sticks to the backs of my thighs, though I seem to be the only one sweating. I palm the ball’s plastic skin, relishing the crinkling sound it makes against my fingers, and then I hurl it at a girl opposite me, she hoots and dances to the side, elbowing the girl beside her, but the ball catches her in the hip. Christine, who is directly across from me, wags her finger at me and shakes her hips. The girls here are good at dodgeball, better than the girls at Truth Tabernacle, but they don’t whip the ball like Christopher and the other boys did, for whom athleticism wasn’t fun if it didn’t involve some form of physical torture. This is the hardest thing: scanning the line of girls for my brother’s determined eyes.

*   *   *

Sometime around my eleventh birthday, Great-gram began dropping us off at our church for Sunday service without Mom. She never went in with us and she never went to any other church
as far as we knew, because, she explained, she’d made her peace with God and that was all we
needed to know. Her secular indifference drove Mom crazy.

After picking us up, she’d take us to the beach, no matter what the weather happened to
be doing, where we ate peanut butter sandwiches and dug for Razor clams. She loved eating
fresh clams but digging was getting too hard for her.

It’s the summer before the Mount Baker ski trip and Jill’s homemade fortune teller—a
happier time, or so I’d thought. Great-gram limps down the steep trail to the shore. Sometimes it
would be Teddy Bear Cove, sometimes Squalicum beach, but today she brings us to a beach with
no name, one I haven’t been to before. Carrying her shovel and a children’s pink plastic sand
bucket, she looks at the sand at her feet, considering. Sometimes the doughnut-shaped hole of a
clam is visible above the tideline, in drier sand, and it is one of these that have caught her eye
now. She gets down on her knees, carefully, using the shovel like a cane, and then, still
surprisingly strong for her age, she plunges it several inches into the sand. I move down the trail
towards her; Christopher and I have been lagging behind, tugging plump blackberries from the
wall of thorns along the path and popping them in our mouths. But when I look behind me, he
isn’t there, he’s already down by the water. He must have slipped past me, which I find odd,
because usually he can’t resist giving me a poke or a pinch. Already he’s studying the sand, not
for the breathing holes of clams, but for rocks. I run the rest of the way to Great-gram and gently
take the shovel from her and thrust it into the sand again, then pull the shovel up and towards me,
bringing with it sand that seems too dry to support a clam. And indeed, when I reach in I can tell
it’s no longer alive, the tide has left it to die alone, in a grave of its own making.
You weren’t supposed to dig up Razor clams out of season, we could have been reported, but as Mom was always reminding us, Great-gram came from another era, and trying to force her to inhabit ours was about like trying to force a fish to live on land. I used to think this meant she would die, so I always shoveled as fast and as hard I could. I was the best clam dicker, Great-Gram said. I always found their quarter-sized holes in the sand faster than anyone else, and I always dug up the most, though I was also the most likely to cut my hands on the razor-sharp edges of the shells as I pulled them out of the sand. Christopher, a beach-comber by instinct, was easily led astray, filling his pockets with shells, sea glass, and of course, rocks. He could have dug up as many clams as I did, but I knew it hurt him to pull that muscular fistful out of the earth and condemn it to death.

Usually he would dig up one or two for her though, because there was something about Great-gram that made you want to please her. After wandering away from us until he is like a tiny doll on the horizon, he saunters back empty-handed to where we squat in the damp sand and looks down at us, suddenly tall and grown-up—a nine-year old going on nineteen—the sun’s rays framing his narrow figure like a halo. I can’t make out the expression on his face; it’s hidden in the shadow of his Seahawks cap. He jiggles the rocks in his pockets, where they clink like coins.

“You know, don’t you,” Christopher says quietly.

I put the shovel down and look at him. He turns his head away from us, towards the bay, so I can see the side of his face, and there’s a look there I’ve never seen before, warping the geography of his features into anger, real anger, adult anger. Great-gram doesn’t seem to notice, she’s removing the last handfuls of sand from a hole, her face hovering inches from the opening.
“You know, don’t you,” Christopher says again, his voice raised.

I look at Great-gram, confusion settling over me like dust.

Great-gram doesn’t look up. “Some things I know and some things I don’t, Christopher Thomas. Just like you.”

He kicks a rock, nearly hitting me. “You knew all along and you never told me.”

“Wasn’t for me to tell.” She glances up at him, squinty-eyed, as she pulls a small clam out of the hole. It squirts water at her in a pathetic effort to save itself. She drops it into the pink bucket and wipes her hands on her pants.

Christopher turns away in disgust. Clouds of dusty sand billow around his feet.

“He found me,” he says, his voice rising like an excited puppy’s. “He found me, he sent me a letter, and I’m going to live with him.”

“Live with whom?” I say.

Great-gram stands up slowly, knees cracking like twigs. “You’re upsetting your sister.”

“Who found you?” I hear the whiny tone in my voice and know Christopher will look down on me for it.

He whirls around and faces Great-gram, chin up, his bright eyes almost level with her dim ones. His hands are tight little fists, and he’s trembling. “I don’t give a damn.”

My mouth falls open. Damn. A forbidden word. I watch Great-gram to see what she will do, but she picks up the bucket and walks away from him, towards the trail that leads to the car.
Christopher runs down to the water, yanks the rocks out of his pockets—agates, mostly, he has so many already, but he can’t seem to stop himself from bringing more home—and hurls them into the bay, one by one.

I walk towards him, the word Damn still echoing in my head. I want to taste that delicious word on my own tongue. I mouth it a few times, silently, letting my tongue and lips roll around the shape of the sound, but I don’t dare whisper it.

“Let him be, Rachel. Let him be,” Great-gram hollers at my back.

I hesitate, the sand burning the naked soles of my feet, but Great-gram asks me to carry the bucket to the car, it’s too heavy she says, and even though I know there’s only a few clams in there, I’ve no choice but to do as she says.

We wait for him in the car nearly fifteen minutes, our peanut butter sandwiches lying limp and forgotten on the front passenger seat. It’s hot, even with the windows down, and the bucket of clams on the floor at my feet is starting to smell. I pull out strands of my hair and watch them float away in the light. Great-gram doesn’t speak, and neither do I. When Christopher comes back, loping towards the car like a long-legged colt, he’s smiling, he’s calmer than I am even now, all these years later.

Nothing is said about what happened on the beach. We punch and tickle each other on the way home like always, everything seems normal on the surface, but there’s that difference in his umber eyes, that brooding he can’t quite seem to bury.

After dinner we scrub pots and plates, our bellies brimming with clams, and then we take sleeping bags to the screen porch at the back of the house. They’re silky on the outside, cool to
the touch, almost damp-feeling even, only they’re fleecy on the inside, making them too hot for a summer night, but Great-gram insists we use them. We lay them side by side on the wooden floorboards and flop down on our backs in the dark. A streetlamp nearby flickers on and off. The porch smells of damp potting soil and lavender soap and rubber boots. In the morning the starlings at the suet feeder by the shed will shake the air with their buzzing and chirping.

Sometimes we sleep in the guest bedroom, but only if it’s too cool to sleep on the porch. There’s only the one double bed in there, and Great-gram is worried we are getting too old for bed-sharing. The quilt on the bed is homemade—our grandmother, who died of cancer before we were born, used denim and other pieces of fabric to make it. I love all the different colors, it is a plethora of colors—a new word I learned the other day—though it smells like old lady. There’s a ship in a glass bottle on the dresser and shells from the beach on the windowsill. There’s also a pile of rocks on the nightstand, stacked one on top of the other like a delicate statue from ancient times—the work of Christopher. He leaves piles of rocks wherever he goes, like an unseen animal marking his territory with droppings.

Great-gram doesn’t believe in TV, especially now that cataracts are beginning to cloud her vision, so Christopher and I usually mess around with old games—Checkers, Axis & Allies, Backgammon—or with the large tin of broken Crayons, but lately we feel too old for these things, things that are starting to look to us like artifacts, like the museum pieces of our childhood, good only for displaying and remembering. Once, when Great-gram and I were cooking in the kitchen, Christopher took the radio apart. He was halfway through putting it back together when she realized it was too quiet and sent him to bed without dinner, though later she swore the signal for her favorite station came in clearer after that.
There’s a cork fishing rod and an old wicker tackle box; they used to be our Great-grandfather’s, and then our grandfather’s, and someday they’ll be Christopher’s. He swings the rod around and stabs at the air with it: it’s a sword and he’s a knight. He has his own fishing rod, a shorter one made for kids, like me, but he prefers the ancient cork rod. He sings:

Father forgive us for what we must do

You forgive us we’ll forgive you

We’ll forgive each other till we both turn blue

Then we’ll whistle and go fishing in heaven. (fish and whistle lyrics John Prine)

He sings this with bravado, even glee, but I think it’s bold of him, because what do we have to forgive God for? There’s nothing in the Bible about God needing to repent, but when I point this out to Christopher he rolls his eyes at me and says it’s just a song, a song about how great fishing is. It’s so great, Christopher says, that Heaven must have fishing rods and rivers and lakes all over the place. But I don’t think about heaven much, even when I’m in church, because heaven means you have to die first. I’m surprised to find that Christopher has thought about death.

I don’t know who taught him the song, or why.

Christopher tosses me one of the smaller rods and we have a swordfight. While Great-gram hides somewhere in the house, we lurch around the dark yard, drunk on waning childhood, pointing our swords at each other and baring our teeth. We do this every night we are here, like a holy ritual before bed. Suddenly he steps away from me and disappears into the shadows like a
wraith, and for a moment, it’s like I’m alone, like Christopher never existed. I count to twenty in my head, but he doesn’t reappear.

“Christopher?”

I dart from one tree to the next. I look behind all the trees, there are only five, but still I don’t see him. Then I remember the shed and tiptoe towards it. I feel a tiny sting on the back of my neck, the mosquitoes have found me. The shed is so white in the fading light it almost glows. I hesitate at the closed door. The small shadow of a bat flickers in the air above me.

A twig snaps on the ground nearby, and then I feel Christopher’s hand tighten around my ankle, the tip of the fishing rod poking into my shoulder blade.

“You’re dead, sucker!”

“I am not.”

“Yeah you are, I got you,” he says and yanks me to the ground.

I jump back up. “You got my shoulder blade, that wouldn’t kill me!”

“With a real sword it would. You’d bleed to death. And I’d just stab you again.”

There’s no arguing with Christopher. Anyway, he’s the one who knows anything about swords. I have to fall down on the dewy grass, belly-side down, and play dead until I can come to life again. My face is turned so I can see the first stars of the night over my head.

Sometimes, instead of swordfights, we catch the small moths that gather around the porch light and put them in glass jars. We don’t keep them in the jars overnight, we know they will die. So we merely look at them, at the way their antennae shiver with expectation, waiting to see if
they’ll climb on each other’s backs and mate, but they never do. They crawl frantically up the
glass, slipping and falling, shaking their wings, until we grow tired of them.

Often, we sit on the back porch steps and whisper things to each other, things we don’t
want Great-gram to hear. Though her eyesight is bad, her hearing is as good ours, if not better,
and we have to be careful. We whisper about Mom, about how we don’t know where she is or
what she does when we spend the weekend here. We only know she isn’t home or doesn’t
answer the phone, and when we ask Great-gram where she is, her mouth gets tight, and she tells
us to go outside and play and to please stop asking so many ridiculous questions.

When was it that Christopher put an end to our whispered discussions about Mom? It
must have been around the time he said damn.

Today Great-gram picks us up after a summer arts and crafts camp, but she’s late. She
doesn’t take us to the beach for clams, she’s quiet, and Christopher and I don’t show her what we
made at camp. We’re coasting slowly down Alabama Hill, the bay glittering in front of us. It’s
raining, but the sun has come out over the water, and there’s a rainbow clamped down over the
city like a lid, but we ignore these small miracles, because Christopher is showing me how to
write a letter using invisible ink, like detectives do. Someday you might need to know how to do
this, he says. You don’t want other people reading your secrets; you have to be sneaky, and you
can’t trust computers to keep your secrets safe. I think of the elaborately folded notes girls send
each other during class, but I know this isn’t what he means by secrets. He takes a pen and two
sheets of paper, one on top of the other, and writes hello dumbass in bold ink, pressing down as
hard as he can, using one of his rock and mineral books as a desk. He glances over at Great-
gram, but of course she can’t see it, and then he takes the top piece of paper, the one with the
writing on it, and tears it into a dozen tiny pieces. He hands me the bottom page, which looks blank, and a crayon he filched from camp and tells me to color the paper until the message appears, and sure enough, *hello dumbass* appears, skeletal white letters in a sea of black wax.

*This is how you send a letter to someone safely*, he says earnestly. You send the bottom page, and the recipient uses a crayon, or a colored pencil. He speaks of other ways of creating invisible ink, ways he will have to show me when he can get his hands on the ingredients: lemon juice, milk, white crayons, baking soda.

I see his brown eyes watching me intently through the mass of dark springy curls, making sure I understand. He is dead serious, for once he isn’t joking.

He never did get the chance to show me how to write an invisible message using lemon juice, or milk, or white crayons, or baking soda.

Such are my memories of those whom I can no longer see.

*  *  *

Sister Frances is describing Idi Amin’s military coup in 1971. The girls are quiet, they don’t even shuffle their feet against the floor. The windows are open, but though the air is heavy and still, I feel cold. I look at the faces of the girls, but they do not seem to notice it. I rub goosebumps on my forearms.

It’s dinnertime, but I’m not hungry. I hunch between Vicky and Agnes, they are talking about something, boys probably, but I don’t hear anything. I take out one of my books and try to read, but the words won’t hold still. Vicky eats my posho and beans without asking. I put the book down and shiver.
Back at the dorm, I study the Lugandan pronouns until I feel a throbbing sensation above my eyes. It feels good to know I’m studying so hard it hurts, but soon my whole body aches, and the blanket isn’t warming me up. Lights out is a few hours away, but I close the book and blow out the candle.

I dream of snow, mountains and mountains of cold, hard snow, and a solitary tree, waxing beautiful in the moonlight.

*  *  *

In the morning, I go through the motions. I line up for water, I splash it on my face, I rub my teeth with my finger. I swallow a spoonful of porridge at the cafeteria. My first class of the day takes me past Sister Imelda’s. My body is heavy and the sweat rolls off my skin like drops of rain beneath my uniform. I stop outside her door and gaze in. She sees me and nods.

Sister Mary is saying something about the Rwenzoris, Uganda’s snow-capped mountain range—like the Cascades back home, but I can barely concentrate. I’ve started shivering again, a deep, bone-shaking rattle I’m sure everyone in the room can hear. Never have I been this cold, not even in Bellingham when it snowed. I will myself to focus on the sister, she’s holding up a photograph of Mount Stanley, but it’s hard, it’s like she’s speaking a language I don’t know. Christopher should be here, he could tell everyone about the geology of mountains, but I can’t remember where he is. The other students are reciting something now, so I move my lips silently. My breath comes out quickly, in staccato gasps, like the frantic breathing of a fish on land. I lower my head to the desk.

I feel the burn of a hand on my shoulder, shaking me. From far away, a voice: “She is not well, Sister.”
Outside, the light is bright. I’m being pulled along by two girls, one on each side of me, they are forcing me to walk but I don’t want to, I am too tired. Briefly, I wonder if they’re taking me to the principal’s, if I’m finally going to be caned. I stumble along, I don’t understand why I’m so tired, it must be the food, but they make me keep walking. My teeth clash and bang against each other and tears stream from my eyes though I don’t know why, I’m not crying, I’m not afraid of the principal and her cane.

Instead of a hard wooden cane across my backside, I feel a soft pressure, a fleshy hand on my forehead. My eyes focus for a moment, and I see it isn’t the principal but the nurse, Sister Angelica.

I hear the words “banange” and “hospital” and realize they’re talking about me.

They guide me to the backseat of a car. It’s been nearly a month since I’ve been in one, and the motion lulls me, I feel my head drooping. I lean against someone’s soft shoulder, and then I don’t remember anything more.

* * *

I am standing on a mountain, and snowflakes lick my face, though I don’t feel cold. The sun disappears behind the mountain. The sky darkens. I turn to look behind me, they must be close by, surely I haven’t gone too far, and there’s Christopher, he’s standing a few feet away, he’s smiling at me. He’s wearing skis but he hasn’t got a coat on, just jeans and t-shirt, and the Seattle Seahawks hat. I try to walk over to tell him off for dressing like an idiot but my feet are heavy, weighted down. I’m buried beneath a foot of hard-packed snow. I struggle to dig them out with my bare hands, they scrape at the icy snow but I feel nothing at all, and when I reach my feet,
there are the skis, but I’ve lost the poles. I turn awkwardly around so I can tell Christopher about a place where it never snows only I can’t recall the name, but he is gone.

    *    *    *

I open my eyes. There’s a black woman in a white dress and funny white cap looming over me. I smell the sharp odor of her underarms as she reaches across me and does something to my arm, something tight and then something cold. Everything is bright, and hot. There’s a constant buzzing, like mosquitoes are flying along the tunnel of my ear. I have the feeling there’s something I need to make sure no one here sees, something terrible, something about me, but I don’t know what, or where. I open my mouth, wide, but nothing comes out.

    *    *    *

Mom whispers in my ear: “You’re at Mengo Hospital,” and at first I think she says “Mango” Hospital. I open my eyes and look at her for the first time in months. We are here, she says, because I did not tell anyone about my quitting.

    I try to sit up, but my arms and legs are too heavy and I fall back onto my pillow. “I’m not quitting,” I say, but my voice is barely more than a whisper.

    Mom leans over me. The whites of her eyes are shot with red, and the skin around the corners is creased. She looks like she hasn’t slept in days.

    “No one said anything about you quitting. You’re going to get better. You already are getting better.”

    I look around the room. I’m lying in a metal-frame bed, one of many in a long row of metal-frame beds, some with kids in them, some of them empty. There’s a girl in the bed on the
left, watching me through half-closed eyes. Slowly, it comes back to me: the exhaustion, the dizziness, then the school nurse and riding in a car.

“I’m in the hospital,” I say slowly, trying out the words. Except for my twisted ankle, I’ve never been a patient in a hospital before.

“Yes,” Mom says heavily and sits down on the end of my bed. There are no chairs for visitors, no bedside tables with a phone and space for flowers and get well cards. A little girl a few beds down starts coughing the deep, hacking cough of an old man. A tall nurse in a white, knee-length dress with a black belt at her waist and what looks like a folded napkin on top of her hair walks by and with a pang I’m reminded of my school uniform, and of Sister Imelda.

I look down at my hands, but there’s no hospital bracelet like in the movies, though there’s an IV piercing the back of my left hand. “Why? What’s wrong with me?”

She leans toward me. “Honey, you have malaria. I couldn’t believe it when I heard. You weren’t taking your quinine. I had one of the Sisters go through your things and I was told there wasn’t any in your locker, even though I gave you enough for the whole term. She thinks it was probably stolen.”

I nod. Of course. Quinine. Stolen out of my locker on the first night.

Mom holds out her fist in the light between us and opens it. Sitting on her palm is the piece of amber Christopher had found shortly before he died. It shines, as though with light of its own. I’d brought it to Africa with me and kept it in my pocket ever since. Her eyes look sad, she knows he must have been the one who found it, and for the first time I wonder if she carries something of him around, too. I take it from her without a word and tuck it under my bare leg.
The coolness of it comforts me. And yet, something about what she says makes me feel nervous, but I don’t know why.

“Why didn’t you answer my letters? Why didn’t you tell me you needed more?”

For a moment I think she means Christopher’s rocks, but of course it’s the medicine she’s talking about. I scratch at my hot, rashy arms.

“I don’t know.” I look away, to the girl who’s still eyeing me. She’s no longer trying to be sly about it. I turn my back to her, but this means I’m facing Mom again.

“You could have died.”

A nurse walks by. The sound of her heeled shoes on the floor precedes her.

“I wish I had died. You should have let me,” I say, knowing it will hurt her, knowing vaguely, from whispered rumors overheard at family gatherings (rumors that maybe were whispered loud enough for me and Christopher to hear), that she has wanted to die more than once, for real, though they never say why. The nurse glances over her shoulder at me, and when our eyes connect, I remember. *The postcard.* If the Sisters went through my things, if Mom had Christopher’s amber, then that means they all know. A wave of heat from deep inside my belly moves outwards and up, to the top of my scalp, turning my skin red. I pull the thin hospital blanket to my nose and watch Mom move to the window at the head of my bed, her back to me. I wonder if she’s thinking about Great-gram. After a long silence, she says in a voice I barely hear, “That’s unfair of you.” I notice a slump to her shoulders, one which would take hold of her upright posture in the years to come. “He’s lost to me too, you know.”
I look down and notice the skirt of her *kitenji*, the rich purple of royalty, now faded to a halfhearted lavender. It’s the same one she wore all those months ago when she first came here and looked at herself in the mirror, dismayed that she looked like a hippie. I’m surprised to see she’s let the hem unravel. Africa has not been kind to her, either.

*  *  *

It’s Monday. Not much has been happening. Bette, the woman Mom hired to help with the household chores, is singing in the yard. She sings to the beat of her wooden spoon knocking the dust *knock knock knock* from the old Oriental rug Mom lugged all the way from home. Mom’s in her room, which is also her office, where she’s making phone calls before the power goes out. Frank is Elsewhere. I’m sitting in the kitchen alone, eating lunch, listening to Bette.

My lunch is two samosas and a glass of Ovaltine in boiled water. Mom used to take me and Christopher to an Indian restaurant downtown as a treat and we would always order samosas. They were big and shaped like pyramids, and Mom would cut them in half for us quickly, before we could bite into them and burn our tongues. I would watch the steam waft out and disappear into the air above our heads and imagine they were volcanoes, like Mount Baker, Mount St. Helens. Christopher and I loved samosas, crisp on the outside, soft with potatoes, peas, and spices on the inside. We loved them so much he and I made them one evening when it was our night to cook, but it took a long time to do the dough, make the filling, fold them, fry them in oil, and then there was still the main course to prepare. We never did make them again. Now I bite the samosas without looking at them. Bette puts rice inside and sometimes curry, but most of the time they’re plain and taste like nothing.
Bette stops singing. She says something in Luganda, and then she says my name, though she isn’t calling for me. I blink and a little boy walks into the kitchen. It’s Simon. He lives next door. “Oyagala football?” he says, in the polite voice everyone uses here—it’s soft and demure, but full of meaning, like a paperback book. I know there’s flock of children standing in the yard, too scared to come inside the muzungu’s house. If I say no, they’ll gossip about me and dare each other to peek in the windows. If I say yes, they’ll stare at me and whisper. I say yes, I would like to play soccer.

Simon giggles and runs out the door.

My stomach feels heavy, as though I’ve eaten six Indian samosas instead of only two Ugandan ones. I rub sunscreen into my skin, and put on handmade leather flip-flops and a pink baseball cap, which Mom makes me wear because of the equator. I tell her I’m going out to play. “Don’t go too far,” she says. “You’re still sick.”

None of the children are around, they’ve already gone to the empty lot down the road, and Bette has gone inside. I pause in the doorway and close my eyes. I hear women saying Wange? men laughing, children shouting, babies crying, chickens clucking, horns honking. When I open my eyes, I see the thin film of red dust on the concrete porch, tracked in from the dirt road by countless shoes and feet. My flip-flops have no traction, so I press down on the balls of my feet and glide across the porch. I slip through the metal gate at the bottom of the driveway—ours is the only gate in the neighborhood that is never closed during the day—and walk down the road towards the empty lot. The heat in the air ripples and flows like a river; I can feel its current pressing against my skin, and it’s like I’m trying to hold my head above water to
breathe, but the current is sucking me under. It’s like being two-dimensional, like a letter on a piece of paper pressed between the covers of a thick textbook.

I feel people walking by, brushing against me lightly, like the nibbles of small fish. A boda boda surfaces, and I stand to the side of the road, my face averted to avoid the cloud of dust as it roars by. A dog on the other side of a gated compound growls quietly. I move back into the road and swerve to avoid running into a man with a bundle of sticks on his head.

Down the road I see the empty lot where the children, all of them no older than seven, are clumped together on the side of the road, watching me. Their clothes are bright against their dark skin, as bright as raised voices, though they rarely speak to me above whispers behind cupped hands.

Suddenly someone says, My muzungu! and everyone is shouting and laughing and running all at once, they move as one towards me, circling me, their hands poking and prodding me like a game of tag, until all at once they break away and head back to the empty lot, still shouting the word muzungu at the air in front of them, like a war cry.

I reach into my pants pocket and feel nothing.

Their voices sound far away. A ball appears, made of matooke leaves bound tight by string, and the game begins. I walk over to join them, but my legs are suddenly heavy. I turn back to the road and throw up on the skin of a plastic shopping bag. The children come over and stare at the bag, splattered with brown liquid and grains of white rice, which stand out against the black plastic. I can smell the vomit, and my nose and throat burn.

“Ay, the muzungu is sick.”
“Banange.”

They click their tongues and shake their heads, like miniature adults. I walk away, my back to them, and head down the road.

I lie in bed with Bette’s mop bucket on the floor and float in and out of sleep. I throw up just one more time, though nothing but clear liquid comes up. Mom says, “I told you not to go far away,” and she’s right, I went far away, but so did she. I make a tunnel under the blankets and imagine I’m in a cave far from Uganda. It’s too hot for blankets and I sweat, but at least in hear I am alone.

* * *

Low voices sneak through the stucco walls. I open my eyes. It’s dark, night time still, and I try my light but the power is out again. The voices get louder. It’s Mom and Frank, arguing about something. They sometimes argue, but they never shout, not like this. I press my ear against the cool door.

“You should forget about it, Mary. She is just a child.”

“But that’s my point! How could she have possibly understood what she was looking at? What if she gets the wrong idea?”

Something slams with a dull thud—a dresser drawer, perhaps, or a book.

“So there is a right idea about it?”

“Dammit, Frank, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m worried about her. Gram said she started acting funny around her for no reason. This has to be why.”
“And you think I should talk to her?”

“I just thought if you did, if you told her it doesn’t make her great-grandmother a bad person, she would believe it, coming from you.”

“Why would she believe it if I said it, Mary?”

“Because, Frank. Because!”

“What if she is a bad person? What if I do not want to say anything about it to her? What if we just leave it alone, okay?”

“Oh, Frank!” And then Mom is crying—quietly, shudderingly, so helplessly. “I failed them both,” she wailed. “I’m a terrible mother.” I yank my head away from the door. But then I hear him murmuring at her, soothingly, the way a mother might comfort a child.

I run back to the bed and pull the blanket over my head and grit my teeth, but even so I can’t stop from hearing the squeak of the bedsprings, the crying that has become moaning, *I failed them both* still ringing in my ears.

*  *  *

Mom has had the oh so great idea that taking me to the orphanage where she volunteers on weekends will improve my attitude. Whatever. Not that she has ever asked *me* what *I* think would be best for me.

We have to leave early in the morning, because the orphanage is on the other side of Masaka. Mom waves at a van full of people. There are so many people I think we won’t be able to fit, there’s a fat woman with a chicken and two men in the middle row, and three teenagers
and an old woman in the back, but everyone moves until there is more seat. A man in shotgun makes a big show of offering Mom his seat, saying he can sit in the back and calling her “madam” like she’s Queen of England. I roll my eyes and squish next to the fat woman. My butt hangs off the seat and I can’t find my seatbelt. The fat woman and the chicken glare at me like I’m being annoying on purpose, and then I realize no one is wearing seatbelts.

It smells like deodorant hasn’t been invented yet. No one seems to notice, not even Mom.

The van keeps slowing down and speeding up, because of the potholes, and when the driver swerves suddenly I fall sideways into the aisle between the seat and the door.

“Hey!” I shout.

Mom turns around slowly and glares at me, like I fell on purpose. “For God’s sake, Rachel,” she says.

I have to press myself against the fat woman’s side to keep from falling again, and as I do so I imagine that I feel the stiff curve of postcard inside my hip pocket. The chicken starts pecking at the freckles on my arm, but the fat woman does nothing. When it poops on her dress, I laugh. She wipes it up with a handkerchief, as though this is a normal, everyday sort of thing.

The taxi doesn’t go all the way to the orphanage, so we have to walk. The air at this end of town smells the same as it does at the end of town where Mom and I share a house with Frank—like diesel, armpit, and a smoky sweetness from cooking fires and burning garbage. It smells good, not like a bonfire or fireplace from home.

The orphanage is hidden behind a giant metal gate, as though they’re expecting war not orphaned children. Mom has to knock. I wonder if they’re even expecting us. A guy in
camouflage with a green beret and an AK-47 slung across a shoulder opens the man-door. He barely acknowledges us as we file past him, our eyes to the ground.

“Why do men with guns always make me feel like I did something wrong?” I whisper.

“Did you?” she asks sharply.

“No,” I say, but then I think about the postcard.

There’s no grass anywhere, the ground has been pounded smooth and shiny as a floor by all the children everywhere—children running towards us and screaming. I look behind me, I think maybe someone famous must have snuck in with us, someone like Michael Jackson or Madonna, but I see only the guard reading a newspaper. Then I hear muzungu! Muzungu!

Women herd the children into groups. Dust hangs in the air above our heads, and a tall black man appears silently, incongruous among the children. His name is Fredrik, he manages the orphanage, though he isn’t the owner. The owner is some white American guy who spends his winters in Kampala. The orphanage isn’t one single building like you’d think, but several—two for the dormitories, one for the dining hall, another for classrooms, and a big one for the administrative building. The first thing I notice is it looks nicer than the other buildings.

The children are dressed in new-looking Western-style clothes, but the only toy I’ve seen so far is a soccer ball made out of black plastic shopping bags. There are hand-painted signs everywhere, with reminders to wash hands, to be kind to others, and, even though the oldest children are only six, a reminder to avoid sex until marriage. Mom’s kind of place, for sure.

After he talks to Mom about the schedule for the day, we are left in one of the classrooms, where five and six year olds sit and wait, giggling. Mom walks from child to child
and bends over with exaggerated interest, looking at what they’ve written, and the way she praises them you’d think they just wrote something for the Nobel Prize, but it’s just misspelled words written in giant, shaky print. They don’t know the names of colors, and they barely know how to count to ten. I wonder what Christopher would think. We were expected to know these things before we were three, and if we didn’t, Mom nagged us. She never would have gotten excited if we’d written “blue” without the “e” when the right answer was obviously supposed to be red. “There’s always a right answer,” is one of her mottos.

But she’s wrong. There isn’t always a right answer.

The kids stare and smile at me like crazy people. They don’t even try to hide the fact that they’re doing it, even though they’re supposed to be working. They don’t know Mom yet, apparently. There isn’t a place for me to sit, so I stand awkwardly up front, under the gaze of their eyes. I start thinking about Great-gram and the dead man in the tree, but I don’t like it, so I pick my nose instead. If they’re going to stare at me, I might as well be, in my mother’s words, provocative.

Mom finally notices when the kids really start cracking up. Her face turns so red it looks like someone smacked her, and there’s a tic above her left eye, that’s new.

“Rachel. Leah. Jefferson.” She says it real slow, but you can hear the force of her anger behind every syllable. The kids giggle even harder, perhaps a bit more nervously than before, and suddenly I’m on their side. I’m not the outsider anymore, she is.

I wonder what she’s going to do. She’s never hit me, but there’s no bedroom to send me to, no toys to take away, because these things don’t exist here, they are meaningless. As though hearing my thoughts, she turns her back on me, it’s as though I don’t exist. I sit down on the
dusty floor and pick at the skin around my fingernails. I’m just a name, Rachel. Leah. Jefferson. I’m the one who died on the mountain that day, not Christopher.

*   *   *

At dinner, we line up and file singly into the dining area, where girls and boys sit together. Mom and I sit with the other teachers and volunteers. I’m the only kid at the table.

Reverend Michael reads a psalm in candlelight, but I’m too distracted to notice which one, and then everyone’s talking, they’re reciting the Lord’s Prayer. And that’s when I notice there are Muslim children here, too. At least I think they are, because of their clothes. When we’re finished, I ask Mom why they have to say the Lord’s Prayer, too, if they’re not Christian. Mom hisses at me, *It’s better this way*, like that’s any kind of answer. I’ve embarrassed her, again.

The women look at me, their eyes unsmiling. I am the only one wearing pants, like a boy. I am the only one with a nub of amber in one pocket and the recent memory of a great-grandmother’s crime in the other.

I do not return their look.

*   *   *

I enter the dining area and sit down, the eyes of the children holding me. The room is eerily quiet, though it wasn’t a moment ago. I close my eyes, finger the amber in my pocket, and then he’s there with me, though I shouldn’t be surprised, this would be his day too. I put my arms around his shoulders and feel his hair against my cheek—it’s longer and curlier than it was when I last saw him—and breathe him in, shampooed hair, Tide laundry detergent, grape bubblegum,
leather baseball glove and beneath that, the pungent scent of boyish sweat. He’s younger than he was when I last saw him; he must be no older than five or six. When he comes to me like this, he’s never older than he was when he died, but he might be much younger.

On his first day of Kindergarten, when I was seven and starting first grade, I walked him to school. It was my first time walking without an adult, the year before I had always walked with Mom. It was early in the morning, and the neighborhood was busy with people leaving for work. Other children, most of them older, were walking to school too. Christopher was holding my hand, because Mom told him not to let go. He had on a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles backpack, like most of the boys had then, and it was almost as big as he was. He was asking me about school, and I guess I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going. After a while I noticed the street was different, the school wasn’t where it was supposed to be. We should have come to it by now, we’d walked long enough, but it wasn’t there, instead we were in front of a carwash. A memory I had long since forgotten, why was it coming to me now?

I feel a hand on my shoulder. I open my eyes and see Mom. She’s smiling and there’s a cake: it’s a bright white cake laced with poisonous-blue trim, flowers, and letters. It says Happy Birthday Rachel, and beneath that, the number thirteen. Mom cuts into the cake with a knife. The icing is hard, like a shell. I’m not hungry, but I spear a piece of cake and chew, because this is what you do when it’s your birthday. I try to remember what happened on that first day of school, how we went from being lost to being not lost. But all I can remember is the way Christopher’s hand was sweating into mine—he was both nervous and excited, because he was about to make his debut in the world.

*       *       *

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It’s raining big, heavy drops that sound like hundreds of thousands of stones hitting the tin roof over our heads. Mom is teaching the six year olds, and today I’m allowed to sit in the dining room with the four and five year-olds during their free time. They look at me and giggle, fingers plumbing their mouths, but one girl comes over to where I’m sitting—I’m reading *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* for the hundredth time, I wasn’t able to bring many books—and runs her fingers down my arm. It’s a light touch, a tickle, like a spider or the brush of a feather, and I shiver.

“Where did you get your arm from?” she says.

“What?”

She looks up at me with large eyes. The brown of her irises, I notice, are a fluted fringe of dark lines that rise and spread like the backbones of mountains, weaving through valleys of caramel brown, a landscape of detail, and not the plain brown I first thought they were.

*Where did you get your arm from?* She touches my arm again, and I yank it away. This time her touch burns.

Christopher, what would you say to her? And I’m shocked to find I don’t know.

I shrug and roll my eyes. “I don’t know. From Kmart. I got my arm from Kmart. Where did you get your arm from?” She shrieks with laughter and dashes away, and from the safety of the other kids she shouts, her English thick with accent, “From baby Jesus!”

I tell this to Mom later, when we get back to the house, a place she’s already referring to as home, and as I do so, I realize the girl would have no idea what a Kmart is, though she never let on. Mom smiles when I get to the part about baby Jesus and her eyes light up—a betrayal, because how can you light up like that when Christopher is still dead?
I begin to stay in bed later and later. Sometimes Mom looks in the empty mop bucket and takes my temperature with a thermometer that beeps at 98.6 and makes me get up, but sometimes she lets me be. On these days, I burrow under the covers, relieved by the darkness they provide. I feel as though I’ve been sitting in the nude under a spotlight—one that’s brighter and hotter and crueler than the sun—without the protection of clothes, sunscreen, sunglasses, a hat. I enjoy the pressure of the darkness against my eyeballs, the foreign taste of boiled water Bette prepares for me, the sound of it rushing down my throat, the silence.

Lying in bed, caged in by mosquito netting, a book on top of Frank’s Bagandan drum beside me, I listen to the distant sounds of children playing, car horns honking, dogs howling, roosters calling, Bette banging dishes together in the kitchen. The sun of the dry season blazes through the red, orange, and green wax print I’ve tacked over the window, but at least it isn’t as bright in here anymore. I look at the bare bulb dangling from the ceiling, bone-white glass with a cloud of flies and moths banging against it when on, though most of the time it isn’t.

I study the thirty or so books I brought from home. None of them seem real to me anymore. I begin tearing pages out of one book and taping them between the pages of another. I especially love doing this with the endings. Paper cuts bloom on my fingers. Sometimes I cut a paragraph or a sentence, or even a single word, and tape it on a different page or in a different book. I put Elinor Dashwood on the deck of the *Pequod* and Owen Meany in Nemo’s *Nautilus* and reread them, but it doesn’t change a thing, sad things still happen.
Yet it did make me feel better, somehow, to gut the pages of my books and mix them up, throwing all those imperfect characters, with their individual fears and desires and mistakes, into new places, surrounded by new people.

Rachel Bareeba

I still have those books. Mom kept them; she never tossed them out or donated them. I find them in a box labeled Rachel / Uganda. I pay tribute to them, like a shrine to my childhood pain.

I’m going to be here for a while, but I haven’t hung my clothes in the closet like I do in hotels. This is my mother’s house, though it won’t be for much longer. This is why I am here: she has finally done the one thing it would take to bring me back to Bellingham. She is going far away again, she is dying, and this time she can’t take me with her.

My job is to go through everything in the house, getting rid of all but the essentials and whatever I want to keep. But especially, my job is to help ease Mom into death, painlessly, though it never is painless. I am to ensure she doesn’t fall into death alone, with no one to hold her hand, though there’s a fair chance she will anyway.

Staying here has been difficult for both of us. But checking into a hotel would be pointless, since I have to sort her belongings, prepare her meals, run her to doctor appointments, and pretend I’m not helping her. She hasn’t said anything more about my appearance, and I’ve hardly alluded to her mortality, the expiration date set by her oncologist, though it’s all we have to think about.
Her house is on the opposite side of town from our old one, which was closer to the bay, just south of the university and west of Great-gram’s house, in the Happy Valley neighborhood. This house is near Lake Whatcom, where I used to spend my summers floundering around in the water during Bible camp, my skin gone red and blistering before settling into a comfortable tan. It’s a small ranch-style house perched on the crest of Alabama hill, with a view of downtown and Bellingham Bay. Before Africa, we wouldn’t have been able to afford a house up here, a house with a view.

My last visit was six years ago, when the boys were two and four. It was Mom’s idea, she wanted to make sure they were properly vaccinated and baptized, she said, but really she wanted to know if they were normal, as if these things can’t be accomplished outside of America. And too I think she wanted to see what she could do with me, the child she still has, her daughter.

George didn’t go with us; already we were beginning to go our separate ways, politely, like strangers. He was puzzled that I had agreed to come, he knew what my relationship with her was like; he’d seen some of it himself.

“If you don’t want to go, why did you say you would?” he said with the air of a professor amused by a student’s incomplete grasp of a simple concept.

“I don’t,” I said. “I don’t want to go, really.”

“Then why did you buy tickets?”

“I don’t know,” I said, though I do know. Mary Jefferson is my mother, and I am her daughter. We share an Africa known only to us. It changed us, though in different ways, but we survived it, it has become the thing that drives us apart and holds us together, it’s the force that
keeps us moving, like silver balls in a Newton’s cradle. This connection between us is not something I can run from forever, and I’m surprised to realize I no longer want to.

I’m on the daybed in the guest room. The floor hidden beneath boxes of things that used to belong to the Other Rachel, the one who existed before Africa. Ah-FREAK-ah: this is how George pronounces it in his Ugandan – Ankole accent. I wonder if he ever thought: freak. Rachel, what a freak. Probably not. Though things didn’t work out between us, he was never one to look down on another person, at least not outside his head. When I would ask him if I was getting fat or if I had said something mean, he would look at me oddly, like I was foreign for asking such a question, and perhaps I was foreign to him, even in marriage. Especially in marriage. But in his world people are not complicated.

When we were still together, many people thought I was black too, like him, or biracial like our boys. Now I have to work at it. That’s the difference between then and now: everything I do, every move I make, is hard work—like learning lines for a play.

It was half-past midnight on September the thirteenth, 1981 when I was forced into the world by my mother, whose maiden name was Mary Brewster, and nominally so by my father, Max Jefferson, who would figure in my life as prominently as a black hole, all but invisible. I have made it to thirty-one years old. This is supposed to be the prime of my life, and in some ways it is. I have a job I love and two little boys. According to the high school dictionary I found in one of the boxes, being in the prime of one’s life is defined as the period of greatest perfection or vigor during one’s lifetime. So this is it, then. Perfection.

But I don’t feel the perfection or the vigor. I feel incomplete and deficient. Damaged even, especially since coming back home, or to what was once home. I feel paler, like a hare
shed of its brown summer coat, turning white with winter, or as though I am now elderly, infirm. No, not elderly. When I think of elderly, I think of bodies limping and shrinking. This is different. This is the infirmity of ant larva or grub: pale and swollen, writhing with helplessness.

This paleness leaves me feeling exposed, vulnerable. Going outside in sunlight is painful. I stay indoors, I dig through layers of the Other Rachel’s youth in box after box, but I don’t know what I’m going to do with any of it.

I find a faded album with pictures from a birthday party. In one of them, I’m sitting at a table alone, my image blurred; I must be spinning in a chair. I wear jeans and a purple sweater with sleeves that are too long, even though the other girls have on party dresses. You can’t tell from the image, but it’s secondhand, from Goodwill. The girls wear skirts in pink, yellow, purple, and blue, some with stirrup pants or leggings underneath, and ruffled tops or oversized shirts or screen-printed tops. The boys wear sweaters with busy patterns in reds and blacks and whites, or with button-down shirts tucked in at the waist. Christopher has on a sweatshirt with a picture of the Incredible Hulk on the front, though he isn’t a fan, and a pair of sweatpants. This must be for our tenth and eleventh birthdays. The colors seem wrong, like Technicolor, and everyone is ghostly white from the camera flash—everyone except for Christopher, who looks normal. In one picture we are arranged in a group, like a class photo, with the shorter kids in front. Christopher stands in the middle, and I like to think his big smile is easy, natural. I stand in back, with the taller kids, my face partially obscured by the girl in front of me.

I don’t remember who took those birthday pictures—pictures of the last birthday party I would share with Christopher. It can’t be Mom, because she’s in some of the pictures too, and
Great-Gram wasn’t good with a camera, her aim was always off, her shots out of focus. But someone must have.

I remember wanting things.

Pogs, those circular cardboard cutouts with different patterns and designs, they are supposed to be milk cap tops, but now they sell them in packs at toy stores, minus the milk. Christopher and his friends like to play the game—you stack the pogs in a tower, facedown, and take turns throwing a stammer on top of it, but I don’t like the game, because it means you might lose your pogs to other players, though you also gain new ones. Christopher thinks this is silly, what’s the point of collecting if you don’t play the game, he says. This is another example of what he has begun referring to as my girlishness, like I’m symptomatic of an incurable disease, and I’m not asked to play with him and his friends as much anymore. You keep your slammers, he says. It’s all about the slammers. He considers himself the expert—more and more he is like an older brother, with knowledge about things that seems to surpass my own. At least this is what he would like me to think.

I want stuff for making friendship bracelets – embroidery floss of all shades of colors, and beads of all shapes and sizes, plus an organizer for keeping it all together. Mom says she doesn’t think I need them though, so I have to wait until someone donates some to Goodwill, which I don’t think happens often, and use my own money. I wish girls would trade their friendship bracelet stuff the way boys trade pogs, but they don’t.

Great-gram surprises me with a set of faceted beads in red and yellow and blue. I practice weaving the thin strings of Mom’s tooth floss together, slowly and clumsily; my fingers are not as deft as those of other girls, but I save the beads. I’m not sure what to do with most of the
bracelets I make, if you could call them that, so I shove them under my pillow and forget about them until I change the sheets.

What I want are some friends, close friends who are girls, friends who will whisper in my ear, pass carefully folded notes to me during class. What Anne of Green Gables refers to as bosom friends, real kindred spirits. Or even just a friend, one who would wear my friendship bracelets, even the tooth floss ones. She wouldn’t laugh or look at me funny when I tell her there are over a hundred different species of poison dart frogs, that their brightly colored-skin is full of deadly poison. She would nod as I explain how native peoples added that poison to the tips of their arrows. She would be interested to know about how our sun will die in about five billion years, how it will swell up and swallow the earth like a hungry leviathan before shrinking, elderly and spent, into a small white dwarf. Maybe she would already know this stuff. She wouldn’t say So? and wrinkle her nose, or look bored, or embarrassed for me.

Christopher says the problem is me, but it’s a problem easily solved, like a simple algebra equation. All I have to do, he says, is learn the language of little girls. But this can’t be, I think, because we all speak English, even the boys, and in most cases my English is better, regardless of sex. But he is right about one thing: the problem is me, somehow.

We’ve been going to our church’s elementary school since Kindergarten. It’s a small building behind the church. A B C and 1 2 3 have been painted in bright primary colors, for babies, I think, because the building was originally built for grades K-3, though now it goes up to grade 6. Everything is small because there aren’t many parents who care about the souls of their children, or so Mom says. My grade has seven girls and four boys. Christopher’s grade is a bit bigger, because the younger grades usually are. Most kids start going to the regular public school
when they are double digits, but Mom is going to keep us here as long as she can. We wish she wouldn’t care so much about our souls.

All the grades eat sack lunches in the same room—which is also a gymnasium and auditorium. Each grade has two tables: one for girls and one for boys. This means I have to sit with Jill and her friends, every day. We eat our food quickly, and then we work on our friendship bracelets, or I try to with the tooth floss, which the other girls laugh at. They whisper into each other’s ears, sometimes looking at me, but most of the time it’s the boys they look at. The boys fling food at each other, and especially at us. They wriggle in their seats, farting, laughing, arm wrestling. Most of the girls have a sandwich, a piece of fruit, chips, cookies, and Gushers or Fruit rollups for lunch. Christopher and I only get the sandwich and the fruit, because Mom thinks eating junk food every day will make our teeth rot and fall out of our heads. I watch for evidence of this in the other girls, but their teeth are as white as mine. Four of the girls have braces and one has a retainer, but I know this has nothing to do with sugar. When lunch is over, or when a boy makes a mess, the lunch lady, Mrs. McMillan, who is also the gym teacher, washes the tables with her bucket of greasy gray water, which smells so bad it makes me want to throw up.

When school ends, Christopher and I walk the three blocks home. Jill and her two best friends, Maria and Alison, walk on the other side of the street, ogling Christopher and giggling. They’ve all written him notes, most of which have ended up as paper footballs flicked back and forth between the boys during lunch. Sometimes I’d rather sit with them, I’m much better at paper football than I am at weaving tooth floss bracelets, and the boys never whisper and giggle like idiots. When we reach Larrabee Avenue, by Larrabee Elementary school—the school we wish we went to—we go our separate ways, Jill and Maria and Alison making a show out of
saying goodbye to me. They call me Boofy, though I don’t know why, I have no idea what it means.

When we get home, we read books, books we want to read, real books from the library, not the awful books about Scientific Creationism our school makes us read, books Christopher and I know are lies. If it’s nice outside, we climb the maple trees in our backyard, where we sit and make faces at each other and read. Sometimes we talk about what we are reading through the tin can telephone Christopher rigged between the two trees. He reads mostly geology, paleontology, or cosmology, and for me, it’s mostly about animals from exotic places, and fiction. Though I know I’m too old for it, I still love Ramona Quimby, because with her I feel less alone, and more brave.

When Christopher and I make comic books with colored pencils, he draws stories about dinosaurs, or journeying to the center of the earth, or about blobby aliens that arrive in meteors that crash on remote islands. His greens and browns and blacks are worn to nubs from drawing all those exotic rocks and plants and talking dinosaurs. His reds are worn down too—from all the blood the dinosaurs bite out of each other. But I always draw comics about girls like Ramona. I draw them with short, messy hair, and they always wear dirt-stained pants and plain t-shirts. They are bold, these girls, they pull on other girls’ hair, they start food fights, they win running contests, they do detective work and always solve the mystery. They don’t care what other people think, and they certainly don’t have time for giggling and bracelets. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if I met a girl like this. I don’t think about whether or not she would like me. I’m never in any of the comic books I create.
After dinner we have to sit at the dining table and do homework. We kick each other’s legs and race each other at math. Christopher is the only fourth grader in on our fifth grade math class. He’s the only real competition I have. Math is the one subject he’s willing to get an A, even though he could easily get A’s in his other classes. “I’m not a nerd,” he explained to Mom one night when, exasperated, she asked him why he misspelled words on his spelling test, words she knew he knew how to spell. Besides math and spelling, there’s Reading Comprehension and Social Studies, and then we have to read from our Creationism readers. We laugh at these readers, we write jokes about them in the margins, but only when Mom is in another room. She believes in that stuff, though she lets my brother bring home from the library what he calls real science books, even though there’s nothing in them about God kickstarting evolution or planting fossils in the ground to test our faith, like some sort of socially deviant, conniving trickster.

Christopher hates thinking of God or science like that, so he always writes down a few wrong answers for his homework, even though he really knows which answers the teacher is looking for. My brother always knows the answers.

Now that we are getting old enough, Christopher and I have to plan and make dinner twice a week, sometimes more if Mom’s busy. We squabble about what we will have; we don’t have the same tastes. Christopher is heavy on the meat and loves to cook elaborate meals that sometimes take hours. Once he discovered a Coq au Vin recipe that required lighting a pot of brandy on fire, which Mom reluctantly agreed to buy, and suddenly he wanted to make it every week. His friends scorned cooking and laughed at his enthusiasm, saying it was for girls, but he would just shrug. It’s chemistry, there are chemical reactions happening, he’d say with a faraway look in his dark eyes. The food changes. There’s fire.
I don’t care for cooking, and am happy to throw a quick salad together so I can get back to my book. Sometimes Christopher says he doesn’t need my help, and I’ll sneak out of the kitchen without Mom noticing, but most of the time he wants me around to do the dirty work, to be his errand boy. I never get to light the brandy on fire.

At bedtime, Mom sits in the old rocking chair, the one that has rocked three generations of our family, and asks us what we learned in school that day. Christopher and I know she isn’t so much interested in the math equations we solved that no one else could, or new words we learned to spell and use; instead she would like us to tell her about Bible lessons, and she loves to learn about new Creationism theories, as they are called, and so we indulge her in monotone voices.

I get the top bunk, because Christopher still wets the bed sometimes. Beneath me, on the underside of my mattress, hang planets of the solar system and glow-in-the-dark stars. I can’t see them, but I imagine them before I go to sleep. Christopher made the planets out of paint and Styrofoam balls for his end-of-the-year art project. We watch the twin lights of a passing car zoom across the walls and the way shadows dive out of the way like panicked pedestrians, and I imagine they are UFOs, which Christopher doesn’t believe in, though he would like to. Before we fall asleep, we call each other nasty names, we devise insults; it’s a game of ours, to see how creative we can get without resorting to real curse words: you suck on a lollipop, motherfudger, go prick your face, you vile standing tuck, you bull’s pizzle, go rattle your goat teats. I started winning after reading Shakespeare.
Christopher always falls asleep first, and so easily, like he doesn’t have a care in the world. But in the silence, beneath my racing mind, I often hear him whimpering in his sleep, helpless as a baby.

*   *   *

I get up from the guest bed, my head thick like a hangover. It’s only five in the morning, but I can’t sleep. I sort through Mom’s bottles of medicine in the kitchen cabinet, carfilzomib, dexamethasone, bortezomib, and empty the ones she needs into a pill container, the kind with individual compartments for each day of the week. I try saying the names out loud, quietly, but they are like a foreign language on my tongue, they belong to another world I am not privy to, though most likely I will be some day.

At the dining table I drink coffee and look out the window, my back to Mount Baker. From this distance the fishing boats are as big as ants and I have to squint to see them. I wonder if I’ll go blind someday like Great-gram did. Perhaps cancer will get me first. Beyond the boats are the San Juan Islands—backbones of sunken mountains—and beyond all that is the Pacific Ocean. I loved maps as a girl, and when I learned we were going to Uganda, I was in awe of the distance we would have to go, most of it ocean. For the first time since Christopher’s death, I was excited about something. I was going to the place with the big animals, it would be better than watching the Discovery Channel on Saturday mornings.

I had no idea what Africa was really like.

Last night I woke up, saw the beams of a car’s headlights dancing along the wall, and leaned over the side of the bed to look down at Christopher. I wanted to talk to him, urgently,
though I can’t remember why, and for a moment I was disoriented, the hardwood floor looming through the darkness inches from my face.

I got up and phoned Jeremiah but of course only the machine answered. I heard his deep voice, commanding yet witty. *Hello. Professor Sullivan can’t come to the phone right now, but leave a message and he’ll get back to you after the due date of the assignment you’re calling about.*

A voice from the past—a ghost’s voice—repeating over and over relentlessly, zipping across power lines from one side of Bellingham to the other. No matter what happens to me it will go on like that, assured and self-congratulatory, like an invisible electronic god. Hearing it made me want to laugh.

“Can’t sleep,” I said into the dead silence. I closed my eyes and pictured Jeremiah at Queen Elizabeth, holding his safari hat over his heart like a cowboy, his back to a herd of antelope at sunrise. He came to visit me a few years ago and, overwhelmed by how different it was, fell ill the first week. That’s home, I think, that’s where I really live. Among all that dramatic, National Geographic scenery, too magnificent, too bright, like a photo that’s been digitally enhanced. Go a few miles here or few miles there, out of sight of human habitation, and you come across an animal carcass, a fresh kill, a big one. Then you feel alive.

I toast and butter bread, pour juice in a glass, and lay it on the table. Mom won’t be up for a few hours, she sleeps in late now; I won’t be missed. I resist the temptation to check on her, to see if she’s still breathing. She wouldn’t want that, she doesn’t like to be treated like a fragile glass. Our roles are reversed, now I’m the anxious mother checking for the rise and fall of the
baby’s chest. I pull on clothes and brush my teeth. I avoid looking in the mirror, I’m afraid to. I’m afraid I’ll look like the Wrong Rachel, the one that doesn’t belong.

In the end, though, I look. What woman doesn’t? I smooth my permed hair out of my face and am surprised to see how much paler I am since coming here, though it’s only been the one week. The sun isn’t as strong this far north. I phone a tanning salon, make an appointment for tomorrow.

Rachel Jefferson

I curl up on the back seat of Frank’s Pajero like a Labrador retriever. Simon and the other little kids stand in front of the driveway, watching. I don’t want them to know I’m feeling better, that for days now I could have been outside with them. As the car pulls out of the driveway and onto the crowded, dusty road, they run alongside my window and wave.

Frank drives west. Kampala is behind us, and soon Masaka is too, though the sweet smell of burning trash lingers. I sit up and watch as the houses become fewer and fewer, until there’s nothing but trees and wetlands.

Mom has convinced Frank to take the week off from his job as a news reporter at New Vision, and he is driving us to Queen Elizabeth National Park.

She says it’s because she wants us to spend time together as a family, but I know the truth. We are going because a black man was hung from a tree, and Great-gram didn’t care. She tries to get us to sing songs, but either Frank doesn’t know the words or I don’t.
The trees get taller and thicker, they lean over the road, the tips of their leaves like fingertips touching the trees on the other side, and the horizon darkens. I see women walking or sitting on the side of the road, carrying bundles of fruit and vegetables on their heads like eccentric party hats. I see the jungle cleared away for matooke plantations. I see small brick dwellings with women and children sitting in front of them. A homemade brick kiln, an old mud-daubed house, crumbling.

I think about Sister Imelda going through my things and finding the postcard, and for some reason, the thought excites me, like the time Christopher brought a Dirty Men’s Magazine home from a friend’s. I don’t know what they’ve done with it.

Four children squat beside the road, their backs jungleside. They are not selling anything, they don’t have any baskets of mangoes or cassava, and they are far away from any town or house. They just sit there as if they’ve come from a great distance and could go no farther. Children like these have become a familiar sight to me, like trees. Do they know who I am, a muzungu, as I look out the car window at them? To them I’m just a pale blur in yet another car that leaves nothing behind but a cloud of red of dust. I look up front to see if Mom and Frank have noticed them, but they’re talking animatedly about a new charity organization in Kampala, their eyes straight ahead on the road in front of them.

*   *   *

I watch Frank enter the building, a one-story white stucco structure that reminds me of a church, although the sign out front says “Fullstop Destiny Motel.” He’s going in to see if they’re still serving lunch, even though it’s nearly three o’clock. The motel is in the middle of nowhere, “nowhere” meaning grassy hills sparsely populated with trees. Some of the trees are matooke,
but most of them are unfamiliar to me. Once I would have asked Mom what kind they were. This is a Uganda unknown to me. It’s nothing like the busy street markets of Masaka or the congested roads of Kampala, but it’s also nothing like the vast plains of the Africa I’d seen on TV. Mom gets out of the car and leans against the Pajero. It’s too hot for her, and the air conditioning doesn’t work. A mosquito wafts in through the window as though by accident and hums at my ear.

“Come out here,” she says.

Outside the car, I feel small. We don’t say anything, just stare at the cumulonimbus clouds grazing on the horizon like a herd of animals. I take a deep breath and fill my lungs—the air is truly fresh: no diesel, no burning garbage, no perfume, no animal dung. I exhale. My body is beginning to feel healthy again. The raw, inflamed skin on my arms and legs has paled and the scratches have stopped bleeding, my stomach no longer feels queasy, the whites of my fingernails have grown back, my jaw no longer aches. I’m not sure why, but I feel immense relief. I still think about Christopher all the time, but the sadness hurts just a little less. In this moment, at least, leaning against the car with my mother in the middle of nowhere, I have a name again. I say it out loud, “Rachel.” Mom looks over at me, and it’s the first time I notice I’m her height now. She takes my hand, squeezes it. “Rachel,” she says.

* * *

Not long after that birthday party, big stinging drops of rain fell like pebbles from the gray Pacific Northwest sky. Autumn always began and ended this way, and was pretty much the same in between, too. The sky darkened at four o’clock, not long after school let out.
Banished from our maple trees by the cold, we become sluggish and irritable. We bicker, but we’re too lazy to punch and kick. Mom insists on shaving Christopher’s head, and although he likes his hair long, he is slow to resist this time.

When the first snow comes to the city, we wake up as though out of a stupor and run outside, our heads tipped back and our tongues hanging out like a dog’s, to lick at the falling snow. It doesn’t snow often in Bellingham, but when it does, and it’s usually just a dusting—an inch or two if we are lucky—we scoop up what we can in our bare hands and make snowballs, which we lob at each other from behind a tree or from around the side of the house. Once, while we are playing with Jill and a couple of other kids from school, a snowball I throw goes down inside the front of Christopher’s jeans, making him shriek and jump. He refuses to speak to me for the rest of the day, believing I did it on purpose, that I’d gone after him like a coward, and in public. Jill is particularly nasty to me after that, too, and for once Christopher allows her to simper over him.

Mom is anxious lately, she sits and stares at the calendar on the refrigerator, or she paces the kitchen and sighs. She says we can go on the Mount Baker ski trip with the other kids from church, she has something she needs to do that day—someone she has to see—and she can’t bring us. This gets Christopher’s attention, but she doesn’t elaborate.

Our alarm goes off early, and Mom takes us to church, where a bus waits to drop us off at Heather Meadows, where we will put on ski boots and skis and slide and tumble and fall, pretending as we do that we aren’t competing with each other.

By the time we get there, I’ve forgotten about Jill’s paper fortune teller, about how this is supposed to be my lucky day. I step onto the skis and I do well, I only fall down twice. I hardly
pay attention to anything else. The wind blows the hair out of my face, my skis are wings, I’m flying. I never want this moment to end.

*   *   *

At the funeral, I would hear more than once that it wasn’t my fault.

For weeks I would remember the last things we said to each other. It wasn’t good; he was still mad at me because of the snowball incident. I was skiing better than he was, I didn’t even fall down like he did. It was hard for him—in front of the others—to have a nerdy sister who skied better.

I find him sitting on his butt in the middle of the slope, staring at Mount Shuksan. I wobble over to him. Skiers and snowboarders zoom past us. I wipe at the sweat that has pooled under my goggles. I’m scared someone will run into us, but I get down on my knees next to him and look at the mountain too. I bet he’s thinking about the rocks he could find if only he could get up there. There’s just the one cloud, perched like a cap on Shuksan, bone-white.

“Hey,” I say, my breath steaming, “It’s a UFO cloud!”

He snorts. “Don’t be stupid. It’s a lenticular cloud.”

I clap ice crystals from my wool mittens. “I know that. But it looks like a UFO.”

Christopher stands up slowly and looks down at me, but his dark eyes are flat, like he isn’t seeing me. “If you’re a flaming moron, I suppose it might resemble an unidentified flying object, except for the fact that it isn’t flying,” he says loftily.

I lean against my pole and smirk at him. “Neither are you, butt-face.”
His face reddens; he looks around to see if anyone has heard, but the rest of the Church group is gathered around the ski instructor off to the side of the trail; they’re listening intently to what she says. A gust of wind blows down the mountain and into our faces, and suddenly I feel the cold, a cold that must have been there all along.

I hug my arms. “Maybe we should join them,” I say.

He adjusts his helmet, which isn’t fitting too well because somehow he’s still wearing the Seahawks cap underneath. “Maybe we should go down there.” He points to a steep, narrow trail through the trees off to our left. “I bet I can beat you to the bottom.”

I glance back at the instructor, but she hasn’t noticed us. Cold sweat trickles down my spine. When I look at him again, he’s the one with a smirk.

“We can’t go down that, it’s not for beginners.”

He shrugs. “If you’re afraid then, I’ll just go it alone.” He snaps his boots onto first one ski and then the other with a decisive click.

“Don’t be stupid, you know we aren’t allowed! It’s too dangerous.”

“You know Rachel, you used to be fun, but now you just sound like the other girls,” he says and smiles triumphantly. “Pussy.”

Tears sting my eyes. Girly tears. I watch him pick up his ski poles and find myself remembering a conversation we’d had, it must have been months ago, well before he’d said *damn* in front of Great-gram at the beach. It began with a comment his friend had made about his skin color, how it’s darker, a rich peanut-butter, even in winter, and why was that? Was he white, did our Mom adopt him, or what?
We were in our bunk beds, me in the top bed reading with a flashlight, and he in the bottom bed, probably staring at his glow-in-the-dark stars. He’d been quiet, we had long since finished our Shakespearean insults, and I figured he was sleeping.

Instead, I heard his voice asking me if I’ve ever wondered why we look so different.

“Different?” I chased the zooming discs of light from car headlights on the wall across from us with my flashlight. “Like how? You mean penises and stuff?” I knew that wasn’t what he really meant though, and felt a weird sensation in my stomach, as though moths were frantically crawling up the sides.

I heard the bedsprings creak. “No. I mean, have you ever wondered if we’re really, you know, related? If my skin is so much darker than yours, and my hair and eyes too, how can we be? I don’t look like you and Mom, you must have noticed it.”

I can’t remember what I’d said. I only remember looking down at him over the side of the bed and flashing the light in his face in what I’d hoped was a playful manner, and was startled to find it wet with tears.

Now I was the one caught crying, though for a very different reason, and in this moment, as I stand on the mountain looking at Christopher through my goggles—a wall of shatterproof glass—I suddenly feel like he is a stranger to me.
Rachel Bareeba

He *did* look like Mom, even more so than I do. They laughed alike, their eyes crinkling with the effort of containing all that mirth. They had the same lips, the lower lip of which had the tendency to pop out when something wasn’t going their way. When I challenged the authority of either one of them, up went the dimpled chin. Their eyebrows arched way above their eyes, giving them a look of constant wonder. Their ears stuck out, ready to hear everything. All of that in the same round face. But if all you saw was color, then no, they wouldn’t have looked alike to you at all.

Rachel Jefferson

Christopher died that day on the mountain. I shouldn’t say he died: he was killed. Everyone said it was an accident, and maybe it was, but I felt like a murderer, his death felt like something that could have been prevented, one I should have prevented, unlike a death due to a natural catastrophe, like an avalanche. There was no avalanche that day, though theoretically there could have been, and if there had been, I would have been taken too. I would have died alongside him, and I wouldn’t be left feeling what I do.

He died of peer pressure, or someone’s idea of what a boy, or rather a man, is supposed to be. He died because I—Rachel Leah Jefferson—wasn’t like other girls.

*   *   *

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He was doing well, at first. We must have gotten about halfway down the trail, which wasn’t as steep and twisty as I’d thought, though it wasn’t groomed as nicely—the snow felt different under my skis—and was still too advanced for us, but he didn’t fall, not once. He was behind me though, and this wasn’t what he’d had in mind. I was terrified, my chest was tight like someone was sitting on it, but when I took the first turn without falling, I felt a little better. It was when Christopher passed me that I fell down and twisted my ankle, and this is I think is what saved me. Or condemned me, depending on how you look at it.

I watched him disappear down the hill and knew he was going far away from me, though how exactly, I wasn’t sure. Instead of bending his knees like we were taught, he stood straight and tall, he would have been standing on his tippy toes if it weren’t for the fact that his boots were strapped to the skis, one ski pole held out at the side, the other one missing, and he was gaining speed, he was going dangerously fast straight down the hill, his skis pointing in, pigeon-toed. If only he would fall down, but he was too stubborn. A man came to a halt in a spray of snow next to me and asked if I needed help, but I shook my head and said my brother’s name and pointed. As I spoke, my breath billowing in front of me like a nefarious mist, I realized I was crying. The man saw Christopher careening wildly towards a sharp turn in the trail, swore under his breath, and pushed off towards him, leaving me with my sprained ankle, useless.

They disappeared behind trees, Christopher screaming; his voice shrill and unfamiliar, then all at once I couldn’t hear him anymore. There was only the sound of an unknown bird, beautiful and flute-like, and utterly alone.

*   *   *
At the funeral, Great-gram holds me. I sit in her lap like I’m five again. I must feel heavy, but she lets me stay.

I think about the tree, the Douglas-Fir that ended Christopher’s life. If it had been a person, they would be arrested, sentenced, thrown in jail. Douglas, a person’s name, but this Douglas still stands, ignorant as rain.

“Don’t blame the tree, love,” she says. “Don’t blame the tree.”
Part II

Rachel Bareeba

Today she is stronger and prowls around the house behind closed curtains, as though the cancer is a passing thing, lurking just outside the front door. It’s like this, some days. Today she wants to help me go through the attic. “So you don’t get lonely,” she says.

I don’t want to see what’s in the boxes in the attic. It feels too much like snooping in the boxes in Great-gram’s cellar, I don’t know what I’ll find, but now I have no choice, I have to go through with it. The attic is accessible through a pull-down door in the ceiling, so I open it and climb up the ladder and have a look around. It’s an unfinished attic: wood rafters above, a plywood floor that only goes halfway across the room and a carpet of pink fiberglass insulation where the flooring ends. “You really should have the rest of the floor put in,” I holler through the opening in the ceiling.

“It will have to do,” she says.

There are at least a dozen boxes. We sort through old Christmas decorations, a box of clothes that was supposed to go to Goodwill several styles ago, old cooking magazines, books, knick knacks. Either she accumulated a lot of things since she came back, or else she didn’t get rid of much before Uganda. I put the decorations and the clothes in the garage. I’ll donate them tomorrow.

There’s an entire box devoted to my mother’s drawings, laid flat and peppered with mouse droppings: portraits of faces, sketches of landscapes, still-lifes, objects that caught her eye for one reason or another. I look at the penciled-in dates in the corners. Some of them are more
than thirty years old. I never knew she’d held on to her work; I had always assumed she didn’t take her drawing very seriously, even though it was good. I turn away and breathe slowly. She doesn’t need to see me crying, not right now, when she needs me to be strong.

I clear my throat. “We’re like archeologists,” I say.

“It’s kind of exciting, isn’t it?” she says with a smile.

We go through the layers of yellowed paper, revealing unexpected beauty: a detailed drawing of a Marabou stork on a pile of garbage, a charcoal sketch of fishermen in a boat on Lake Victoria at sunset. Or is it sunrise? Beneath that: a colored pencil portrait of me and Christopher when we were no more than two and three. I look out at the viewer with my arm hooked protectively around Christopher, who is looking up at me through his unruly curls with unconcealed awe. How she got us to sit still long enough, I’ll never know. “Well, Goodwill won’t have any use for these,” Mom says quietly, but I close the box and set it next to the family photo albums. “The boys should see them,” I say, and she nods, her eyes on the hands in her lap.

The largest box smells like a forest. I pull out wedding pictures, old black and whites of distant relatives, a quill pen and gilt-edged guest book from the wedding with my father, old baby clothes tucked away in tissue paper, one set pink, one set blue. A bouquet of silk flowers, a pair of men’s bowling shoes. “Your Dad could out-bowl the best of them,” she says with a smile. “We used to go every Thursday night, when we were still dating.” I try to picture it, but of course I can’t.

My collection of pog milk caps in a gallon Ziploc bag, at least the ones that didn’t get dumped down the latrine at St. Margaret’s, she’s kept them all these years. I caress the faded cardboard disks and briefly wonder if Sam and James would like them, but of course the boys
have their own passing fads. Christopher’s rocks, the special ones he labeled and arranged in rows by color in shoeboxes under the bed, are at the bottom of the box. His sketchbooks with UFOs and homemade comic strips, his Truth Tabernacle report cards. Without a word she puts these things with the photo albums and drawings.

My own sketchbooks are there too, and a diary, a black leather one from my days at Sehome High. “I didn’t read it,” she says when she sees me holding it. I flip through the gilt-edged pages. It’s as self-important as any high school girl’s diary, though it’s far from typical. There are the usual grumblings about teachers and other authority figures, and lingering passages of crush-gushing and confusion, but dominating the lined pages are the intimate details about my transformation from the Old Rachel to the New, white to black, American to African. I still think of that time of my life as mysterious, a time when I thought I knew exactly who I was and where I was going, when really I hadn’t a clue.

I let the diary fall open and begin reading out loud. “Yesterday I used Banana Boat spray-on tan from Kmart. I put it on at Jeremiah’s house and later we went to the mall, where I saw no one who knew me or recognized that I had changed my appearance. I was a brand new person, unknown to everyone but myself. We had our pictures taken in a photo booth, and Jeremiah said now I really do look like a black girl, or at least a biracial one, and he’s right. I put the picture on my nightstand next to the bed and I can’t stop staring at her, that beautiful girl, the real me.” I pause for a moment and glance at Mom. Her eyes are watery and her jaw is clenched so tight I’m afraid she might break it again, since her Multiple Myeloma has weakened her bones. But she tells me to keep reading, so I do. “Already I’ve forgotten what I used to look like with blonde hair, it’s almost as though that girl never existed. But at school today, my science teacher stared
rudely at me, and Jessica, that annoying bitch, called me a wannabe nigger in front of everyone in the girl’s locker room.”

Mom flinches when I say the n-word. “Jessica? Reverend Yardley’s girl?”

I nod.

Her eyes narrow. “Well, isn’t that interesting,” she says.

I smile cautiously at her. I’m aware of the wall between us. It’s been there for as long as I can remember, even before Christopher’s death. The wall between mother and daughter. Something I’ve both resented and needed. I want to find the door in the wall, I want to throw my arms around her. I want to let her know how grateful I am for her parental outrage, but doubt holds me back. In her eyes, I’m not her black child; I’m not the one needing protection from the Jessica Yardleys of the world.

I slam the diary shut and toss it on the throw-out pile, but Mom picks it up and sets it on the floor next to me without a word, her eyes boring into mine.

Her eyes insisting You can’t hide from the past.

Rachel Jefferson

It takes only a day to drive to Queen Elizabeth National Park, but it might as well have been ten. Gone are the rows of matooke trees, the walls of compounds, the noise and stink of traffic. We know we’ve arrived when, after swerving to avoid a truck that has fallen on its side on a sharp curve high atop a cliff, we see the plains stretching below us like a brown sea, dotted not with
boats but with the occasional tree: the savanna at dry season. I strain my eyes trying to see if any of the dots are elephants or lions, but nothing down there moves, not even the branches of the trees. When we reach the bottom, the temperature is ten degrees hotter than it is at the top. We drive for a time on a narrow dirt road, seeing no one, neither animal nor human. Then: the park gate, where we pay a fee and continue driving through nothing but grass dry and brittle as thoughts.

Water is where everyone is here. Lake Edward is huge and gray and opaque and deadly, and it’s swarming with crocodiles, hippos, naked children from the village. We rent two rooms in a small hostel next to fancy Mweya Safari Lodge on the shore of the lake. Of course Mom chooses to stay in the hostel, because it’s the “real” Uganda. There are a few other people renting rooms here, people in their twenties, but I’m the only kid. Warthogs tame as dogs graze on the lawn at the outdoor canteen, where we have dinner under the darkening sky. I eat French fries, crisp and oily, which I haven’t tasted for nine months. Mom is telling me about the things we will do tomorrow, but it’s hard to concentrate. A warthog is being chased by a bigger warthog until finally it pauses long enough for the big one to rear up on its hind legs and mount its back. Frank, who is talking to one of the waiters in Luganda, notices and roars with laughter. The waiter grins lewdly and slaps him on the back. I look down at my food, embarrassed, not daring to look at Mom, wondering how the female feels, wondering how she can hold up all that grotesque weight, and in such a public manner. The power flickers and then goes out, as though Mom were turning off the lights so I won’t be able to see the sin of sex. Another waiter materializes from the darkness with a flickering match, and soon we are eating by candlelight. Mom and Frank gaze into each other’s eyes and smile. I look away, into the husky darkness.
My room is like the dorm at St. Margaret’s. It’s spare, with nothing in it but two sets of metal bunk beds and linen. There’s a small window above my head, where the ceiling and the wall meet, decorated with metal bars that form a network of curlicues that remind me of cursive writing, of school. The bathroom is in a separate building, like the kind you find at campsites back home. I walk down the hallway, past Mom and Frank’s room, which is quiet. It’s dark, the power is still out and probably won’t come on again until morning, and outside I can hear more than I can see.

I walk carefully along the dirt path. The weight of the African night presses against my eyes, my face, the top of my head. At the bathroom I hear a tearing and shearing sound, like scissors, or horses in a field. And there, looming under the light of the waning moon, I see them. There are two: immense as small whales, their legs comically short and stubby, their blubbery skin shining wetly in the starlight. I’m not trying to be poetic—the stars really are bright here. On the other side of the building I see the glow of a white woman’s face, watching. She notices me and waves, saying “hippos!” in a voice just above a whisper.

I’ve seen wild animals before, wild deer, wild seals, but these hippos are wilder. They must know we are near, but they keep their backs to us. I could throw a stone at them and they wouldn’t even flinch. No matter what I could do to them, they wouldn’t feel a thing.

Mom comes up behind me. “Would you look at that,” she says softly.

I ask her if they are dangerous, and she points her toothbrush towards our hostel and says I should go to bed, I can ask the tour guide tomorrow.

Along the path I see people standing in the doorways of the hostel. They whisper and giggle, and for a moment I think it’s because of me.
It’s hard to find a tour guide this late in the morning. Mom and Frank took forever to wake up. Everyone else has gone, I watched all of them go with the first light of day, excited and jittery like a first date, and now there’s no one to take us on safari. We aren’t allowed to veer off the main road by ourselves, even by car, because of the animals; anyway we wouldn’t know where to find them if we did. Mom and I follow Frank down the road. He says there’s a park office where we can get more information. He isn’t interested in seeing animals, I can tell; he keeps a small notebook and pen in the back of his pants pocket in case he discovers a story for the newspaper where he works, which is unlikely. What would he possibly have to say about this place? Breaking news: last night hippos mowed the lawn and warthogs made babies. And today, the sun rose.

I like stealing a look at the Lugandan words in his notebook. My favorite word is *kubanga*, which means “because.” Once, he caught me with it. “Do not read that,” he said, “Or your eyes will fall out of your head.”

But my eyes didn’t fall out, and I don’t stop trying to read it. I’m not interested in pleasing him like my mother is.

Along the road there are sharp-toothed acacia bushes. Small colorful birds flash between the dull branches, their splayed feet making the thorns shiver. Suddenly twenty or thirty mongooses dash out from beneath one of the bushes, startling Mom. Frank and I laugh, united in this one and only moment. They run down the center of the road with purpose. Every few feet one of them stands on its hind legs and stares at us, its small wet nose stabbing the air. They turn down the driveway to the park office and disappear beneath the bushes, like the whole reason
they jumped out of the middle of nowhere was just so they could show us where it was. I count to ten but they don’t make a sound, they don’t reappear. I can’t help but think they were never there at all. My imagination made them, and then they were gone, poof.

Rachel Bareeba

I read in a book once that a writer should never use the word “suddenly” to talk about what happens next, even if something happens rapidly or if you are taken by surprise. Something is wrong with your writing or your understanding of the plot or you’re just a lazy bastard if you say “suddenly.” But in Africa, I was often startled. In Africa, things often happened suddenly.

* * *

For a long time I believed I would return home, to America. I told myself it was because I wanted to see the place where I’d left off; I didn’t think home would change. I certainly wouldn’t, even if I ate different food and wore different clothes, and I would never intentionally think or behave differently, in fact I disliked the idea; after all, I couldn’t even stand the thought of wearing a dress all day at school, and that was such a small thing. Mostly I assumed I would see our time in Uganda as an extended vacation, like a holiday at Disney World: entertaining at best, worth a few postcards, but not a life-changer.

Suddenly, we were there for months, which blended into years.

When Mom first brought me to Uganda, I didn’t interact with other people as much as I could have, but even so I soon learned the social hierarchy: whites were bazungu, softened by too much food and money, prone to eccentric behavior, like underdressing and spending money
on pets. Blacks were *badugovu*, hardened by too little food and money, prone to looking at whites with amusement, distrust, and opportunity. When I saw another white person, I tried to interpret how blacks saw her or him. Did she smile too much? Did he flaunt his money? At first I liked this game because it was fun, it felt like having friends without the risk of intimacy—of giving one’s self away—but eventually I was forced to acknowledge that the game could be used against me, that it *was* used against me, or at the very least that it applied to me too.

I began to change my behaviors, once so ingrained into the very fibers of my skin, my muscles, my brain—a torrent of unconscious actions and thoughts—that I hardly knew they were there, at first. But especially I sought to change my appearance. Appearance is everything. Appearance is your signal to the world that you are this and not that, that you like one thing but not the other, that you can be trusted to do X, but would never try Y. I appeared white because my skin was white, and so I was a *muzungu*, but after a while, surrounded by black people as I was both at school and at home, I began to see myself differently, and I did not like what I saw.

*Rachel Jefferson*

It’s afternoon. We’re going down to the lake, to a safari tour by boat. I didn’t know they did safaris on boats, but I’m relieved to be doing something other than staring at Mom and Frank, who do nothing but hold hands and raise their eyebrows at each other. Frank asks if I want to take one of his smaller cameras with me. I cross my eyes, say no way. Of course I would love to take pictures, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Mom decides to bring a camera, one with a long lens attached to it. She sits on a bench seat across from me and examines it carefully because it has more buttons and dials than she’s used to. Frank watches her, amused.
“Leave alone that button.”

“But what does it do?”

“You turn the lens like this to focus, and then you press this button. That’s it.”

Mom giggles even though he hasn’t said anything even remotely funny, and I’m reminded of Jill and the other girls from back home.

I know neither of them is really interested in the tour, especially Frank, and that we’re here because of me. They’re still treating me like an American child, a child placated by the spending of money. Not so long ago I would have been excited to come here, but I’ve lost interest in childish things like zoo animals. I look at other people and pretend I’m on my own, that I’m old enough to be here alone.

It’s unbearably hot out and the air here smells like coconut sunblock and muddy water mingled with French fries, cigarette smoke, and women’s perfume. There are twelve rows of benches, and every one of them is full—the safaris that left this morning were back by noon. Red life jackets are stowed under the benches and along the sides and by the stairs leading up to the top deck, pointless, I think, since the water is full of things ready to eat you anyways.

The tour guide, a middle-aged black man with a sailor’s cap in hand, is talking to a young white couple several rows ahead of us, but when the boat shudders to life, he puts his cap back on and speaks through a microphone. His voice crackles in a speaker above Mom’s head, but he speaks too softly or the volume is too low, and his accent is thick and unfamiliar. He must be from a local Western tribe, one that doesn’t speak Luganda. Some people must have understood him though, because they get up from their seats and climb the stairs to the top deck.
“Shall we go up?”

Frank puts his arm around Mom’s shoulders and looks at her. “I like the view just fine from down here.”

Mom smiles, says, “Well, okay. What about you, Rachel? Don’t you want to see the view?”

The top deck is small, crowded, standing room only. The view isn’t much better because of all the tall people. It’s quieter though, the hum of the engine is fainter. The sun beats down on my head; I can feel the warmth through my baseball cap, but the wind lifts the hairs on my arms and makes me shiver. I manage to find a small opening at the rail. It’s on the opposite side of the land, though, and it’s hard to see much of anything except wave after wave of brown water. I don’t want to stay up here but I’m hemmed in by button-down shirts and khaki pants. A man Mom’s age and his gangly, pimple-faced teenaged son, who never once looks at me, speak quietly together in what sounds like German. On the other side of me a white-haired couple with large binoculars hanging from their necks goes on and on about the birds they’ve seen so far.

There are no speakers up here, and it isn’t until the people who have stayed below begin to cry out that we realize the tour guide has been talking, that something big is happening. There’s a splash, and a man with a British accent on the other side of the boat points to the water below. “It’s right there! A hippo! Ho, she’s got a baby!”

Several of the people hurry back down the stairs. All of the remaining people are grown-ups; the German boy must have gone below, too. There’s more room at the rail on the other side now, and I make my way there, since that’s where everyone is. In the water are several hippos, including the mother and calf alongside the boat, which has stopped moving. They float in the
water, motionless, ignoring us. For several seconds, everything is still, everyone is as quiet as though the sun has just set.

(Suddenly!) A hippo opens its mouth wide, revealing peg-like teeth, and grunts loudly. The woman next to me jumps and laughs. The other hippos dive, except for one, who floats motionlessly just beneath the surface of the water, a red gash visible along its side. It is dead. The sun, high above our heads, sends a blinding glare over the water. I turn away. The boat begins to move again, as though the tour guide doesn’t want us to see that death abounds here, too. Up ahead are several more hippos, strewn along the muddy shoreline on their sides like boulders. A crocodile floats in the water a few feet away. Further down the coast on a gentle hill that slopes towards the water is a village of tin-roofed huts. Chickens scratch at the dirt, and tethered goats strain against their ropes. Half-naked women and children bathe in the water or wash their laundry. The hippos are close to the villagers, too close, but they ignore each other. An antelope of some sort with scimitar horns stands motionless as a statue at the crest of the hill, his back to the horizon.

There’s something familiar about this place, though I don’t know what it is, and my chest aches with longing.

After a while my feet get tired from standing, so I make my way back down the stairs and over to our bench.

Mom tells me about the hippos, which were right next to them, and the pictures she took, but I can’t concentrate. A black couple I hadn’t noticed before is staring at Mom, and at Frank, who has his arm draped casually around her shoulders. The woman, about Mom’s age, watches her through narrowed eyes. She notices me watching her but doesn’t look away. Instead she
leans in towards the man and whispers something in his ear, her eyes still on me. I stick my tongue out as far as it will go, until it hurts, and wiggle it.

“Rachel!”

Mom and Frank stare at me like they’ve never seen a kid stick her tongue out before. I feel shame rising up like bile in my throat. “That woman was glaring at you,” I hiss.

Mom looks over her shoulder, then back at me, her eyes wide. “I don’t care if she was giving me the finger. You never, ever stick your tongue out at an adult, do you hear me?”

A hot wave rocks my body. This wave is shame—shame that other people, complete strangers, look at us with such loathing, but it is also hatred, something I’ve never felt so physically before. It’s hatred in three dimensions, as enormous and bloated as a dead hippo, and it’s sitting on my chest. No matter what I do to it, it won’t leave. I look at the black couple again, but they’ve turned away, they’re looking at something in the water.

“Did you hear what I said?”

I leap from the bench and run back up the stairs to the top deck. On my way up, I hear Mom say she has no idea what has gotten into me.

The unfairness of Mom’s reaction hits me like a punch in the stomach. How can she be angry at me when I was just sticking up for her? How can she be angry at me when other people look at her and Frank like they’re committing a crime, or are about to? And then I wonder: doesn’t she see it? Doesn’t she see the way people here look at her? Doesn’t she see the way people look at her and Frank?
I grip the rail, frozen with hate. What I hate is not Mom or Frank, or even the black woman with her accusatory eyes. It isn’t as specific as that. I hate that we are different, because of Mom’s religious beliefs, because my father left us, then because we lost Christopher, and now because we don’t look like everyone else, we don’t belong. What I hate is that I never have belonged, and Mom is powerless to help me. Mom has created her own world, one for herself and Frank, and the feelings of others outside of that world do not matter to her.

I begin praying, but not out loud. I am praying to no one in particular, because God no longer feels like anyone in particular. Uganda has the God I once knew bound and wrapped in bright batik cloth, and I can no longer recognize him. The picture I have of him now is like an African mask: hard, immobile, skull-like. He’s on the side of the oppressed, and I come from the oppressor.

I hear excited voices, some animal must be out there again, but I don’t see anything except the brown earth. And then there it is: an elephant. She’s standing just beyond the water, alone among the dry shrubs, about a hundred yards away, and she is looking at me from her enormous head. Her skin is thick and etched with lines like tree rings, and her ears look thin and delicate as the wings of a bat. I stare into her eyes, so small compared to the rest of her, but I can’t read them, I can’t tell how she feels about the boat, about us.

We move agonizingly slow in the tumid air, and then I realize it’s because we’ve stopped again, the motion I feel is the rocking of the waves. There are people pressing against my shoulders, breathing down my neck, stepping on my toes. I don’t want to stare at this elephant like she’s a freak show, the fat lady at the fair, but there’s a crowd behind me, there’s nowhere to go. All of the people are grown-ups; I don’t know where the German boy is.
The elephant lifts her right foot in the air and brings it back down, hard. She does this over and over, and a small cloud of dust rises in the air. Her ears and trunk shudder and sway.

I hear a sound coming over the hum of the boat’s motor: a flapping sound, like the rapid turning of pages in a book, a big book. The boat begins to rock back and forth, violently, we’re going to capsize. What it feels like is a ride at an amusement park, like my body is hurtling away from itself, or my soul is hurtling away from my body, away from the elephant who does not want to be seen. And then: I’m looking up at faces, concerned human faces; they seem to be up in the sky like a flock of pale moons. The back of my head hurts.

“She just fell over,” a voice says. “I tried to catch her.”

“No, she fainted,” another voice says, and then I know why my head hurts.

“Someone go find her parents.”

“I’ll go, Gus.”

The white-haired man with the binoculars tucks them under his arm like a purse, and though he is lean and elderly, he reaches down and grabs me by the armpits and hauls me to my feet with a grunt. My baseball cap falls off, but I don’t try to get it. “Are you alright, Miss?” His hands are still supporting me. I nod. He tells me to sit down. I stand on my toes and look over his shoulders—but she’s gone.

“What happened to the elephant?”

“Please, dear, you need to sit down,” a middle-aged woman with a strange accent says, her worried face floating inches from mine.
The man with the binoculars, the one called Gus, looks me in the eye and chuckles.

“Africa give you a fright, did she?”

“Oh leave her alone, Gus. I found her parents.”

Mom and Frank are here, edging in, feeling my forehead, dusting my clothes, putting my cap back on. I back away and stumble on someone’s shoes.

“It’s hot,” Mom is saying. “Let’s go downstairs and sit.” She watches me out of the corner of her eye like she’s worried I’ll break.

I stay on the bench for the rest of the tour, my back to the black woman, my head turned away from Mom and Frank. There are more elephants, but they’re too far away to see well without binoculars. I think about fainting, how I’m the only person I know who has ever done it. I can feel the eyes of the black woman on the back of my head, and I catch other passengers watching at me, too. All of this means, I’m sure, that something is different about me. Something is not quite right. It’s a relief, I think, to finally acknowledge it.

* * *

As if I’ve been given permission I begin to write in my diary. My writing is bold and brass and loud on the page.

I write that the hippos can fly, only they still look the same, they still look fat. They fly softly and graze on clouds, which flicker with lightning in the distance.

I write that I’m putting on my winter coat, in Bellingham, but the sleeves are too short. My pen describes the frost formations that would grow in the mud like clumps of grass, how it
crunched deliciously under my boots. I’m walking down one of the urban trails, my hands and wrists bare and cold. I feel exposed.

I write that Frank’s camera is flashing in the sky like a star, taking pictures of the planet. It starts to move nearer, though the flashing doesn’t get any faster. It falls down out of the sky like a shooting star, straight at Mweya Lodge, bright and shiny. It takes pictures of the elephants, the lions, the crocodiles. It zooms through the small window in my room at the hostel. It hits me in the head; it passes right through my skin and takes pictures of my insides. When I describe the roll of film, after I’ve written about sealing it in the white paper bag at Kmart and writing my name on it, all I can think of to show are the whites of eyes. That’s what the camera focused on: eye sclera.

I write that the bus from our church is barreling down one of the dirt tracks at Queen Elizabeth. I’m standing near a waterhole as it speeds by, the pointy faces of mongooses pressed against the windows, looking out. I run behind it, my lungs jamming with dust. Mom and Frank are inside the bus too, and suddenly the mongooses are looking at them. They climb up and down their clothes and claw their skin, until a mongoose finds Frank’s journal and devours it. Finally the bus comes to a stop, and when I look through the windows of the folding door, all I see in the driver’s seat is a small bonsai tree—crooked, beautiful.

I write that I’m digging for razor clams on the shore of Lake Edward in Queen Elizabeth and putting them into Great-gram’s pink plastic bucket. Only they aren’t razor clams. They’re shaving razors, pink, with triple blades. They nick at my fingers like teeth. The more I touch them, the more skin is flayed off, like the papery skin of an onion.
It’s not until I put my pen down that I realize none of what I’ve written is about Christopher.

* * *

I’m near the bathroom at the hostel, where the hippo was grazing in the dark the other night. I see the patterns the tracks make in the dirt, the clipped grass, the piles of log-like feces. My fingers go around and around the outline of one of the tracks. It has four toes and is larger than my hand. A few feet away a line of black ants march past, their multi-jointed legs slim and powerful, never wavering. Their shiny mandibles are as big as their heads, and but for a twitch of their antennae, I am ignored.

Mom is in the bathroom getting ready. The toilet, when it flushes, sounds—after peeing in latrines for several months—like the roar of a dying animal. “You don’t have to go back to that particular boarding school,” Mom had said to me at breakfast this morning. “There are literally hundreds of other boarding schools we can choose from.”

It gave me pause. How much did she know about what it was like for me at St. Margaret’s? Or was it the postcard, was there something different about me that she noticed since she brought me back? She might have talked to one of the Sisters, Sister Imelda, perhaps. My heart does a little flip—but I can’t imagine her betraying me like that. And Mom isn’t like most American mothers; she’s distracted and can’t be bothered. She never went to parent-teacher conferences or chaperoned field trips. Christopher and I never got to bring in birthday cupcakes or listen as she, along with the other parents on career day, talked about what her job was like. Once, when I was in first grade and Christopher was in Kindergarten, she remembered it was Valentine’s Day and gave us red and pink construction paper and a pen. We had to hurry up and
make a valentine for each of our classmates as we scarfed down breakfast. Ours were the only homemade cards. Next to all the brightly-colored store-bought cards with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and My Little Ponies, no one took them seriously. So I could hardly imagine she had gone out of her way to find out how I was doing at St. Margaret’s, other than to make sure I was excelling academically.

“When I was in seventh grade, things weren’t going so well for me, so your grandmother let me try another school,” she said as she pushed her scrambled eggs around on her plate.

“It is working for me,” I said. “I like it.”

Mom sighed. “You’ve always been afraid of change. But change is good, it can help you learn new things about yourself. Don’t be afraid. You have to pick yourself up by the bootstraps. You have to embrace opportunities when they come your way,” she said as she scraped her eggs onto Frank’s plate, even though he was busy writing in his journal instead of eating.

Bootstraps. I thought of the homeless men and women I used to see standing near the supermarket back home, how the only opportunities they had left to them were the small acts of kindness from strangers. Christopher and I used to pedal our bikes to the supermarket and watch, counting how many cars rushed by them before someone stopped and offered spare change—a dollar or two if they were lucky. Once, we counted eighty-three cars before someone stopped. That was a record, but not by much. Most of the homeless wore boots: torn, ragged, the soles flapping. Dirt-scuffed boots. This must be what it’s like to pull yourself up by your bootstraps: you grab them with your chapped hands and pull, hard. If they don’t fall apart, you’re thankful, but you can’t leave anyways, you can’t walk away and spend your dollar, because where there’s one opportunity, there’s sure to be another. So, you don’t leave, you wait for more.
Mom stood up and pushed in her chair. She leaned over and put her arms around my shoulders. “I wish you could live at home with us while you go to school,” she said. “But that just isn’t possible right now.” And then she walked away, towards the hostel, without even glancing at Frank, who was still looking through his little journal, the one he keeps in his pocket. And then it hit me: maybe things between Mom and Frank aren’t what I thought. Maybe this trip hasn’t really been for me at all; maybe I’ve just been the excuse.

A few feet away from the hippo tracks are another set of tracks, smaller, but the same shape. So this hippo was a mother, then.

I think about what Mom said to me about change and opportunity. But how can I afford not to go back to St. Margaret’s? If I don’t, I’ll never know what Sister Imelda knows, I’ll never know what it is to do something you don’t like—like wearing a dress—because of something you’ve always wanted to be, like a nun. I’ll never know if Vicky and the others will stop seeing me as muzungu and start seeing me as Rachel, whoever she is.

On the way home, the silence between Mom and Frank is hard as ice. I can’t allow myself to be lulled into the silence by the motion of the car. If I do, I might never pull myself up by my own bootstraps.

I lean forward and hover to the left of Mom’s ear. “I’m going back to St. Margaret’s. I’m going back, even if I could just live at home,” I say. I’ll run away, I’ll disguise myself and escape if I have to.

Rachel Bareeba
I'd rather go by bus. Prince Charles said that, which makes me think he’s never ridden a bus in Uganda. They call them Coasters, but they’re not trying to be funny. God, I miss it there—the women robed like birds of paradise, people spilling out of doorways and crowding city sidewalks or village roads so they can talk to you. America is too cold, too vast. Too empty.

I pick up the 525 at Alabama Street—I’d told my mother I was going to visit Christopher’s grave, but she probably doesn’t believe it. I haven’t been there since he was buried. Today is my appointment at the tanning salon, and then there’s the outfit I need to buy for the presentation Jeremiah talked me into giving at the university. I press my forehead against the cold glass, hard, welcoming the pressure like an impending headache. Bellingham has changed. It’s like looking at a palimpsest—I remember where certain stores or buildings should be, only they aren’t. I remember the names of most of the main drags, but that’s about it. I turn away from the window. I’ve been gone too long—I thought that was what I needed, to be Somewhere Else. The bus rocks me soothingly, like a mother, like my mother must have rocked me, only I don’t remember it.

I change buses downtown and let myself be carried to our old neighborhood on the south side. We pass the church we used to go to, the Truth Tabernacle, only it’s no longer there, it’s been torn down. A Shell gas station looms in its place. It’s morning, one of those clean-cut spring days that makes you feel like an asshole for being in a depressing mood.

Then the bus passes where we used to get off and walk the last block to my great-grandmother’s, puffing up the sidewalk under budding cherry trees, the breeze from the bay at our backs. The neighborhood has aged. The paint is peeling on many of the houses, the
flowerbeds are weedy, and children aren’t shooting hoops or riding bikes, though school has surely let out by now.

As we move closer to Fairhaven, the houses give way to glass condos that look expensive but fragile. Slim, beautiful people, all of them white, jog or glide into sports cars and speed away.

I feel tears forming, a hot pressure like a firebrand behind the eyes. I rub them and notice my hands. Already they’re beginning to fade; thank goodness I’m going to the salon today. A tanning bed feels like being in a coffin, but a warm one, like sleeping in a bed. And when in it, I see matooke trees, hippos and children splashing in the lake, a mongoose in the doorway, dirty jerry cans lining the stream, the shadows made by a candle in the dark, the pog milk caps I used to collect, row after row of metal bunkbeds that stink of urine, the books I shared with Fridah. The way she looked at me as she danced in the fading twilight.

Rachel Jefferson

This is how I like to remember her: Fridah bringing a photograph with her on our first day back to school. It’s a Polaroid photograph, washed out and blurry, the kind framed in white. She takes it out of her black plastic bag and holds it in front of me and says, “This is going to be me someday! If you’re nice, maybe I’ll give you my autograph!” She says it with a drawl, as though she’s already bored with the idea, or perhaps with me, though her eyes dance at me. I look at the photograph. It’s of a beautiful black woman; she’s wearing a red dress and what looks like a cheerleader’s white pom pom over the fullness of her behind. Her arms, legs, and waist are a
blur, but you can make out her big smile and the stack of five clay pots balancing on her head. Fridah holds the photograph up to my face like a small mirror, but nothing about this woman resembles me.

* * *

Fridah’s parents have chickens. There’s a wall around their house, like the one around the house Mom and Frank live in, and three brick and wire coops filled with hundreds of pale gold chicks. In the center of each enclosure are heat lamps, bowls of feed, and water troughs. I used to think chicks were cute, but now I think they’re terrible. All they do all day long is climb over each other, and peck, peck, peck. There’s also a new dog here. They had to get a new one because someone tossed a chunk of poisoned meat into their yard one night. No one knows why, though it’s probably because dogs are feared in Uganda. Fridah isn’t sad as she tells me this. He’s not a pet, but a guard dog, though he isn’t vicious like other guard dogs I’ve seen here.

In the mornings before we walk to St. Margaret’s and in the afternoons when we return, Fridah and I clean the coops, change the water troughs, and refill the bowls of feed. We examine the chicks for signs of illness. Sometimes there’s a dead chick or two. Fridah picks them up with the shovel and tosses them to the dog. He catches them in his mouth and swallows them whole.

In the afternoons, when we’re supposed to be studying, we sit on the front porch, where Fridah practices the traditional dances of her people—the Baganda. She stomps and shakes and insinuates, trying to get me to join her, until someone raps loudly on the metal gate. Men, women, and even children hardly older than eight or nine come to the house every day. They come to buy our chicks. The compound fills with their penetrating stares, which I still feel on me long after they’ve left. Sometimes they come with matooke or cassava, but Fridah has been told
to accept only money. I watch the strangers put the chicks in a plastic bag or the rubber tubs they use for bathing and feel a sense of dread, but Fridah assures me they won’t be killed until they’ve grown.

Everyone always refuses to pay Fridah’s asking price. At first, I didn’t know this was not only acceptable, but expected. “You never buy something without first bargaining! They would be cheating you!”

Fridah often spoke in exclamatory sentences.

Sometimes a person—usually a man—would bargain unfairly, offering only the smallest amount of money for several chicks, laughing when she heckled back. And not well enough, judging from the way they would leer at her, their eyes traveling up and down her blue school uniform: up her legs and down over the slopes and peaks of her hips and breasts, which pressed against the fabric with uncontained urgency. These men would stare at me too, of course, but not with the same mix of desire and disdain, because I was still as flat and square and thin as a picture. To them, I was still a mere child.

Fridah would turn these men away with a strong and level voice. Once, one of these men promised to warn her father about keeping his eye on her, because she was surely up to no good. After he leaves, she sits with her back to me and pecks at the scabs on her knees and the loose skin around her nails, saying nothing.

“That musajja is afraid of you,” I say. “Did you know the elephant is afraid of ants and won’t eat from an acacia bush if it has them? That musajja is like an elephant.” I laugh, loudly. “He’s so afraid of you, he runs away with his tail between his legs, threatening to tell on you like a little child.” I say all this with the innocent naiveté of a sheltered thirteen year-old, and I say it
like I believe it. She smiles, and after a while she begins to laugh, and then she jumps up and dances around the compound again, as though imagining she’s the beautiful woman in the Polaroid, with nothing to weigh her down except for a few clay pots on the flat of her head.

* * *

I came to live at Fridah’s house at the start of the term, just after Christmas. Mom and I drove to Kampala to meet them first, to make sure it was a good match. This was Sister Imelda’s way of putting it: a good match. I had half expected her to be there too, but she wasn’t.

The driver of our taxi pulled up in front of the house and honked the horn and Fridah’s mother, Mrs. Namuyangu, opened the gate. “You are most welcome, madam,” she said to Mom, who introduced me as Rachel Jefferson. Mrs. Namuyangu gazed at me, and I wavered with uncertainty: should I get down on my knees and greet her the way I’d seen Ugandan children greeting their elders? I looked at Mom, but she gave no indication of what I should do. She herself had spoken in English, they both had. I felt the color rising in my face and looked away.

“Hello, Laycho.” She waved towards the house. “Let us have tea,” she said. “Fridah is preparing it as we speak.”

I was nervous; I couldn’t remember a girl named Fridah, yet Sister Imelda said she’d been a student at St. Margaret’s for the past two years. She must know me, the muzungu, but what if I couldn’t recognize her?

We walked through the door and into a dim room that smelled of curry and boiling matooke. I glanced discreetly around the shadowy room, but we were alone. There were two sofas facing each other and a bare coffee table in the center. Several calendar posters from the
past five years or so were arranged haphazardly on one wall. I could hear the angry banging of pots coming from a room at the back of the house.

Mom prattled like a schoolgirl about her job as an English teacher and the orphanage. Mrs. Namuyangu nodded politely, betraying nothing. Then she turned her lamp-like eyes on me and said, “And how do you find our beautiful country of Uganda, Laycho,” she said, her tongue stiffening painfully around the ‘R’ sound, transforming me into someone else, another girl.

No one had ever asked me what I thought of Uganda. No one, not even Mom, had ever asked, and so I wasn’t really sure what the proper response was supposed to be. “It’s nice,” I said. Mrs. Namuyangu nodded and continued to look at me, wide-eyed. Expectant. “The people are very nice. The land is very . . . nice.”

She laughed a tinkling laugh. “Yes, it is a nice country.”

“Rachel,” Mom said. There was a note of warning just beneath her voice. “Why don’t you help Fridah in the kitchen?” She turned to Mrs. Namuyangu. “She’s always been such a tremendous help in the kitchen.”

I hurried through the doorway at the back of the room and down a narrow hall that ended in a large room; it looked like a garage with a stove and cabinet in one corner. A pot of something was cooking on the stove. Next to it was a large tub, a red jerry can, and a pile of dirty dishes. The floor was poured concrete, and instead of a wall on one side, there was a large metal garage door with a long glass window along the top, giving the room depth and shadow. Particles of dust floated in a finger of light.
Under the window was a girl. She was sitting with perfect posture on a purple and green straw mat, her back to me. Only her head was tilted forward, like she was looking at something on her lap. She was as silent as prayer. I hovered in the doorway uncertainly. Like me, she was wearing her school uniform, a dark blue one-piece dress that stopped just above the knees, but hers was neater: not a single crease or streak of dirt marred the fabric. What I mean to say is that even from my vantage point across the room, I could tell she was one of those girls who understood the power of appearance—the effect clothes and such have on other people, the way they can be used to get what you want. I cleared my throat and the girl jumped and shoved something beneath the hem of her dress.

When she saw me, she rolled her eyes. “Banange. I thought you were Maama.” She turned away and took whatever was under her dress back out. It looked like a book.

I stepped into the room. “Your mom said you were making tea.”

She looked at me over her shoulder. “So? You think I should make you some?”

“I don’t really like tea,” I said and smiled. There was something about her unexpected banter and the knowing look in her brown eyes that made talking to her easy.

“Everybody likes chai.”

“Well, I don’t. Is that a book you’re reading?”

“Well, I am not reading a cup of chai!”

“Hold on,” I said and skipped out of the room and back down the dim hallway. In the living room, Mom was saying something to Mrs. Namuyangu about Idi Amin, but she stopped talking when I came in.
“Everything okay, Rachel?” she said. I didn’t think about it at the time, but since then I have wondered if there was something about my face, some naked look I was wearing, that made her say that.

“I just wanted to show something to Fridah,” I said and grabbed the backpack I had brought and hurried out of the room before she could ask me anything more. I heard her mumble something to Mrs. Namuyangu about kids these days.

I hurried over to Fridah and tipped the backpack upside down. Seven or eight paperback books fluttered to the floor, the covers splayed open like birds in flight. The Giver. Little Women. Lord of the Flies. The book about elephants Mom had bought for me at the park office in Queen Elizabeth.

“Are all of those books yours?”

I nodded.

“Sure?” She touched them gently with the tips of her fingers and then pulled away as though she’d been burned.

What I remember most clearly about that moment was the look on Fridah’s face. She looked frightened by so many books. She was frightened, and I understood it, it was a fear I was just beginning to understand myself. What she feared in that moment was the promise of something she thought she could never have for herself. I didn’t dare tell her that where I came from, books were like leaves, it was as though books grew on trees. They were trees. And sometimes there were so many of them they were taken for granted, they were thrown out into the unforgiving wind, they were burned like firewood. I didn’t dare tell her there were so many
books in our house in America that they practically supported the walls. We sat there silently for I don’t know how long, her inspecting the covers of the books like a very thorough physician, me glancing surreptitiously at her, at the way the corners of her mouth fought a smile. When I told her how I swapped characters and endings with some of the books, she finally did smile. Then, with her eyes to the floor, she said, “Thank you for showing me your books.”

“I thought you might like to read them,” I said. “You can borrow them. I could stay here at your house and you could read them.”

I’d brought the books not as a bargaining chip, a means to escape the rows of bunk beds and the furtive petty thievery that plagued the dorms when the lights went out, but because I always went around with books. I was like a woman with a baby, because when you have a baby, you don’t dare leave the house without a diaper. But now the books were something more, and in that moment I learned that anything can be something more.

After we looked at the books I took out a disposal camera Mom had gotten for me and we took turns snapping each other’s picture; Fridah, striking a pose, me with a book to my chest, a rare smile carelessly spread across my face like it actually belonged there.

Soon the camera’s wheel wouldn’t turn anymore. She smiled and handed the camera back to me. “I should make the chai,” she said and went over to the stove. “For your mother,” she added.

In the car on the way back to Masaka, I had what Mom liked to refer to as a “clarifying moment:” not once did Fridah call me muzungu. I would always be Rachel to her, except once, because there was a moment in our brief lives together when she did call me muzungu, because in that moment, that’s what I was.
Rachel Bareeba

The Rape of the Pearl. Later, after I had come to stay, I would learn that this was the name of the book she’d been reading the day I’d met her. It was the only book she had to share with me—a worn-out book swiped from her father—and I treasured it. This book, about the lives of people under a Ugandan dictator the author didn’t have the freedom to name, was not the sort of book a typical thirteen year-old girl read, and because of this, I understood that Fridah was different, and that she held a part of herself away from other people, like a matryoshka doll. By chance, I had been allowed a peek at this other Fridah.

In time I would learn we are all like matryoshka dolls.

* * *

Over the years I have thought about the books I shared with her. I had already read all of them many times; some of them touched something in me, others not so much. But sharing them with Fridah, seeing them through her eyes, made me realize that books are like people, too: they can look and behave differently depending on who is doing the reading. For me, The Lord of the Flies was a chilling book I struggled to understand. I was all too familiar with how cruel children could be, yet somehow I clung to the belief that children would never go so far as to actually murder other children like Roger did to poor Piggy. But Fridah was not surprised. She said she understood the power struggles that went on between them. Without that struggle, without the forming of alliances and the drawing of boundaries, they would’ve sunk, she said, into the depths of despair. They would’ve had to admit they were castaways, alone. They would’ve had to face the fact of their own impending deaths.
Fridah was always challenging me to think, and I learned more from her than I ever learned in any classroom.

And yet: while she understood alliances and boundaries, she herself would cross them many times.

Rachel Jefferson

It’s morning. We’re sitting between rows of yams in the garden. We’re supposed to be weeding. She lies in the dirt on her back, looking up at the sky, one arm thrown across her forehead like an actress in a movie, her legs crossed at the ankles because she’s wearing a dress, which flutters like a sail on a ship in the wind.

I watch for that flutter more than I know I probably should.

The Namuyangu garden is outside the walls of their compound, down a narrow dirt track a little distance, in an area where other families have small gardens too. I rise to my knees in the red dirt and peek between the leaves at people as they walk slowly by. The plants are young, but tall and bushy enough that I’m pretty sure no one can see me, and so I finally allow myself to really look. I’ve got my diary, I’m trying to do what Mom says I should do, to write about the things I see here, but everything and everyone is moving away from me too quickly, leaving me here with Fridah and a funny feeling inside. I flip back to the entries I’d written at Queen Elizabeth. Why had I had so much to say then?

“Why are you doing schoolwork? It is a Saturday!” Fridah says loudly. I flinch, but she’s watching the clouds, which are big and silent as mountains.
“I’m not doing schoolwork.”

She sits up and looks at me through the leaves, her face framed in green. “Then what are you doing? You are always doing something in that notebook of yours,” she says in a tone of disapproval that sounds just like her mother’s, her eyes lit up with laughter.

I pull my baseball cap low over my forehead. “I’m writing.”

“Ahh, a letter to your boyfriend!”

I roll my eyes. “God, no!”

One of those mpa’abaana birds flies over us, making its awful infant’s cry.

“Sure! I bet you have one or two, over in America,” she says lightly.

“Oh shut up. Toss me a sugarcane, will you?”

She laughs and twirls one of the green sticks like a baton, then throws it high into the air. It sails over the green heads of the leaves and arcs slowly towards me. I jump up and catch it with one hand and take a bow.

“Hey, muzungu!” a teenage boy walking down the road shouts. He raises his hands above his head and claps.

In that moment Fridah’s hand darts between the leaves and grabs my diary, fast, like the tongue of a chameleon.

My face goes hot. “Give it back!”
She folds her legs beneath her like a proper Ugandan lady and picks at a scab on her knee, lazily. “You have to do something to get it back.” She smiles at me wickedly, and in that moment panic slices through me like buckshot. She knows, I thought. That odd feeling. I’d been feeling it for days, like an oncoming cold.

I dive at her, but she rolls away and I hit the ground, crushing a plant into the dirt.

“Maama is going to be angry,” she says and opens my diary.

“Please don’t,” I say, my voice cracking. She looks up from the diary and studies me. I see myself as I imagine she must see me: an impossibly thin, flat-chested, tousle-haired white girl with streaks of dirt on her face and knees. I know I’m not beautiful, but I feel it more plainly in this moment than I ever have before. My vision blurs, I’m going to cry. I try to look tough, but I know I just look scared, pathetic.

She closes the diary, suddenly serious. “I will not read it,” she says. “But if you want it back you will have to take off all your clothes and run down the road.”

I tell her she’s crazy, that of course I’m not going to go streaking in the middle of Kampala. Then I have to explain to her what “streaking” means, that people can go to jail for being naked in public. But she shrugs and says she doesn’t think I will be arrested, not by a Ugandan police officer. I think of those tall silent men with their AK-47s slung over one shoulder, carelessly, like an overnight bag, and shiver. She holds the diary up and waves it like a flag.

“You run down the road naked,” I say.

“Nah. You don’t have anything I want,” she says carelessly.
And I know it’s true. I could leave here tomorrow, and it wouldn’t matter to her. I have nothing she wants. I grab the hem of my shirt and tug it over my head, revealing my floorboard chest, pale and heaving and face her open-mouthed astonishment, long enough to feel the light breeze playing with my nipples, then I sprint all the way back to the house without stopping, while my hair, now free of the baseball cap, chases me like a strange bird.

A little while later Fridah finds me in the chicken coop, milling restlessly with the awful chicks, a new shirt covering my failure at womanhood. She holds the shirt, hat, and diary out to me silently, but I don’t move.

“I did not read it. Do you believe me?” she asks, her confident voice now subdued and slightly shaky.

I hold her gaze. Her eyes look sorry. I stumble towards her, scattering the downy chicks at our feet, and take my things.

She smiles radiantly, gat-toothed. “You did not actually do the streaking. I knew you would not,” she says and flounces maddeningly away. I watch her go with a strange mix of irritation and pride for her, for the life that is ours, expanding in my chest.

*  *  *

I thought I knew St. Margaret’s, having lived there for nearly four months, but how I remembered it—as lonely and authoritarian, with its rows of functional bunk beds and strict dress code—isn’t what I’ve come back to. It looks different, the classrooms buzz with girls who jump out of their seats to answer questions, the air vibrating with the sounds of girls who gallop and leap and laugh and I find myself wanting to join in. The bunk beds are still the same; they
still creak and stink of urine. The uniforms are still dresses, of course, but it’s like I’ve come back to the St. Margaret’s of a parallel universe.

The way the girls look at me seems different, too. They no longer treat me like an anomaly even though with my pale skin and long blonde hair stand out like a fly on a wedding cake. There’s only one other girl with long hair—Albino Dreadlock Girl, whose name I’ve learned is Miriam. But they seem to have accepted the fact of me, the way you accept a new freckle or mole.

I sit in the sunshine among other girls, popular girls who run school clubs, make decisions, start new trends—basically, the who’s who of St. Margaret’s. I came to join this circle of girls because Fridah is so central to it. She’s dancing in the middle of the circle, swaying her hips, stomping her feet, snapping her fingers: she’s good enough to draw attention away from the other dancers, of whom there are about five or six, though it’s hard to keep track because girls are constantly joining in and dropping out. Fridah is the constant, like the swinging of a pendulum in a grandfather clock: she never seems to stop moving.

Vicky and Christine sit next to me, one on each side, silent as sentinels. They are here because of me.

Before I got sick, I’d seen Fridah on occasion, though I didn’t know her name, but because she circulated among a different set of girls and didn’t live at the school, she was a stranger to me. I think she probably knew more about me, the muzungu from America, than I knew about her.

We don’t have a radio or instruments for making music, but we do have our bodies—our voices and our hands—and although I don’t know the Lugandan words to the song the other girls
are singing, I can at least clap. I follow the movements of Fridah’s body and try to memorize the steps, which I find difficult. I’d rather do calculus with my eyes shut, so I close them and focus on the beat—the aural mathematics of movement—and imagine myself in the middle of the circle with her.

When I open my eyes, I see Sister Imelda strolling down the walkway along the cafeteria, her hands clasped behind her back. She looks over at us but she hasn’t noticed me yet, she’s watching the dancers, no, she’s watching Fridah, but surely she, a nun, isn’t interested in dancing, and then she sees me looking at her and beckons me with her hand, not as a teacher, I think, but as a friend.

I feel Fridah’s eyes on me as I leave the circle.

Standing under the boughs of an African tulip tree, she looks smaller than I remember. The flowers are past their prime, they wither and fade and hurry to the ground, like little red meteorites.

Sister Imelda smiles and I’m surprised to see I’m as tall as she is. I lower my head. “Wasusyotya, Sister,” I say.

“Welcome back to St. Margaret’s, Rachel,” she says in English. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better, thank you.”

“I am glad to hear it. I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say. I see my face staring back at me from the lenses of her glasses. I look young, and my mouth is open slightly, giving me a dopey look, and this embarrasses me.
“Good. I have a student, younger than you, who is struggling with math. I was wondering if you would agree to tutor her twice a week. Addition and subtraction is what she needs to work on.”

I nod. “Yes ma’am, I will try.”

She tips her head to the side. “I see your manners have improved. You sound like a Ugandan abaana now,” she says and turns away to greet another Sister.

I watch her walk away. You sound like a Ugandan abaana now. I feel light and soft, like a bird in flight. An African tulip blossom caresses my arm on its way to oblivion. Sister Imelda is moving away, she’s turned the corner, she’s gone, and I haven’t moved.

But then I think: I’m a fool, to confuse sounding like someone who belongs with someone who actually does belong. I might know how to sound like a Ugandan child now, but I’m not Ugandan, though I’m still undoubtedly a child.

I have too much to be Ugandan.

I have too much food, clothes, toys, opportunities. I am white, a muzungu.

Muzungu, my muzungu!

And I think: this is what everyone has been trying to tell me all along.
Part III

Rachel Bareeba

Frank never came to see me when I was at Mengo Hospital, nor did I see him again until the holiday, for he was a busy man—like my ex-husband, George, he was a journalist for *New Vision* and often had to travel—and it was through him that I would meet George, years later, unexpectedly, after he and Mom were no longer a couple for good, once she learned why he seemed so much more busy than the other journalists at the office, who could often be found at our house for dinner or a beer. In fact Frank was always in and out of Mom’s life, including when we were still living in the States. He was working on a Master’s in Journalism at UW in Seattle when my Mom met him at a coffee shop during a rare trip to the city with some of her friends. Though Mom wasn’t the prettiest of her friends (her words), he singled her out and changed our lives forever.

It wasn’t until my incident with malaria that Mom told me the story of when she lost her will to live, which is really a story about how she met Frank, and this is because Mom wasn’t supposed to be meeting men because she had already met one—my father—and married him, and had done so quite happily, or so she had thought at the time. But she met him anyways, and over the next few months, her on-again-off-again affair with Frank took a toll on her both mentally and physically, because it went against everything she thought she knew about herself as a married woman and especially as a God-Fearing Christian, so four months after that fateful day in the coffee shop she did the only thing she could think of to do in her shameful situation: she wound up in the hospital with lobar pneumonia, having lost the desire to live.
But I’m ahead of myself, and anyways, at the time at least, being young as I was, it was their encounter at the coffee shop that interested me the most, perhaps because I wanted to understand why she liked him more than my father since I didn’t think Frank was anything special, and less so with what went on later when she was admitted to the hospital, so I asked her to tell me about the coffee shop encounter in detail. I expected her to say no, but to my surprise, she agreed.

We were sitting in the Pajero she’d recently bought with Frank, heading back to Masaka, the smell of cigarettes from the previous owner lingering in the air. It was a stick shift, which she wasn’t used to driving, and she would pause, sometimes in the middle of a sentence, every time she had to shift up or down.

She claimed she remembered every detail, the way elderly people remember their childhoods. “It must have been getting close to Christmas, because I remember hearing “Baby It’s Cold Outside” on the radio as we were driving down, which I realize sounds really cheesy, bringing up a song like that, but that’s what I remember. And it was cold out.”

They’d decided to get coffee at the Spotted Owl Coffee shop—a small, little-known place in a city of hundreds of coffee shops, one that would follow the fate of many businesses and fade out of existence. She didn’t notice him when they walked in, but later he would tell her he had seen her come in, and that he had thought she looked lonely. Her friends were having a heated debate about whether or not women should subject themselves to patriarchy by shaving their legs to look infantile (and therefore nonthreatening to men) and my Mom—ever the conservative and also not particularly skilled at debating or even articulating her opinions unless it had something to do with what Christopher and I should or should not be doing, which didn’t apply to her then
because we hadn’t yet been born—chose to ignore them and doodled on her napkin as she sipped at her coffee. When I say “doodled,” I don’t mean the sort of thing teenage girls do, like flowers and hearts and peace signs, in the margins of their notebooks during math class, for my Mom was a talented if undiscovered artist who could brandish a #2 pencil like a deadly weapon or cradle it in her hand as though it were a newborn. In fact, it was what she was drawing that drew Frank’s attention to her, because it was Frank that she was drawing. “I don’t know why I started drawing him,” she said with a faraway look in her eyes. “I was hardly even aware of what my hand was doing until Frank had gotten up from his chair a couple tables away and leaned over my shoulder. Because of course I kept looking up at him as I sketched his face, and he thought maybe I was writing something about him, and he wanted to find out what.”

When he saw the outlines of his face looking up at him from the white napkin, which also contained a damp, coffee-stained kiss in the upper left corner, he let out a shrill laugh, the kind adolescent boys might emit when their voices are changing, a laugh that didn’t fit his short, brawny frame. And Frank was short—Mom was nearly two full inches taller, shoes off—and as a result, he’d spent much of his boyhood in rural Uganda weightlifting whatever he could get his hands on: bundles of firewood, jerry cans filled with water, bunches of matooke, rocks, even his younger siblings.

He was twenty-three when Mom met him—three whole years younger than she was at twenty-six, a fact my thirteen-year old brain had trouble accepting, given that I had found Christopher’s friends immature, and they were only one year younger, which I pointed out to her, but she just laughed and said three years is nothing once you reach a certain age, though she wouldn’t say at what age that happened.
Despite his high-pitched, rather scratchy voice, he was, according to my Mom, a noticeably good-looking man. I had never really thought of Frank as good-looking, or even as a man, and was only just beginning to understand that I was supposed think of boys in general that way, and since my incarceration at St. Margaret’s meant I didn’t see boys, in general or otherwise, I felt confused and embarrassed.

My Mom’s friends, both of whom were single, made fools of themselves, according to Mom, in their attempts to win his manly attention despite their concerns about patriarchy, but even though Mom’s wedding ring would have been quite visible (Mom is left-handed), it was clear from the start that Frank was interested in her. “Julia and Barb were the pretty ones. I think they were as surprised as I was that day, and resentful. They had to be, given what they would do later. Even though I was already married to your father and they were still single, they were the ones with many beaus, they were the ones men were always interested in.”

They resented her because he chose her over them even though she was married, and of course they expected that when he asked her for her number, she would gently turn him down, perhaps while showing him the ring, and that would be that but she didn’t, and it was through Julia and Barb that my father learned about it. By it I do mean, of course, the fact that my Mom was sleeping with Frank. I still thought of it as icky, and not something I wanted to hear about in relation to my mother, so like Julia and Barb, I resented her for not turning him down. But still, I listened, and she talked. She talked to me like I was an adult, an equal.

Frank didn’t seem terribly bothered by the fact that Mom was married—which struck even my thirteen year-old self as odd—but it did bother her. “I was stressed out all the time, and it started to take a toll on my body. I would run a brush through my hair, lightly, and several
strands would fall out. I began biting my nails, something I never used to do and had always found repulsive in other people. And when Frank realized how our affair was affecting me, he broke it off, and that’s when I got so sick I had to be admitted to the hospital.” And did my father notice something was wrong with my mother? Did he wonder why she wasn’t at home nearly as much? “If he did,” she said, “He never said anything about it.”

When I asked her why my father left if he didn’t seem to be aware of what was going on, she didn’t say anything for a long time, and I thought maybe she hadn’t heard me, so I turned my attention back out the window. But about fifteen, twenty minutes later, Mom turned off the road and parked in front of a new-looking building with a wide porch and a grass roof. The sign said The Equator Line Restaurant. A restaurant for tourists. Between the restaurant and the road was a white arch with the word “equator” perched on top of it. A yellow line passed through its center and down a walkway that led to the entrance of the restaurant. I assumed we would be going in to eat, even though it was in the middle of the afternoon, but instead of getting out of the car, she started talking again.

“While I was still in the hospital,” she said in a voice just above a whisper, “Barb and Julia stopped by the house. They knew I wasn’t there, of course. It must have been after they’d just been in to see me. That’s how your father found out. They told him. I don’t think they realized Frank had broken it off, I certainly hadn’t told them.”

There was a man doing a demonstration for a small group of people with a large yellow bowl on a metal stand. Below the bowl was a hand-painted sign that said “Did u know.” It straddled the yellow line, but after a little while the man moved it a few feet to one side of the line, and then again to the other side. He had something in his hands, it looked like a small jerry
can, and whatever was in the jerry can went into each of the bowls. I was fascinated, I wanted to
know what he was doing, I was sure it must have been something that happened only at the
equator, nowhere else on earth could anyone do what he was doing here, now. It wasn’t until I
heard a snorting noise that I realized my mother was crying, the tears running down her cheeks
and dripping onto her lap. She saw me looking at her and dug a tissue out of her purse and blew
her nose loudly.

She crumpled up the tissue and dropped it in the pocket of her door. “Sorry,” she said—a
word she rarely used when talking to me. She pulled at her hair, took a deep breath. I was
frightened because the only other time I’d seen her like this was at Christopher’s funeral. When
she just sat there and stared out the window at the people going in and out of the restaurant, I
thought that was it, there was nothing more she was willing to tell me and I would never know
the truth about my father and his absence. We sat in our seats and watched a white family, a man
and a woman and their three kids, stroll up to the door of the restaurant. The two older children
were boys, about my age, give or take a couple of years, but the girl was much younger, about
five or six. They trailed behind their parents, who seemed involved in an intense discussion that
excluded everyone else. The little girl was turning circles as she walked, her arms pressed
against her sides. Her brothers picked up the large red African tulip flowers that dotted the
sidewalk like drops of blood and threw them at her, lazily, one at a time, and laughed. One
bounced off her forehead, but she didn’t seem to notice. When they reached the door, the girl
stopped spinning and leaped over the threshold.

“You and Christopher always got along so well,” Mom said softly, her eyes on the last
boy as he closed the door behind him. “You never really fought, did you?”
I glanced down at my hands. In that moment they looked like pale fat slugs on my lap. They didn’t look like they belonged to me.

I took a deep breath. “We fought.”

She turned and looked at me. She looked at me like I was a stranger to her. “Did you? But I never saw the two of you argue or anything, not really. Even when you were toddlers. You always got along.”

I watched a line of Ugandan kids marching steadily down the side of the road. Where were they all going? Wherever it was, I wanted to leave this life and go with them, I wanted to run away, but how could I? I wouldn’t survive the night alone in Uganda.

“I remember when some of the kids in the neighborhood were taunting you. They were laughing at you, something to do with your fascination for bugs at the time, I think.”

I closed my eyes. I could still see that praying mantis perched on the leaf of a sunflower, the way she turned her head, cat-like, over a shoulder to glare at us with such indignation, such disdain, such awareness. It was just a few days after the fourth of July, so it was a hot, dry day. Smoke from wildfires across the border in Canada blew over the crests of mountains and settled heavily into the valley. The smell of dying trees everywhere, invading even our dreams. Birds seemed quieter than usual, even the gulls were silent. There were seven of us kids, and we were all a bit edgy because we could sense uneasiness in the adults. We were far enough away from the fires, we couldn’t even see flames, but it was rare to see so much smoke this side of the mountains.

“Let’s blow it up,” Adam, the biggest kid, said.
“Gross!” One of the older girls shrieked.

Adam pulled something out of his pocket and ran his finger along the red edge and smirked. It looked like one of Mom’s tampons, but the way Adam smiled told me it was much worse. He balanced the thing on a leaf underneath the one the mantis stood on. The girl who had shrieked was looking at Adam like she wanted to kiss him.

We gathered around to stare at the mantis, which had bent her forelegs into a position of prayer. “Mantis religiosa,” I whispered, and Billy, who was standing next to me, gave me a playful shove. And then I realized the tampon wasn’t really a tampon. It was a firecracker.

“No! Leave her alone!” I shouted.

Adam lit a match and held it in the air with a dramatic flourish, then bared his teeth at me.

“Shhh, he hissed. “It won’t hurt.”

I looked over at Christopher, who was tearing a leaf into shreds and not looking at me.

“But they’re good, they eat bad bugs! They eat bad bugs that eat the plants!” I whined, but no one was paying attention, everyone was watching Adam as he slowly reached towards the firecracker, enjoying the attention. I jumped up and down. “They pray, they pray like people!” But he was going to blow her up anyway. I threw myself against Adam as hard as my seven year old body could, nearly knocking him off his feet. He laughed, but I could tell he was angry.

“Hold her down,” he said, and I felt hands grabbing me roughly by the arms.
“Rachel the Nerd Mantis Lover,” someone shouted, then they were all shouting it, their arms entwined, turning a circle around and around me from which I could not escape. There were kissing sounds, and then they were singing *Rachel and mantis sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g*. Hot tears slid down my cheeks, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t see the mantis anymore, but I hoped she had gotten away.

Christopher was singing too, but then he saw my tears and froze.

“Stop it,” he said quietly, and the circle of kids stopped.

“I’m going to blow it up now,” Adam said, and before anyone knew what was happening, Christopher had gone up to him and punched him in the nose, hard. Adam pressed his hands to his face and ran away, and the other kids ran off with him. Christopher high-fived me, as though I was the one who’d done it. As he walked away in the direction the other kids had gone, he turned to me and waved, the rays of the sun filtering down to him through the smoke and igniting his curls. I’d run into the house then, crying, having forgotten all about the mantis until days later when we found the firecracker on the ground beneath the sunflower.

“He punched that boy rather hard, didn’t he?”

I looked up, startled. “I didn’t know you knew about it, though. I didn’t know you saw us.”

She nodded and looked at me, her blue eyes taking on a bright intensity, like a plea, as though she were begging me to bring him back. “I saw.”

“Why didn’t you punish him?” I was sure that had I been the one to throw the punch, I would have been grounded for a week.
She leaned her head against the seat. “I almost did punish him. For a moment, when I saw how he hit that other boy, it made me so mad I almost went out there, but then he put his arm around you, he protected you. How could I punish him for that?”

I jammed my fingers in my mouth and bit down, hard, but I couldn’t stop myself from seeing the bright flash of snow, the curve of the lenticular cloud over the edge of Mount Shuksan, and the wounded look on my brother’s face when I skied over to where he had lost his balance and fallen.

(I almost didn’t notice that her memory of Christopher after the punch didn’t quite match mine. I was sure he had given me a high-five, but she had said he’d put his arm around me. I didn’t know what to make of that, and so I said nothing about it.)

“We fought when we were on the mountain. We fought and it was my fault,” I said through my fingers. “He died and it was my fault.”

A wasp landed on the windshield and walked slow circles over our heads.

Rachel, baby, it was an accident,” Mom said, her voice cracking. “You know that, right?”

The wasp paused and began washing its alien-like face with the deliberate strokes of a fastidious cat. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to be that wasp.

“No,” I said and rubbed my eyes. “No. He was angry because I could ski better than he could. He was angry because his dorky sister was better than he was at something, and in front of his friends.”
I heard the click of Mom’s seatbelt, felt her arms pull me into an embrace. I pressed my face against the hard space between her breasts and waited for the tears to come.

“If anyone should take the blame, Rachel, it’s me. I’m your mother, and I was the one who let you two go, even though it made me nervous.” She ran her fingers through my hair, like she sometimes used to when I was little. “I don’t think anyone thought something like that could happen. But God works in mysterious ways. He decided it was Christopher’s time. Nothing we did or didn’t do could have changed that.”

I felt the steadying tap of her heart against my ear and pulled away. The sun had gotten lower in the sky and was shining over the roof of the restaurant and into our eyes.

“I shouldn’t have let him go on that trail,” I said dully. “I knew it was dangerous. But I was mad at him, Mom. I was so mad. He hurt my feelings. He called me names, he made fun of me, and a part of me wanted him to go down that trail. I wanted him to fall down. What if that’s why he died?” Mom exhaled, slowly. “Rachel, I want you to listen to me. People fight, all the time. People make mistakes. We let our emotions cloud our vision. We choose ourselves over other people. I know what that’s like.”

“No you don’t. You don’t know what it’s like.”

“But I do, Rachel. I do. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. You see, I love Frank. Very much. So much that I left everything I know, our friends, our family, and our way of life, everything, I left it all behind. I love him so much that I’ve dragged you here even though I know you’re young and have to deal with more than you ever should’ve had to. But sometimes I wish I could go back in time. Sometimes I wish I could make things right with your father again and go
back to the way things were, before I ever met Frank. Because I do miss him. But I acted out of selfishness. I chose myself instead of him.”

“You miss him?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then why did you let him leave?”

“Rachel.” She grabbed the steering wheel and held on to it, tightly. Then she leaned back and looked at me. “The thing you have to understand about that is, we both let each other go. Okay?”

I shrugged. I didn’t understand. How could I? I was a thirteen year-old girl trying to understand my forty year-old mother. It was like pressing my face against the cold glass of a window with the shades drawn, it was like trying to see inside a house I’d never been in, though I would live in one like it someday.

“Fine. Whatever. So what happened when your friends told him about you and Frank?”

She took a deep breath. “Well, Max didn’t talk to me about Frank until after I’d come home. He was thoughtful enough to wait until I was healthy enough to handle discussing it with him. So eventually we talked, and we cried, and we both decided we wanted to stay together, and that was that, though things were never the same between us again.” It was, she said, a dark and lonely time in her life, and it was the one thing about her story that, at the time, I could relate to. Frank was gone, she wasn’t on speaking terms with Julia and Barb, and her relationship with my father was strained at best. That was something I could understand—the loneliness.
And so, a few months later, Mom contacted Frank after finding the napkin with his face on it. She had forgotten she still had it, and when she came across it in a shoebox in her closet while cleaning one day, all the old feelings came rushing back. She had just found out she was pregnant with me, and she convinced herself that she was reconnecting with him as a friend. “I wanted to tell him I was pregnant with Max’s baby. I wanted to let him know I had moved on. At least that’s what I’d told myself.”

But she hadn’t moved on, and when she gave birth the second time a year after I was born, my father asked for a paternity test, and when the results came back, that’s when he left us.

And this is the answer to all questions: Because Christopher is my half-brother. My black half-brother.

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Before his death Christopher had, of course, learned the truth about who his father really was. Who he really was. He was always one step ahead of me.

Rachel Jefferson

Without a word we get out of the car and move towards the man with the three bowls straddling equator. He takes a step forward and beckons us with a wave of his hand.

I watch as he explains something to my mother, who nods eagerly, but I hear nothing except for the ringing in my ears. He points at the yellow line on the ground and asks a question, a question that seems to be directed at me, but I don’t know how I’m supposed to respond.
Instead, Mom says something and it has the right effect, she’s given the correct answer, and the man smiles.

He spreads his large, ringless hands on the yellow bowl, which is actually a large funnel with a bucket underneath. Then he picks up the little jerry can and tips it over the funnel, and we watch, silent and breathless, as the water falls straight through the opening in the funnel without spinning.

Then we move to the right of the line. This time, when he pours water in the funnel, it spins counterclockwise. Mom laughs and claps her hands, but I keep my arms pressed firmly against my sides.

After that we move to the bowl on the other side of the line. I understand that the water is supposed to spin in the opposite direction—clockwise. I understand that I’m supposed to be amazed and impressed. I understand that I’m supposed to watch the water as it swirls down the funnel for the third time. But instead of watching the water, I watch my Mom. She lowers her face and hovers just above the rim of the funnel, her eyes unblinking. The water falls out of the jerry can, straight towards the hole, brilliant and glassy. As expected, its spin is clockwise. Shards of light hit the black in my mother’s eyes, causing them to dilate, a reaction she is unaware of and powerless stop even if she were, and she stands up and digs around in her purse for money to pay the man.

Rachel Bareeba
Years later I would learn that the force of the Coriolis Effect is so insignificant it has no impact on something as small as a funnel of water, or even the drain in a bathtub. The man was a fraud, a huckster, an imposter. He lied, and my mother believed him. She believed him and she gave him her money.

Years later I would learn that he wasn’t the only person who lied that day. I would believe her, and I gave her my love.

Rachel Jefferson

She snaps her wrist that way Ugandan kids do. I snap my wrist too, but my fingers don’t do it, they don’t make a sound. She giggles. We stand with our backs to the wall of our compound among black garbage bags and rotting matooke peels, waiting for something to happen, for life to grab us by the shoulders and shake us. What I feel like looks like the wall of the compound in front of us—covered with a mural of animals, like giraffes and gorillas, most of them unfinished and looking like they’re fading into the forest. There’s a sweet, smoky smell in the air, and the giddy buzz of flies.

Three boys appear in the middle of the road, like a mirage. Hand-in-hand, they move slowly towards us; their features are indistinct, their skin shimmers. The boy in the middle is the tallest. Unlike the other two, who are wearing school uniforms even though it’s Saturday, the tallest boy is shirtless. The muscles of his torso ripple like wind dancing across the surface of a lake. They all have the standard shaved heads and skinny arms and legs. The tall boy seems to be the leader, though his stride is long-legged and self-conscious, like he’s still learning how to
walk. He holds up his hands. “Ay, nnyabo,” he says to Fridah. “I see you have been keeping the muzungu from us. Have you finally decided to bring her out?”

I stare at him. If he were an American boy, I would high-five him or even just nod, I would know what to say. But I still don’t know the rules between boys and girls of a certain age, here.

She looks away and speaks in a quiet, high-pitched voice I don’t recognize. “Her name is Rachel.”

He holds out his hand. “Laycho, you are most welcome to our humble neighborhood. My name is Brian, and this is John and Emmanuel.”

I feel shy with these boys, especially Brian. Though they are thin, their arms and legs are wiry and strong-looking. I’m conscious of my whiteness, my long blonde hair, my frailty. Fridah is still looking away, but it’s obvious she’s examining the boys indirectly. Brian’s eyes are on me, they are measuring, amused. Without looking down I can see my flat chest, boyishly narrow hips, the streaks of red dirt on my jeans, the frayed hole in one knee, the toenails of my sandaled feet blank of nail polish.

“The muzungu is bored,” Brian says.

I glare at him and take Fridah by the hand. “I’m not bored,” I say. He has a hunted, feral-looking face, a hungry face, but with youthful, clowning eyes, like the eyes of boys from home. Though he’s older than we are, the skin of his face is as smooth and hairless as ours.

“But you are not doing anything, are you? Bazungu like to be busy Fridah,” he says, and one of the other boys, John I think, nods.
“Busy,” I say. “Oh, we’re busy.”

John sits on his haunches and Brian leans against the wall. Only Emmanuel, with his uniform pressed and spotless and his eyes on his scuffed-up shoes, looks uncomfortable, like he doesn’t know what to do with his own body. I like him immediately.

“Sure,” Brian says. “Busy.” He picks up a stone and tosses it, lazily, across the road. It sails over the heads of three women who are walking, the sway of their hips synchronized, with baskets on their heads. It lands in the ditch on the other side, unnoticed. John laughs, a little too loudly.

I realize I’m still holding Fridah’s hand and let go. I study the clouds. Today they’re flat and gray; they look like imitation clouds, painted on a canvas, featureless, not at all like real Ugandan clouds.

“Bring us a football and we will play,” Fridah says in the tone of voice she uses with her little brother when she wants him to do something for her.

Brian looks at me and grins. “Does the muzungu play,” he says.

“Sure, she plays. Rachel plays,” Fridah says, but the way she says it makes me think she isn’t talking about soccer.

Brian gives the other boys a little nod, and then they are gone as quickly as they came.

We watch a guy on a motorcycle driving slowly with the frame of a twin bed strapped to the seat between him and another guy. “Crazy,” I say.

“So what do you think?”
“Football sounds good,” I say carelessly.

She turns to look at me, and my breath gets stuck in my throat. “No, not football. The boys!” A woman walking by scowls at us. She lowers her voice and cups her hand around my ear. “What do you think of the boys?” she says, her mouth hot and ticklish against my ear. I shiver.

“I don’t know. What about them?”

“Do you not like any of them?” she asks, her eyes back on the road.

“I just met them.”

She sighs. “I am not talking about knowing them. Who cares about that? I mean what do you think about kissing them!”

“All of them?” I say, flustered. For one thing, Brian hadn’t bothered to refer to me by name, and the other two seemed too stupid or lazy to say anything at all.

“We should kiss them. This is our chance. Richard says if a girl doesn’t get kissed by a certain age, she never will!”

“Your brother,” I say, “is an idiot.”

“No he isn’t!” she says, but then she looks at me again and smiles. “Okay, maybe he is an idiot sometimes.”

“Why are we even talking about kissing? I thought we were going to play football.”

Fridah loved football—she was extremely competitive when she played with her brothers, and she was good, I had to admit, but surely even she couldn’t kiss and kick a ball at the same time.
She licks her fingers and rubs dirt off her shoe. “I just said that so we could have a minute alone to talk about kissing. The boys,” she adds, like I don’t know. “Brian has wanted to kiss me for a while now. And we are bored! I thought we could all go to Centenary Park. I want to show it to you. And we will be safer walking there with boys.”

“We don’t walk to school with boys,” I say.

“This is farther away!”

“I guess,” I say.

She picks at her blouse and watches me from the corner of her eye. “Have you ever been kissed before?”

I shove my hands in my pockets. “Oh sure, many times,” I say.

Her eyes widen. “Who kissed you?” she asks and then looks away.

I smile, shrug my shoulders, pretend to read a candy wrapper I find in my pocket. It’s hot under the sun, but my arms are stippled with goosebumps.

“Well? Are you going to tell me?”

“Alright, alright. My Mom, of course.”

She pushes me in the shoulder, hard, but she’s laughing. “Banange!”

* * *

Fridah and I walk behind the boys and pretend we don’t know them. We even let them go far enough away so we can’t see them in the crowd until they reappear, waving impatiently at us, by
a restaurant smelling of fish and chips or a newsstand or a beggar. It’s exciting at first, because we’ve never walked this far from home by ourselves before, and Fridah shows me the Nakivubo Channel and a field where men bet on pick-up football games. I see people washing their clothes in the water and children running along the rails of the train tracks like balance beams. The sun has come out from behind the clouds, and everything looks bright and newly washed. But then I notice the boys nudging each other and turning around to smirk at us, and then I remember I have to kiss one of them. “Pants on a girl are . . . nice,” John says to me after we’ve crossed Jinja Road. Brian laughs and gives him a push, knocking him into a man so old his eyes are almost blue. I glare at Fridah, who looks away.

We cross into the park through a line of palm trees. I walk behind the others, looking. Fridah leans over and sniffs an orange flower—a large, showy one, its name unknown to me. The boys kick the ball to each other as they walk, but they’re heading towards a cluster of trees and bushes. The park is beautiful, and most of the people in the park are beautiful, which makes me wonder if we’re supposed to be here. Across the green lawn is a playground that looks a lot like the one back home, in our Happy Valley neighborhood. I’m reminded of the time I showed Christopher how to hang upside down on the monkey bars without falling off, and how to swing on one swing together, with his legs pumping in one direction and mine in the other. That playground is still there in America, rusting in the rain, growing old. I think about running over to this newer-looking playground and hanging from the monkey bars even though I know I’m too old, I would look silly. People would shake their heads and say, Look at the silly muzungu. But I like to think I can still be a child again—the child I was when Christopher was alive—when no one is looking.

But of course there’s always someone looking.
John has assigned himself to me. He stands inches from my face and looks at me. My stomach turns a cartwheel, either from excitement or fear or nausea. I shut my eyes tightly and wait.

“Do Americans cook food?” he asks.

I open my eyes and stare at him, dumbfounded. “What?”

He looks a bit uncertain, but again, he says: “Do you Americans cook food.”

“Duh. How else would we eat?”

“What is ‘duh’? Is that a food?”

I laugh, and the nervous feeling in my belly fades. “It means of course we cook food.”

“Ay,” he says and smiles. “I thought it was so.”

“You are pretty weird,” I say.

And then he places his mouth firmly against mine and presses me against a tree. The bark is rough and digs into my shoulder blades with almost as much urgency. His lips are chapped and sharp, and his hair, which I touch tentatively because that’s what they do in movies, is shaved short and feels sharp, too. He doesn’t tilt his head to one side or the other the way I’ve seen grown-ups do, and his nose crushes against mine. I open my eyes and see, from around the side of John’s face, Fridah looking intently at me over Brian’s shoulder. When she realizes I’ve noticed, she shuts her eyes, and Brian starts grinding his hips against her. Suddenly I feel angry.

From somewhere among the trees, Emmanuel says something, but all I understand is the word muzungu. John pulls away from me and shouts over his shoulder, kilunjii! Good! This
makes Fridah open her eyes and look at me again, and this time she doesn’t look away. John bends over me for another kiss, but I shove him in the chest, hard, and because he wasn’t expecting it, he loses his balance and falls.

Emmanuel hoots with laughter. “Ayiyiyi! The muzungu doesn’t want you!” He’s sitting on a boulder like a sentinel on the other side of the cluster of trees that hides us from view—a dark place—his back to the rest of the park.

John laughs and shakes his finger at me, the naughty girl-child. The way a brother might warn a sister not to touch mother’s pretty vase.

A stork in the trees above us croaks, making me jump. I shoot Fridah a look. “I’m going home,” I say.

I’m not afraid of these boys and their urgent, mindless kissing, but I am afraid of Fridah’s eyes. I know what I saw in them is the same thing she saw in mine. I run away from Centenary Park and everyone in it. When I reach the train tracks along the Nakivubo Channel, I line up with the crowd, and when the train is gone, I cross slowly, carefully, as though I’ve never walked across train tracks before. Because whatever is wrong with boys that they act so stupid may be what is wrong with me also—a dark place.

*   *   *

I sit in the back seat of the Namuyangu’s Ford Escort that smells of gasoline and matooke, waiting for Fridah’s mom, who is buying medicine and extensions for her hair. Fridah isn’t here; she’s at home, sick with malaria. The car is parked next to a four-story concrete building, beige and simple, but looking as though it’s being held together by brightly-colored dresses worn by a
mob of armless mannequins on the second floor deck. Some without legs hang silently from the ceiling and the rail like children’s piñatas. A hand-painted sign on the first floor says “Pharmacy.” The top floor is scattered with clothes that have been hung out to dry. On the sidewalk in front of the building are several street vendors, selling everything from avocados to watches. Many children are out and about. Some of them notice me as they walk by, and they smile and wave or simply stare, open-mouthed. The mosquitoes are out too: I can see one hanging from the rolled-up passenger window next to me, all leg and wing and fattened abdomen. I squish it against the glass, leaving red smears from the mingling of Mrs. Namuyangu’s blood with mine.

I’ve begun to think about what I want to do with the rest of my life. Mrs. Namuyangu says this is a good thing to know. As we were driving to the beauty shop, she explained how she didn’t know what she wanted to do with her life until after she’d met Mr. Namuyangu, and they decided to open a convenience store in another part of the city, where Fridah and her brothers were born. Mrs. Namuyangu’s job was to stand behind the cash register and count money and smile at customers, while Mr. Namuyangu made sure the inventory never got low, but that life, she said to me with a sigh, wasn’t what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. Then she had turned to me and said, “What do you think you want to do?” to which I had replied, “I want to watch people.” And Mrs. Namuyangu had thrown her head back against the headrest of the driver’s seat and laughed.

I told her she would never get bored if she observed people for the rest of her life.

She nodded, and then she cleared her throat. “I know you are very close, you and my daughter. She has never had such a good friend. Please,” she said, turning to look at me with
pleading eyes, her hands tightening on the steering wheel. “Take her with you to America someday.”

“Okay,” I said. America, hanging out in my mind like a strange dream I had days ago.

“Promise me. She is a very bright girl. She would have such a future there.”

“I promise,” I said.

One of the street vendors, a middle-aged man in a suit and tie selling mismatched bowls and plates, notices my face in the window of the car. I give him a little wave, but a nnyabo—a woman—approaches his display and he forgets about me, his eyes on the ample swell of her hips. He drops his cigarette, smiles hopefully, and scratches his arm like he does every time a woman approaches him. When the woman leaves, usually without a bowl or plate, he leans against the wall of the building and puts his unlit cigarette back in his mouth. The other street vendors talk at each other in loud, urgent phrases, but not the cigarette man.

If all I did for the rest of my life was sit here in the backseat and look, I would never have to think about myself. I’m just a blur, one more shadowy face looking out of a window. I could be anybody. They would have no claim on me, or I on them.

Rachel Bareeba

At dinner, I tell my mother about passing Great-gram’s old neighborhood on the bus. I remind her about the time Great-gram told me her belief that a person is free to reinvent their own world,
thought I don’t mention how I thought it meant I could change my identity. Mom already knows that part about me.

“Gram,” she sighs. “She always was the black sheep of the family.” She looks at me and freezes, her emaciated face reddening with embarrassment.

I force a smile and tell her to eat her soup.

It’s true. I have reinvented myself, though I am hardly free.

And the thought comes to me: what if that woman on the bus, the one who wore African print dresses and sang “baby baby” and the others like her, what if she dressed that way because she wished to conceal her identity, rather than reveal it, as I used to think? What if she was merely an actor on someone else’s stage, fumbling through her lines, as Shakespeare suggests? Who knows what part I’m playing, what cues I’m misunderstanding, or what crisis will bring me to the end? I don’t know what form I take, what design I should follow. Sometimes I dress like that woman on the bus and come across as a wannabe, other times I dress like the white woman I once thought I wasn’t and strike others as trying too hard. Clothing is becoming a bother; I am reminded why young children are quick to avoid it altogether.

Often now I wait longer and longer to put clothes on after a shower, or I dress quickly but leave off underwear, bra, socks, whatever I can get away with. Little by little I discard the detritus of my life, only to reveal what, exactly? What would be left?

I wish I could talk about this with Great-Gram. I would like to know if she would understand. I would like to know if she reinvented herself, if she imagined her own world. Or did she remain the person she had been in her youth, the Marjorie I didn’t know about until the year
before her death, the Marjorie who casually recorded a terrible crime—the lynching of a black man, a crime that implicates me though I was not yet born—in a calm, measured handwriting on the small white back of a postcard, the Marjorie who must have been buried beneath the cataracts and the blue afghans all those years I thought I knew her?

After dinner, which neither of us eats much of, I help my mother to bed, and then I open photo albums.

There I am with Great-gram, my small hand enclosed inside her large, wrinkled one. Though she was old and thin, her hand never felt bony or claw-like. It was always soft and dry, and warm. I’m looking up at her, my face open and curious, while she looks down at me, smiling knowingly, though her face is closed like a book.

* * *

If I were able to speak to Great-gram again, in what form would I reveal myself to her? Would I go with my hair dyed and permed, big and dark like an afro? Would I stop at the tanning salon first, or would I pull my straight, pale hair in a ponytail and apply sunscreen, perhaps even avoiding the sun altogether?

The sunscreen, surely. I’m still afraid of losing her love.

When I’m in the U.S., I can hardly go anywhere without seeing someone who reminds me of her, someone her age. An elderly white lady, hunched and moving slowly through the canned soup aisle beneath fog of white hair, squinting at the coupons in her crooked fingers, fanned out like playing cards. A blue afghan folded neatly on a shelf in a boutique. A bed of purple coneflowers in a front yard. The smell of lavender soap and mothballs. Clams at a seafood
restaurant. A child’s plastic pail and shovel. When I see these things I think of them as hers, though they are never in the right place, the setting is all wrong.

I don’t know what she would think of the darker, African Rachel. What would she say? Would she embrace me, touch my arm, offer me a cup of tea? Or would she shrink away?

I imagine her at the end of her life, in a nursing home, a place she never made it to because she died so suddenly, yet another death Rachel Jefferson felt responsible for. I see her sitting up in a nursing home bed, the blue afghan around her narrow shoulders, flipping through the pages of a worn photo album, the one I hold now. Shadows lope along the wall across from her. Though she can hardly see who she’s looking at, she knows everyone in the album, and in what order. She’s telling her roommate about the people in her life—parents, aunts, and uncles, cousins, friends, and lovers, rivals, enemies, and neighbors, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, many of them long gone and buried. Most people wouldn’t be interested in the details of a stranger, but I wouldn’t want that for her. The roommate stares straight ahead, looking at but probably not quite seeing the shadows, her head wobbling now and then as she says Oh Marge. There would be things “Marge” would know about each person, things they might not even be aware of, and she would weave stories out of these details, out of thin air.

There would be things she knows about herself that she would not have divulged to a roommate at a nursing home, had she been in one.

She shuffles to the bathroom with her walker, which has yellow tennis balls on the feet, turns to the mirror, sees nothing but a white blur and shrinks away, trying to remember what she looked like the summer of 1930, when she was finally an adult. An afternoon dress in blue rayon crepe with puffed sleeves—how it accented her blue eyes and set off her blond hair. And the
beachwear! How it offended her mother and worried her father, and the suits weren’t even two-piece, back then! And her skin! How smooth and soft it was, how perfectly white.

Sometimes I have the feeling, like when the little hairs stand up on the back of the neck, that I’m going to be out somewhere and see her, and she’ll sense I’m near. Perhaps she’ll be sitting on a park bench, made big by her winter coat, muttering to herself as she smells her surroundings. Great-gram, don’t you recognize me? I say. And she does, but would rather not. It’s easier to pretend. She stands up, refusing to take my arm, to touch that skin, and limps away on bunion feet. She does not look back.

I feel satisfied by this; I’ve done the right thing, this revealing of myself to her as I am, the Real Rachel, because I am not like her. I watch as a large black man comes at her from behind, grabbing purse, pulling so hard she falls to the grass—the gravel walk would be too cruel—and drags her because she won’t let go, and neither will he. She slides like a beetle on its back, legs waving in the air. But I can’t imagine it any farther.

I put the album in a cardboard box with others and tape it shut, though I don’t do a very good job and the flaps bulge at the center. I’m not sure what I’ll do with them. I can’t take very much back to Uganda with me, and who else would want this crap, this history with no name?

Rachel Jefferson

Fridah kissed me today, on the mouth like John did, and yet it was nothing like when John kissed me. When Fridah kissed me it was like she was memorizing the contour of my lips, and now that she has, she isn’t speaking to me.
That was earlier, this afternoon. It’s night, now. I’m lying in my bed—a foam mattress on the floor of Fridah’s room, and I’m trying to understand why it happened, if somehow I tainted her. I suppose it began with the romance novel. I turn to my side so I’m facing her. I feel my body sink into the softness of the foam so unlike the mattresses at home, and I think, if I could just stay here in this bed forever, everything would be okay. It’s late, it must be well past midnight, but Fridah isn’t asleep, she’s on her mattress reading it, the unfortunate romance novel, which she stole from her fifteen year-old brother, Richard. The flame of her candle winks at me from across the room. I can just barely see her, a shadow perched among shadows, a stranger in the dark. She found the book tucked under his mattress in the boys’ room when she was sweeping the floors after school today. When she’d showed it to me she’d said, “Look, a new book for our collection!” and gave me a smile that made my heart ache.

On the cover there’s a white woman with long blonde hair, her feline body stretched out on a pink sofa, inviting people to look at her. I wrinkle my nose and laugh. But Fridah doesn’t share my scorn. I look at the book again. The woman sucks on a finger and gazes at something off to her left. She’s wearing a red dress that shows too much cleavage, you’d never see a woman dressed like that in Uganda. Fridah is fascinated by this woman. Is that how women in America dress, she asks. No, I say, but then I wonder, do they? My life from the time before is starting to become vague, like a vague dream you had the day before. All I know for certain is that I never wore dresses like that, but I wasn’t a woman then, and I’m hardly a woman now. But Fridah saw things differently.

“She looks like you,” she says, her head tipped to the side as she studies my face.

“Me?”
“Yes. You both have long blonde hair and blue eyes like dreams.”

I laugh, but later, I study my eyes in the small mirror Fridah’s mom keeps in the sitting room, but all I see is a pale, skinny girl with startled-looking eyes.

Rachel Bareeba

Already I was beginning to understand that so much depends on who is doing the looking.

Rachel Jefferson

We thought it was pretty funny that Richard, a boy, would read a romance novel, but when we turned to the five or six tattered, dog-eared pages, we realized why: for the sex scenes. We hid in one of the chicken coops so Mrs. Namuyangu, who was sewing in the living room, wouldn’t hear us, and took turns reading them aloud, our heads barely touching as we leaned over the pages. The chicks, who by now were growing into their adult plumage, clucked softly at our feet. We hadn’t yet changed the litter, and the air was warm and stale.

We were especially curious about what the woman in the sex scenes did. After she was seduced and undressed by the man, it didn’t seem like much. Penises were nothing new to either of us. We both had brothers, Fridah with four older brothers and one younger, but our own parts were hidden from us, a foreign thing.
When we finish reading all the dog-eared sex scenes, Fridah leaps to her feet and runs out of the coop, giggling wildly. I feel the laughter rising in my own throat and get up unsteadily to follow her, reveling in the strength of my legs, the beating of my heart, the sound of a strange bird in a mango tree in the corner of the compound, and for a moment I let myself imagine that I can dance as well as Fridah can, maybe even better. I follow her to our room, out of breath, exhilarated.

“We are keeping this,” she says and lifts up a corner of her mattress and slides the book under.

“Won’t Richard notice it’s gone?”

“He has a girlfriend now,” she says and winks. For some reason, this makes me blush, and Fridah, I think, notices.

She pokes the wall with her big toe. “Can I braid your hair?” she says. It isn’t the first time she’s wanted to, and I’ve always allowed her, but this time there’s something different about the way she says it, there’s a shyness that wasn’t there before. I sit on my mattress and feel it sink down behind me. Then I feel her fingers gliding through my hair slowly, stroking from the scalp all the way down to the tips, and I shiver.

“I love your hair,” she sighs and leans her head against mine. My heart bangs in my chest, hard. The heat of her breath sends shockwaves down my spine, and I can’t see anything in front of me—I’ve gone suddenly blind.

Fridah pulls herself away. “What is it? You are so quiet.”

I take a shaky breath and laugh.
“I am going to do your hair in a hundred tiny braids. You will like it, *mukwano.*” Friend.

“Okay,” I croak.

She giggles and goes to work on my hair, her fingers working deftly, parting it in sections, weaving strands together, and then tying the braids off with short lengths of string. I close my eyes and try not to think about how good it feels.

An image of Jill holding a paper fortune teller arises, unbidden, in my mind. I can see her as clearly as though she’s still sitting next to me, like I’m still on the bus that took us to Mount Baker on the day my life changed forever. I can see the red and green braces, the blue eyes, the long brown hair that always looked like it’d just been brushed. The fortune teller opens and closes in her hands, like the mouth of a baby bird. She blinks long eyelashes at me. *Well who do you like, then?*

I open my eyes to the dim light and see nothing but an empty wall in front of me.

“I had a little brother,” I say.

“What is his name?”

A cold wave slices through my body. This wave is sadness, which I have felt before, but it is also fear, a fear of letting go, which I have not felt before, not in such a distinct form. It’s fear with an outline, the outline of a bat-eared elephant with her foot hovering in the air.

“Christopher.”

She moves into my line of vision and digs around in a dresser drawer for more rubber bands, and in my mind I see a fleeting yet vivid image of Fridah taking me into her arms and
holding me like a baby. I want her to press me into her arms; I want to feel the blackness of her skin against the whiteness of mine, as close together as black letters on a white page, erasing the blankness I feel. I want. The feeling so insistent, my heart so like a ram battering at my rib cage, that I almost shout it out loud. Muzungu.

“Is he still in America?”

“Yes.”

“Why did he not come with you?”

“It was an accident,” I say, my vision blurring.

Fridah is looking at me now, her mouth parted like a fish’s. She’s closing the drawer and coming towards me, stopping so close I can feel the warmth of her breath on my upturned face. Slowly, she lowers herself down until she’s sitting in front of me, as though we’re about to sing one of those songs little girls sing together at recess, the ones where you clap hands with a partner to the beat of the song. We look at each other, wordlessly—though our bodies are speaking in a language that was, at the time, still new to me. And then she leans in and kisses me. A quote from a book I’d read sometime back falls into my mind like snow: *I have hazarded into a new corner of the world, an unknown spot, a Brigadoon.*

Her lips are gentle, yet firm. She knows what she’s doing, whereas I feel clumsy, and then I’m furious, who else has she been kissing? I grab her bare arms and hold on. She’s smooth, but hot to the touch—so hot I almost pull my hands away, as though I’ve been burnt. I open my eyes and see her closed ones, thick-lashed and evasive. Her eyelids tremble and dance, it’s as if
she’s holding them shut by force, and then they fly open and I found myself tumbling into the
darkness of her pupils like black holes.

Her eyes widen. She pulls away, roughly, and runs out of the room.

Surely I must be some sort of monster. Muzungu.

With my hair half braided and wild I run after her. Through the open door in the sitting
room where her mother is still sewing, I see her wrestling open the metal gate with her hands,
hands which moments before were entwined in my hair. When she sees me run out of the house,
she grimaces and shoves the gate open with a grunt. And then she is gone. I waver under the
equatorial sun, and the gate swings closed between us.

*  *  *

When I take my place across from Fridah on the floor at dinner, she glances up at me with a faint
twist of her lips and mumbles what might be hello. As she might greet a younger sister if she’d
had one, with no display of enthusiasm yet without contempt. A notebook is open on the mat
beside her plate. She’s working on fractions and biting her lower lip, hard.

Mrs. Namuyangu turns her lamp-like eyes on us, on me. “Rachel, your hair. But we
cannot have you attending school like that. Fridah, I do hope you will finish braiding it for her
before you sleep.”

Fridah’s eyes never leave the page. Mrs. Namuyangu regards us, silently, over the rim of
her steaming mug of tea. I can tell by the way she’s looking at us that she can tell something isn’t
right, and I begin to get the creeping sensation that she can tell what we did. What I am.
I start talking, too fast, telling Fridah that math is a strong subject of mine, and that I’ve even managed to catch Sister Imelda’s eye, that she’s asked me to tutor a student of hers. “I could help you, too.” I say, and glance over at Mrs. Namuyangu, but she has turned away, she’s focusing her attention on Richard, who’s saying something in Luganda, something I don’t understand.

Fridah was an average student: she was quite skilled with languages, having done well in Luganda, English, and French, but she struggled with math, and this struggle put her position in our grade at 52 out of 124. She would have to do better if she was going to get a scholarship so she could finish her final years at a good secondary school, because it was already a strain to come up with school fees for her five brothers, too.

She stares at me like she’s never seen me before—as if my offer, which was spur of the moment, has threatened her in some way. She slams her notebook shut and hurries out of the room, leaving her untouched plate of *katogo*—beans and mashed *matooke*—on the floor. Paul, the youngest brother, grabs her plate and starts eating.

“What is the matter with that girl?” Mrs. Namuyangu says in English, her eyes on me.

* * *

Now my body feels like a feather—soft, light, boneless, easily blown this way or that and carelessly tumbled around in a wind I can’t control. I grip the sides of my mattress and hold on. I know this feeling of vertigo is probably because what I did with Fridah is supposed to be wrong, after all that’s what I learned in church, it’s written in the Bible, isn’t it? But it might also be relief. Fridah shone for me like a leaf in sunlight—intricate, deeply colored, and spinning from its petiole in perfect form. It was her dancing that I’d loved, or so I’d thought. I would think if
only I could dance like that, nothing more. Like a desire to be, not to have. Or I would think, she’s like a sister, my sister. Hoping we could just stay the way we were forever.

Now Fridah sits on her side of the room and pretends I don’t exist, that I don’t still need the rest of my hair braided before school tomorrow. She reads the romance novel alone, and avoids looking at my side of the room, at me.

It’s as if I’m a ghost: now you see me, now you don’t.

Rachel Bareeba

It feels easier to stay here, under the quilt my grandmother made, the one that used to be in Great-gram’s bedroom Christopher and I shared, to imagine I’m Rachel Jefferson again—the girl who thought her life couldn’t get any worse, but I have so much to do, and time is running out. There are the day-to-day transactions, like working on my appearance, cooking and cleaning. There are still a lot boxes to go through, and there’s the presentation I promised Jeremiah I would give, which I haven’t even started preparing for yet. And then there’s my mother herself.

There are moments when I can hardly look at her. I find it an effort to keep my eyes open. I remind myself that everyone dies, and each day this doesn’t happen is a measure of progress. I concentrate on unscrewing lids of pill bottles, getting the dosage right, doling the shiny capsules out and placing them on the tray. I have a tough time keeping my hand from trembling to do that much. I feel useless, like nothing I’m capable of doing matters, least of all for her.
What have you accomplished today? She used to ask Rachel Jefferson. I don’t know, she would say. And she didn’t, I don’t really, because what would have counted as an accomplishment? Christopher once said the universe is so big and old and we humans so tiny and new that what we do hardly matters. If we make a mistake, he said—even if it felt like a big one, like flunking a test or breaking Mom’s favorite vase—it wouldn’t matter, in the grand scheme of things. He didn’t say whether a success mattered or not, like passing a difficult test or buying a vase for Mom with your allowance, and the old Rachel didn’t ask. I rarely questioned my brother.

Now I know getting out of bed in the morning is an accomplishment, and if my mother were to ask me today, I would have at least one answer for her. I can only hope it matters.

Tonight we are going out to eat, a misnomer, because neither of us will feel much like eating.

* * *

It’s when she asks me what I’m going to wear for dinner that I realize I don’t have anything to wear for the presentation, which is in two days.

I get off the bus at High Street, by Wilson Library. I walk quickly, like I have somewhere to be. Wearing a black t-shirt and jeans, I could be a grad student, maybe even an instructor, since the dress code isn’t strict. I’ve been to this library many times, though I was never a student here. The high school I went to for a brief time—Sehome High—is down the hill, and it was the thing to do on a Friday after school, before the football game, to wander around campus in search of cigarettes and booze, pretending to be older and more sophisticated than we were, but I often snuck away from the others to be here, among the books.
I’ve decided to look at the room where I’ll be giving my presentation. I know it’s tucked away somewhere in the library, but I don’t know anything else about it. Probably it will be in use; I’ll just slip by and see how big it is. If the door is open I can glance in casually, like a passing student, and if not, then I’ll have to peek through the little window on the door. Large rooms are terrifying, they demand to be filled, and that takes more people than my presentation will muster. On the other hand, a small room is insulting—it suggests even the organizers think you aren’t very interesting.

Before I go through the main entrance, I notice a bulletin board concealed behind layers of paper. The word “Mogadishu” catches my eye, and for a moment I’m confused, unstable, like standing on a balance beam that’s too narrow. I reach inside my pocket, but there’s nothing there. And then I realize it’s just the name of a local rock band, the members are white, and I am here in the States, this is not Africa.

I scan the other fliers, wondering if my face is among them, and then I see it in the bottom right-hand corner. It’s a black and white headshot from years ago, when I was last here. Because it isn’t in color, and because I wear my hair big and curly, I could be almost any race, which means people will see what they want to see. Jeremiah, a friend from high school, has done the best he can, but I worry it gives the wrong impression: “Saving Africa’s Elephants, with Rachel Bareeba, DVM.” Below that is a brief description in fine print: “Huxley College of Environmental Science invites you to wildlife veterinarian Rachel Bareeba’s talk on the unique challenges of providing healthcare to an endangered species.”

*Healthcare?* My heart sinks. The tone is all Jeremiah’s, tongue-in-cheek humor, a technique he uses to guide even the dimmest and least interested students through his class, or
anyone through anything with ease, as I should know, but it isn’t my style, and it’s hardly accurate. Damn you, Jeremiah. I suppose I was once attracted to Jeremiah and his easy-going, charming ways because I was reminded of Christopher, my little brother. I can only imagine that he might have grown up to become a man like Jeremiah.

The flyer is partly covered by a poster advertising an upcoming event held by a video game club, which happens to be at the same time. That I can’t compete with, but I can at least expect Jeremiah’s students to come, bribed by bonus points. I will have to be entertaining, then, it’s the American way. If I didn’t know how much America values entertainment, even in the classroom, I might have felt resentful of Jeremiah’s flippant tone.

On the other hand, the more I think about it, standing here as I am among students, some of whom stop to look at the flyers, I think: It sounds sort of fascinating. “Endangered” makes it sound racy and important, even dangerous, and anything to do with elephants is sure to rope people in.

And then I realize, the word “healthcare” means I have accomplished a small, local sort of fame, a public image, one that is game for others to poke fun of. It’s an accomplishment of sorts, and one I wasn’t expecting. Perhaps I can be appreciated for what I’ve done, rather than for what I look like, after all. In a daze, I head back to the bus stop.

I wonder what my great-grandmother would have thought about this flyer if she could see it now. I wonder if she would think of it as an accomplishment. Maybe she wouldn’t recognize me in the photo, and she certainly wouldn’t expect me to go by an African surname. Perhaps she would attend out of curiosity. I would breeze through the door, just a few minutes late, like a
professor would, wearing khakis and binoculars, a butterfly net perched over my shoulder like a cartoon safari guide. *I’m here to entertain you, and I won’t disappoint.*

*  *  *

I take the bus downtown. Young people hurry down sidewalks in clothes garish as Halloween costumes. A white woman, college-aged, brushes against me, heels clicking. She’s dressed in black fishnet stockings, red high heels, a short black dress that looks more like lingerie than an actual dress, her hair the bright blue of a Smurf. Her sickly paleness and anorexic body is accentuated by the bright green tattoo of a snake winding around her thin arm. I realize I’m staring and hurry down a side street. I see the ghost of myself in a storefront window and feel ashamed, because haven’t I altered my appearance as much as she has?

A white man with a thick layer of sunscreen on his nose nods at me as he passes, the coconut smell lingering in the air behind him. There was a particular brand Mom used to buy, it had an image of a dog pulling the bikini bottom of a little girl down, revealing the pale buttocks underneath. I used to worry it was the smell of the sunscreen that made the dog do it, and I went to great lengths to avoid dogs on the beach until one day Mom asked what I was doing, and I found out it was just a silly marketing scheme, though I still haven’t gotten over my dislike for sunscreen. It reminds me that someone is always looking.

I hurry past boutique windows. Each store is like the last: ablaze with bright lights and guarded by white mannequins impossibly tall and thin, like life-size Barbie dolls. They stand with pelvises thrust forward, and I wonder who they’re trying to lure in. Most of the mannequins are bar-ready in short one-piece dresses, but a few are done up in pants. Skinny jeans have come back in lurid colors, and I can’t stop staring at a pair as green as a mamba snake. There are other
types of pants too; including some I’ve never heard of before: culotte, crops, cigarette, rompers. The contrast of the names of the last two makes me laugh.

It’s the mannequins with the odd woolly sheep’s heads that finally get me off the sidewalk. The name of the store is La La La Boutique, and I can tell it’s expensive. It’s filled with carefully arranged hand-knit sweaters and scarves. The store isn’t crowded, which is how I prefer it, but the sales clerk notices me immediately. Her smile is genuine and she holds her arms out in front of her as though she’s about to fold me into them.

“Welcome to La La La,” she says, but then she freezes. I feel her eyes process my curly afro, brown-tinted contact lenses, t-shirt and faded jeans, the absence of purse on my darkened arm. Her hands fall to her sides. “Is there something I can help you with?” she says, her voice suddenly harder, firmer, the kind of tone you’d use on a toddler about to dump juice on the carpet.

She’s older, probably in her late fifties or early sixties, around my mother’s age, her hair a dyed yellowy-blonde, the pale skin beneath layers of knit clothing beginning to thin and wrinkle. She doesn’t look a pound over eighty, I could easily shove her into one of the clothes racks and be on my way. I reach out and grab a dangling price tag, see $150 in red ink, let it drop. She clears her throat, but says nothing.

“No, I don’t need your help,” I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. I turn around and hurry away. My face feels hot, and my hands shake. Of course, the joke is on me. I want others to see me as a black woman and that is precisely what has just happened. I jerk open the glass door, the bell tinkling madly. Damn you, Great-gram, you hypocrite, I think.

But when I look back over my shoulder, she is nowhere to be seen.
I give up on finding anything downtown and instead settle for a simple outfit from Macy’s at the mall, so I won’t be late for my tanning appointment. Then I’ll have to go back to the house on Alabama Hill, where my mother is sitting at the dining table, swallowing her pills and waiting for me to take her out into the world.

I know the dangers of using a tanning bed, I know the facts; after all, I’ve been trained in the sciences.

My eyes are closed but I see Rachel—I see myself—inside a tanning bed being darkened, as a piece of bread is darkened inside a toaster. A soft mechanical humming surrounds me. The smell of sweat and lemon-scented cleaner and coconut tanning lotion presses against my skin, my eyelids, my chest, leaving me breathless. I’m awake, but I’m unable to move. I’m cold, but it isn’t long before the tanning bed warms my bare skin. This sudden warmth is what being in love felt like, once, when I still knew how.

Another fact I know: love is dangerous, too.

Rachel Jefferson

In the thaw of early spring in 1997, in the mostly empty house at 13th street in Bellingham, Great-gram must have sat at her kitchen table, hunched over a sheet of lined stationary personalized with her initials, MB. Marjorie Bennett. I come from a long line of women whose first names begin with the letter M: Margaret, Marjorie, Marianne, and finally just Mary, my mother. I am Rachel, and I am the break in the tradition.
This is how her last letter to me begins: “They found the son-of-a-bitch liable for wrongful death.” It’s written in slanted old-lady penmanship, the dirtiness of the word “bitch” incongruent with the exquisiteness of her cursive writing. She was talking, of course, about OJ Simpson.

Her letters often began like that, in the middle of a heavy conversation. She wasn’t one for small talk. She never wondered what I did in my spare time, had I made any friends, and she never asked if I liked being so far from home—maybe because she knew those things weren’t up to me. This wasn’t the first time I had to ask Mom what she was talking about, either. This time Mom is evasive, mentioning something about “football” and “murder trial.” And then it comes back to me: the image of a black man on the evening news, a white Bronco tearing down a highway, the face of a white woman who looked like a model.

“But why would she tell me about a murder trial? She doesn’t even like football,” I say.

Her reply is tight-lipped and full of meaning: “There are many things your Great-grandmother doesn’t like.”

Mom doesn’t put it this way, but this is probably the last letter I will ever receive from Marjorie Bennett. It arrived in Masaka two days ago in an unassuming envelope, a week after she was rushed to the emergency room in the back of an ambulance.

Time moves slowly across the Atlantic, and even if there’d been a phone at Mom’s house in Masaka, Great-gram probably wouldn’t have called. We didn’t find out until Aunt Moe sent a letter, and that was how we learned Great-gram’s heart is failing. “It’s nothing serious, Mary, you hear,” is what she’d said when Mom finally got ahold of her on the phone.
Did she know? Had she any idea, a premonition perhaps, that something bad was about to happen to her?

I shuffle through the dozen or so letters—she wrote to me at least once a month, sometimes more—but nothing about the last letter suggests she did. Her next door neighbor, Mrs. Martin, who was supposed to play Bingo at church with her that evening, found her lying on the kitchen floor. Later, Mrs. Martin would say Great-gram told her she was lying there because she was looking for God in the random patterns of the popcorn ceiling.

“Just a heart attack is all the doctor said, Mary. Don’t think you have to make a big fuss and come back here.”

For a long time after, I couldn’t imagine her without seeing her at her table, writing a letter, her bruised heart about to falter. The blue afghan would be somewhere close by, on the back of her chair or across her lap. The radio in the kitchen would be on, for the company. I like to think she didn’t lie there in silence, wondering if it was her time to go.

* * *

It’s Wednesday morning. On the dining table there’s sweetbread and a jar of real peanut butter, like the kind you’d find in America, a special treat from a supermarket in Kampala. We bought it on the way back to Masaka. Frank sits at the table with his finger on a passage in the Bible, his lips moving silently, while Mom makes the scrambled eggs because she’s had to let Bette, the hired help, go. We listen to the news on the radio, which is punctuated by bouncy Ugandan pop songs. I recognize one Fridah and her brothers like, a song by Jimmy Katumba. When one of his songs came on, her whole family would jump up and start dancing—even her parents.
Mom has been packing and unpacking her suitcase since she woke up. My blue suitcase with Rainbow Brite on it has disappeared, and in its place is a new green and tan one with a shoulder strap. Frank picked it out even though he won’t be the one using it, because Mom has become increasingly disinterested in buying things, even the groceries. Her dresses are the same ones she’s had since we came here nearly a year ago, and the house is still more or less devoid of furniture.

Even worse, she’s decided to buy or adopt as many animals as she can. We now have five goats, two rabbits, two dogs, a flock of chickens and mean roosters—some of them Fridah’s—and a cow, all of them crammed into the small backyard of our compound, not as food for the family, but as pets—a radical idea in Uganda, because who can afford to feed a pet? This is embarrassing but at least I don’t live here most of the time, where other children will make fun of me. I can only hope she won’t become a vegetarian, because then what would happen if a Ugandan offered her meat? But she isn’t even aware of the jokes the neighbors make about her. She never thinks, Is this normal, will people laugh at me the way most people do, or are supposed to. But then, she never did when we were in America, either. She says normal is a dirty word.

Frank closes his Bible and looks over the top of his reading glasses at me. “You must be pleased about seeing your grandmother, yes?” He says this with an unmistakable hint of aggression. I glare at him. Great-grandmother, I want to shout, but I don’t. I look at the scrambled eggs on my plate. They’re the same cheerful shade of yellow as Fridah’s chicks.

“Of course she is, Frank,” Mom says and sets his plate of eggs on the table with a thud.

Frank picks up his fork and clears his throat. “I cannot take you to the airport after all.”
“What? Why not?”

Frank glances over at me. “I have a new assignment. I have to travel for this one, but I cannot say much more right now.”

Mom rubs her face, hard. “Where are you going?” she says through her fingers.

“I am sorry Mary,” he says quietly, “I cannot say anything more.”

“You always do this.”

The cow out back starts lowing, loudly. “You see, even the goddamn cow agrees,” she says bitterly, though it sounds like a joke. And then it hits me: Mary Brewster Jefferson just swore. My life can’t possibly get any weirder.

“Mom, you said goddamn.”

“Yes I did, but that doesn’t mean you can,” she says as she stands up and takes our plates from the table, including mine even though I haven’t finished eating.

“You can’t make me,” I say before I can stop myself. My stomach goes cold. Backtalk is never a good idea with her, but I can’t seem to stop, I don’t want to. “And I don’t want to go back, either.”

Frank gets up from the table and hurries out of the room. Mom stares at me blankly.

“You don’t want to go back where?”

I say nothing.

“You don’t want to go back home,” she says slowly.
I still say nothing.

“America is your home,” Mom says. “It will always be your home.”

I remain in my seat, watching her walk away, her back to me. She isn’t the only one who is surprised.

I think about how she says America will always be my home. But when? If home is where you live, where you go to school, and where you talk to people, then Uganda is my home now.

Rachel Bareeba

All these years later, I’m not sure if what she really said was your home or our home. In my memory she said your home, but I don’t know. I don’t know what she actually said. I don’t know where she felt most at home. After all, it’s taken me nearly a lifetime to find mine, because what is home for those who, for one reason or another, are forced to inhabit the gray space between two continents?

Rachel Jefferson
The last time I saw Great-gram was at Sea-Tac airport. I remember she didn’t cry; none of us did. We didn’t have any more tears to cry.

That was nearly a year ago, and I was only just beginning to understand that it might as well have been a hundred, because I was never going to see her again, not really. After the heart attack, she was never the same. Why couldn’t we have gone to visit her at least once in all that time? Why did she have to be sick for us to visit? Airfare is expensive, especially when traveling as far as we did, but I think I understood, even then, that the real reason wasn’t money, it was because going back is never easy.

*   *   *

And here is why it isn’t easy to go back: because the world looks different when you’ve been Away; this is because you change, and so does everyone and everything else you left behind. Great-gram’s house, where we stayed because our house had been sold, felt like the house of a stranger.

*   *   *

We arrived in Uganda with two pieces of luggage each on June 9th, 1995. We left Uganda with two pieces of luggage each on March 28th, 1996.

*   *   *

In my carry-on bag, lying flat between the pages of *Moby Dick*, is my final postcard to Great-gram. I was supposed to send it to her a long time ago, after our trip to the park. On the front is a picture of three African elephants and the words “Greetings from *Queen Elizabeth National
“Park.” On the back is a white space. Mom suggested I give it to her in person, and this is what I will do, because there’s nothing else I can do.

Before I left, because she was (sort of) talking to me again, Fridah asked me what it was like to fly in a plane. I told her it was like dreaming, because of the memories. Something about being up high makes the memories come. Nineteen hours in the sky, and I do not sleep. But the memories come.

* Also in my bag: The Rape of the Pearl. So you don’t forget us, she said.

* * *

Candles are burning quietly on the table. Piano music wafts through the air from somewhere above our heads, making the dining room feel larger than it is. The world is dim and warm, like a summer evening, though it’s late November. I’m sitting, drowsy and full of food, between Uncle Joe and Aunt Maureen, Mom’s littlest sister. She’s my favorite because everyone says she was a tomboy, like me. Aunt Sara is here too, with her wig because of the chemotherapy. The faces of Jackie and Peyton, my cousins, loom like pale moons in the semi-darkness on the other side of the flames. I can’t stop staring at Jackie, because she wears makeup like a woman now and doesn’t seem afraid. Makeup always makes me feel afraid. Mom calls her the freshman, because this is what you are called when you start college, even if you are not a man. Christopher sits next to Peyton, who ignores him. He keeps crossing his eyes at me and making fish faces. He’s bored. If his legs were long enough, my shins would be decorated with bruises. Great-gram sits at the head of the table. Her head is cocked, bird-like, towards Jackie, who is talking about the classes she’s taking. The adults nod approvingly.

Turbulence jolts the plane, hard, and my family is gone.
The flight attendant asks us what we would like to drink. Mom orders wine. My mom never drinks wine.

Somewhere over the Sahara: I remember, quite suddenly, that the dinner with the candles and the piano music ended in tense silence, and that Mom had something to do with it.

At the airport in Cairo. The air thickened by tobacco smoke. “Moses,” says Mom, and puts her arm around me. “Pyramids,” I say, and then I remember they are tombs.

“Rachel,” she says. When she doesn’t go on, I look up at her. She’s fanning herself with a book and staring at the wall on the other side of the waiting area. “You see all these people,” she says, so I look. It’s late at night, and there aren’t many of them. There’s a brown-skinned man in a button-down shirt stretched out on two chairs across from us, his head propped on a backpack. The tired-looking woman next to him stares impassively at the empty chairs next to us. There’s a family of five a few rows away. One of the kids is crying, another is playing a video game.

“When you look at people,” she says. “Don’t see their race. They’re just people, do you understand?”

“Why? Why am I not supposed to see their race?” I say.

“Because it isn’t polite. When I look at people, I don’t see the color of their skin. I see who they are, not their race.”
Shame billows up from deep inside me, like a wave of nausea. I look at the brown-skinned man in the button down shirt, but I can’t unsee his brown skin. What was I supposed to see instead, some other color? “I don’t get it,” I say.

“It’s simple,” she says.

I squirm in my seat. “Frank is black. Fridah is black.” I want to say Christopher is black, too, but I don’t.

Mom gives me hard look. “They’re people, Rachel. That’s all you need to know.”

I look away, the image of the postcard rising unbidden in my mind. “I never said they weren’t,” I mumble.

* * *

Waking up in the guest bed at Great-gram’s, seeing on the nightstand next to me a statue of beach agates washed up from the pockets of Christopher’s jeans, a message from the past telling me that I can never come back, because the world has changed forever. A low thunder of waves rushing at my ears, and then: through the plasterboard wall the quiet crying of a woman who has lost everything.

Almost everything.

Even Aunt Moe didn’t tell us everything. Great-gram has stage four heart failure. She is dying, and without knowing it we have come to say goodbye.

If I close my eyes just right, the crying looks like the battering of the wind against drought-brittled leaves and the falling of African tulip flowers, blood-red in the sunlight.
Rachel Bareeba

There are many ways to lose a person. There are the obvious ways—the physical ways—like death, divorce, break-ups, moving to a new place. Rachel Jefferson understood those kinds of losses even though I was only thirteen, having lived through most of those losses already, but it wasn’t until I went back to America to help take care of Great-gram that I began to recognize the other ways you can lose a person even though their body might still be right in front of you, and that this happens more often than you might think.

Rachel Jefferson

“You shouldn’t have come,” she says wearily. “I’m not some zoo animal to be gawked at.”

Her eyes are terrible, both pupils are almost completely white now, and her hair has thinned out and gone dull. She lays in bed, listening to the radio, her breath coming out in short, staccato gasps like punctuation marks. “How can I hear the radio with everyone coming in here and pestering me?” She says each word slowly, like a child learning to read for the first time.

She doesn’t get out of bed, except to use the bathroom and one other time when Aunt Sara led her to a chair by the window, so she could feel the sun on her face.
The front door of 2559 13th Street doesn’t stay closed—friends and neighbors and relatives wander in and out like worker ants, their arms bearing casseroles or held open for a hug, and anyways, it’s Washington State warm out, though Mom and I shiver with cold.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask Mom as she sorts a pile of medical bills at Great-grandma’s dining table.

Mom shakes her head, at me, at the due date printed in red at the bottom of the bill. “Rachel, your Great-grandma is dying. She’s frightened. Why don’t you go and sit with her?”

I vow never to be frightened of death, even if someone is holding a gun to my face. Part of me thinks it serves her right, after what she had allowed to happen all those years ago. But the other part of me doesn’t want to think.

“Why isn’t she in the hospital?”

Mom looks up at me and sighs. “Because she doesn’t want to die there, hun. I know she acts like she doesn’t want anyone around, but it’s all just an act. You really should go up there and see her.”

“But won’t we get in trouble if she doesn’t die in the hospital?” I say. I feel confused. I know people die everywhere all the time, and not just in hospitals, but I keep feeling like we’re doing something wrong, like we’re going to get in trouble just for being here.

Mom looks at me pityingly. “No one is getting into trouble for anything,” she says gently, but the way she says it makes me think she means something more.
I wait until the next morning to see her. The house is quiet. I don’t know where everyone is. I tiptoe across the hardwood floor in my socks so she can’t hear me above the noise of the music coming from her radio. It’s a song I don’t know, an unfamiliar pop tune from the 50’s.

Her eyes are closed, her lips parted. I won’t have to say anything, then. The hospice nurse sees me and steps quietly out of the room. I sit down in the chair, my back to her, and look out the window. I can just barely see the bay through the budding branches of a neighbor’s tree.

“I think it’s weird that you listen to this music,” I say, my breath fogging up the glass.

“Since when is listening to music weird,” she wheezes.

I watch a pickup truck zoom by. “But you weren’t a teenager in the 50’s. How come you never listen to music from before then?”

She coughs for a full minute, maybe more. I hear her pull a tissue out of its box and spit. “Because 50’s music doesn’t remind me of the Depression. They teach you about that at your school over in, where is it? Timbuktu?” she says and coughs again.

“I know all about the Depression. I read about it in a library book,” I say when she’s quiet.

She laughs, but it doesn’t sound like her. “Thirteen years old. Tell me, great-granddaughter, what was it like?”

The white curtain is a shroud I wrap around my face, sheer enough that I can still see the blue of the sky outside. I want to say it was like death, like watching someone die in a beautiful tree and not doing anything about it and acting like everything is okay when you should know...
perfectly well it’s not. I want to say the Depression was like loving someone and then finding out she’s practically a murderer.

But then again, maybe instead it’s like finding out you are the murderer. I would not want to find that out about myself. Maybe I would have bragged about how great the picnic was too, if it had been me, just so I could pretend it was nothing more than that, another day at the park. Maybe I’m better off, having been fooled instead of having to be the one doing the fooling.

A part of me longs to give her a hug, to hold her tight and calm the rapid thunderous slamming of her heart, but she isn’t talking to me like Great-gram anymore. She isn’t talking to me like I’m me anymore. We are both someone else, seeing each other through malfunctioning eyes.

“I know you found it,” she says quietly.

The pit of my stomach goes cold. Of course Mom would have told her. Somehow, it hadn’t occurred to me that she would tell her.

I hear her start to cry. Hoarse, breathy crying that sounds like choking. I can feel it in my own throat and all the way deep inside my chest, and suddenly I’m so scared I want nothing more than to leave, only I can’t move, I can’t get out of this chair and tiptoe back out the way I came. I can’t stand it; I’ve never seen her cry except when Christopher died. So I lie.

“It was a long time ago,” I say, but the way I say it doesn’t sound convincing, even to me. My voice sounds much older, I sound like Mom, not Rachel, during one of her sarcastic moods. I get up and pat her on the hand. It’s cold, as though she’s already gone, but suddenly she’s sitting up and grabbing my hand so hard it hurts, and I feel my own heart slam painfully inside its cage.
“I was young,” she says, her voice clearer and stronger, the voice of the Great-grandmother I knew from before. Her whitened eyes stare straight into mine, like she can see me. I look away, to the blue afghan she always uses, which has fallen to the floor. “You are young,” she says, and then she lets go and lies back down, her head turned to the wall, and I understand that there isn’t anything more to say.

* * *

She died that night, while Mom and I were asleep. I know it was her heart that did it, but still I wondered if she would have lived just a little longer if I hadn’t come back, if I hadn’t let her see the lie in my voice.

* * *

Mom, Aunt Sara, and Aunt Moe go through the house with cardboard boxes and garbage bags, dismantling what remains of Marjorie Ethel Bennett.

Most of the stuff will go to the Salvation Army, but some things, like the silver flatware and the old bone china dishes our ancestors brought from England, will be parceled out among the family—a diaspora of plates and spoons.

Their intermittent footsteps rap on the ceiling over my head; the distant sounds of toilets flushing, children shouting, the television and the phone, all sift down through the air to me, reminding me of Mengo Hospital when I was sick. I am in the cellar, staring at the box where I’d found the postcard a little over a year ago. I wish I could go back to that moment when I was supposed to get the potatoes for Great-gram. I wish that’s all I had done, instead of snooping through things that didn’t belong to me. Of course, if I really could go back in time, I would go
back even farther than that, to the day on the mountain, and do whatever I could to keep
Christopher from going down that trail, even if it meant tattling on him, even if it meant being, as
he’d said, a pussy.

I know I should wish to go even farther back than that, to save the man from the beautiful
tree, and so save my Great-gram from herself, but I don’t. I just want things to go back to the
way they were.

*  *  *

Mrs. Martin, the elderly woman from next door who took Great-gram to the emergency room
when she had her heart attack, comes by. In her bird-boned arms: a macaroni casserole, and then,
my mother. She reaches for me, the force of her old-lady strength a shock. I stumble away from
them, these older women, women of experience—hidden knowledge—and fold myself onto the
couch where I recede dimly from their view.

“She looked peaceful, Mary. She saw the light and I just know she went softly.” Mrs.
Martin says. Her smile is sad, but it’s the nose that draws me in: it’s long, narrow, and rather
fierce, much like Sister Imelda’s nose, and for a moment I’m disoriented. Nothing about this
woman is Ugandan—she’s wearing old-lady pants, the pull-on stretch kind with the elastic
waistband, her thinning hair is dyed a funny orangey-red, and her skin is so thin and pale she
looks as though she’s about to dissolve. And yet her nose looks like the nose of a woman who is
black.

She’s still saying something, but I can’t make out the words anymore. All I can hear now
is: she went softly, over and over, until the words don’t sound English anymore. I think of the
poem Fridah showed me the day I left, called Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night. She
handed the book it was in to me—I don’t know where she’d gotten it from, she must have spent her chicken money to buy it—her eyes lowered, still shy of me, it was the first of several peace offerings we would share, ones that for us couldn’t come from anywhere but the worn pages of a book.

It was a beautiful poem, about what makes a death a good death, but it didn’t sound anything like what Mrs. Martin said about Great-gram’s death. No one uses those words, good death, who would want to? But it’s exactly what Jan Martin and Dylan Thomas are talking about: what makes a death a good death. Only they don’t define a good death the same way: rage. Do not go gently. She went softly. She saw the light. Burn, rave, blaze. Peaceful.

What did she think about, as she lay in the darkness, dying alone? Did she remember the black man hanging from the tree, like a withering flower about to fall? Did she think about me, and about Christopher, whom she surely must have known was black?

My eyelids are stones, I am too tired. I am tired of people, of places, of words.

That’s pretty much everything.

I am Rachel Leah Jefferson, age thirteen, and I am tired of everything.

* * *

On the day of the funeral I finally wrote on the postcard I’d bought at Queen Elizabeth, the one with the elephants, and later that day I stood with it over the hole where her coffin had just been lowered, the world swayed, and I let go.

On it, the words:
I’m sorry I couldn’t forgive you.

Your great-granddaughter,

Rachel Leah Jefferson

* * *

At noon, under the glaring equatorial sun, I stand in front of the metal gate at the Namuyangu compound. _The Rape of the Pearl_ is in the backpack slung over my shoulder, and next to it, _Lynching in the United States_. Before we left, I used my old library card to check it out. From it I learned that it was not unusual for photographers to take pictures at a lynching to sell as souvenirs, and that there’s even a name for it: lynching postcard. When it was time to go back to Uganda, I didn’t return the book.

The dog barks at me from the other side of the gate as I struggle with the latch. _She_ hears all of this noise, surely. She’s been waiting for me to return since the day I left. I swing the gate closed and feel the weight of her eyes—they’re on the zipper of my backpack, she’s wondering what books I’ve brought back with me, from the land of plenty.

You’re a girl and you’ve seen horrible things but you’ve also seen another girl dance through the rain without missing a beat.

* * *

I turn to face her and as I do so I feel the roundness of the earth beneath the soles of my shoes. Or at least I think I do.
“Rachel!” She squeals and throws her arms around me, around the backpack with the books. When I feel the warmth of her skin, I think of the beautiful tree, but instead of the man in the noose, it’s her I see. My skin burns with shame, like sunburn, and I pull away. Muzungu.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I suppose you hate me now,” she says in her clearly enunciated schoolgirl English. The first reference to our kiss, it sounds as practiced as a recited poem, and I flinch when I hear the word hate. It’s such a definitive word. Somehow it’s a strongly American word. I’m surprised she even knows it. I’ve never heard her use it before.

I kick at the ground and watch the cloud of dirt rise. “Don’t be ridiculous,” I say.

She turns away from me and marches to the house, but just as her foot touches the first step, she halts and looks pointedly at me over the curve of her shoulder. The hem of her dress flutters in a sudden gust of wind as she stands there, regarding me with eyes as sharp as flint. “Guess I’ll go make chai for you, then,” she says in a cutting tone.

I shrug. “Fine.” A drop of cold rain lands on my arm, and another on the end of my nose. Fridah blows air out of her mouth and goes inside. I stand there like that, with one hand still clinging to the gate until long after the rain has begun to flay my skin.

*   *   *

We ignore each other for days. I slide the stolen book about lynching under my foam mattress and feel the unforgiving shape of it against my back as I feign sleep.

*   *   *

The first thunderstorm of the rainy season drives her to my bed. She hides under my blanket, silent but for the occasional nervous giggle. I sit cross-legged on the bed beside her, watching
lighting rend the blackened sky. We stay like that for hours, until the thunder fades to a whisper. I watch the rise and fall of her chest under the blanket as the room grows lighter, and feel the expansion of my own chest, infinite and dark as the universe. I lie down next to her and feel the warmth of her through the thin cloth of the blanket. According to *Lynching in the United States*, there were ten documented lynchings in 1929, the year Great-gram sent the postcard. There’s no return address, but I could figure out where her cousin Edie lived, I could search through other photos for the beautiful tree. I could figure out which lynching was the one she witnessed, if I really wanted to.

Above the beating of the rain on the tin roof, I hear a voice, a person shouting. I open my eyes and see Fridah looking down at me. I sit up quickly, and then we hear Fridah’s parents outside the door.

There’s a man, a stranger, at the gate. His t-shirt has the American flag on it. I stare at the flag like I’ve never seen it before, and it occurs to me that the red stripes are the color of blood, our flag has the color of blood all over it. Rain rolls down the man’s bare head and into his eyes like someone else’s tears. He is saying something to Mr. Namuyangu and pointing, his eyes wide with fear. We turn and see, past black shopping bags rushing down the ditch and a thin dog sitting on his haunches, a white, mud-splattered car.

There’s a young woman inside, a girl really, not much older than we are, her belly swollen, her head thrown against the back of the seat. Mr. Namuyangu bends down and examines the rut in the road. He shakes his head and sends us back to the house for cardboard. As we turn to go, the girl wails like they do here at funerals. We make our way on the slippery road, our bare feet sinking in the cold red mud. “Do you think we will see the baby come out?”
Fridah says. We find some empty boxes from their store and run back. Mrs. Namuyangu is in the car, holding the girl’s hand and talking to her. The rain has let up and the clouds are beginning to thin, but it’s still enough to make Fridah’s skin luminescent. I reach out and trace a line with my finger on her bare arm. She smiles shyly at me as the car’s tires shriek against the torn cardboard.

We push against the back of the car with Mr. Namuyangu as the American flag man tries to drive away. Mr. Namuyangu readjusts the cardboard, and then we push and we push and the car fishtails away from us, spraying us with mud, and for a long moment I think Mrs. Namuyangu isn’t coming back with us, but then the car stops. She walks towards us slowly, her hips swaying, aware that we are watching her. I reach out to her and she takes first my hand and then Fridah’s, and we walk slowly to the house like this, our backs to the wailing girl, the red sunrise on our faces.

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I dream of the car. The windows are blurry with rain and I can just barely make out the shadow of Fridah’s face on the other side of the glass, looking in. Do you think we will see the baby come out? I struggle to reach for the door handle, but my belly is so big I can’t move. The car bucks back and forth, and that’s when I notice I’m alone in the car. I flounder on the seat helplessly, and then I tip my head to the sky and wail. I can feel Fridah pushing from behind, pushing and pushing, until I slip away from her, the car careening down the slick road.

I wake up and look at Fridah sleeping in her bed. I want to tell her about the dream, but I’m still afraid of her, of us.

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Shyly I show her the pictures we’d taken of each other the first day we’d met. I slide them out of the waistband of my jeans as we sit on our mats eating posho and beans for lunch. She looks at them silently for what feels like forever, then she smiles and jumps up to show Mrs. Namuyangu a of picture of herself doing a silly dance pose.

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Then one day I see her sitting cross-legged on the floor in our room, her neck bent as though in prayer or meditation, her head recently shaved, her face glowing from the candlelight next to her. I’ve seen her like this a thousand times, and so I think nothing of it now. I come in from taking care of the chickens, she’s been neglecting her chores lately, and I’ve been covering for her even though we’re still tiptoeing carefully around each other. I lie down on my mattress and throw the blanket over my head. I hear Fridah get up; I assume she’s leaving because I’m here.

“Rachel,” she says softly. The softness a dangerous soft.

I ignore her, hoping she’ll think I’ve fallen asleep, but she isn’t fooled, she knows it takes me awhile to sleep. She nudges my foot, gently.

“Rachel.” I feel the blanket slide away from my face and see her hovering over me, so close I can smell the cheap street market perfume she sometimes dabs on her neck, so close I can’t deny that look in her eyes, so close I reach out to her with my arms and grab her by the neck. She tumbles laughing into bed with me, our arms and legs tangled so I hardly know whose leg belongs to whom, and we laugh and we laugh, our fingers darting at each other’s stomach, sides, armpits, not unlike the way a mother tickles a child. She’s relentless, I can hardly breathe. I roll on top of her and pin her hands to the mattress with mine. I stare down at her, surprised by my boldness. Her eyes bore into mine with a half-mocking, half-pleading look, and I know she
has forgiven me, if there was ever anything to forgive. And then I lean down and kiss her on the mouth, deeply, the length of my body erupting in light and shadow. She presses my moist palm against the fabric of her uniform, sending waves of electricity up my arm. I feel the softness of her breast and am surprised to find she isn’t wearing a bra, even though she usually does. We fumble with each other’s clothing, our warm skin touching here and there, until we hear the dog barking at Mrs. Namuyangu in the front yard.

We spring apart and smooth our clothing back down over our skin. Fridah shoots me a look as Mrs. Namuyangu pokes her head in the doorway.

“Kulikayo,” we say in unison, our voices too high. Welcome home. I avoid looking at both of them, I’m sure Mrs. Namuyangu can sense the difference in our bodies, the difference between us, but if she does, she says nothing and in a moment she is gone.

Fridah sits down next to me and leans her head against my shoulder. I feel happier than I have in a long time.

“Why do you have that book?” she asks.

I take her hand in mine and trace the lines on her palm. “What book?”

“That horrible book. The one you brought back from America.”

My body goes rigid with fear. I drop her hand and get up. I fumble through my backpack, pretending to look for something that isn’t there. I feel her gaze heating my back, and suddenly I feel intensively alive, like when you’re standing on a cliff high above water, about to jump in, and I know with my whole being that I have to hold on to this feeling, that I have to do whatever it takes to never let it go.
I pull her to her feet. “Forget books! Let’s go outside, let’s do something!” I shout.

Fridah giggles. “You sound like Taataa when he’s had too much to drink.” But she allows me to lead her out of the house and into the heat. We run down the middle of the road, leaping over puddles, our muscles quivering, daring cars and old women to dodge out of our way. My feet pound the hard-packed dirt, my lungs fill with the smoke of cooking fires. Boda boda motorcycles zoom past us, car horns honk, people stare at me, some even shout, but I don’t care. My body vibrates with a certainty I only half understand, my legs taking me down roads with purpose, until I realize where I am going, where I am leading us too.

I don’t know how I know where to go, the roads here don’t follow a pattern I can discern, but soon I see the armless mannequins arranged on the second floor balcony, and the pharmacy sign below. In front of the building is the man who sells bowls and plates, the one who scratches his arm when a woman walks by.

“I know this place. Maama comes here,” Fridah says. She turns and looks at me expectantly, but I don’t know why I’ve brought us here until I say it, until I tell her I’ve brought her here to watch me steal something from that man, the arm-scratcher. We stand across the road with our backs to a palm tree. Fridah wants to see if it’s true, about the arm-scratching, so we wait. He rearranges some plates on the blanket and then picks up an unlit cigarette and sets it between his lips. He looks poorer than I remember. The other sellers wear trousers and button down shirts, but not him. The white sleeveless shirt he has on is clearly dirty, even from across the street. And then I hear her voice, as plain as though it was her and not Fridah standing next to me. I was young. I was young. I was young.

“Ay.”

“The horrible book.”

She nods, but she’s still watching the man with an intensity that makes me jealous. Look at me, I want to shout. I shove my hands into my pockets and feel the emptiness in them. “I was looking in it for my Great-grandmother. My jjaajjaa.”

Then she does look at me, her eyes wide, and I feel something falling away, a lightness.

“Your jjaajjaa is mudugavu, African?”

I shake my head slowly. “No.”

She turns away.

“She did something bad,” I say, my voice cracking.

A stork lands in the tree above our heads. I look up at it, at its ugly bald head, so the tears don’t run down my face. Bird shit covers the bark like white paint.

“You’re not bad,” she says quickly—too quickly, I think, and I don’t believe her, I don’t want to believe her. I am bad, I’ve done bad things, I’ve hurt the people who love me, and the worst part of it is, I’m not sure I want to stop.

The faceless mannequins stare down at us, like people in an audience. A gecko perches on the curb in front of us, I don’t know for how long. I kick at it with my shoe, watch him dart away into the gutter. I unwrap a stick of gum for Fridah and one for me and chew and chew and chew, hoping it will slow my heart back down.
A woman in a green and yellow gomesi, a traditional dress, stops at one of the hawkers a short distance away. The arm-scratcher drops his cigarette and watches her, the hope lighting up his face for a brief moment. The sight of him looking like that catches in my throat. I think about the homeless people back home, in Bellingham, holding up their cardboard signs, scanning the faces of people in cars, trying not to look too eager, and I realize I can’t steal something from him—it would be too impractical anyway, because how could we hide a plate or a bowl in our clothes? The woman makes her way slowly to him, touching jewelry, books, watches, until she reaches his blanket. He scratches his arm and nods at her, saying nothing.

Fridah laughs. I grab her by the arm and pull her away. We turn down another street in the direction of home. This one is crowded, and full of more hawkers, a sort of mini street market with everything you could ever want. My fingers crave the touch of something I don’t need, something I can waste or give away, a mere whim. I don’t care who sees me, I don’t care about police officers with AK-47s. A small plastic bottle of perfume with a pink cap in the shape of a ball catches my eye in the dusty haze of the crowd. I reach out and take it from the stand as casually as though I intend to buy it, and then I grab Fridah by the hand and bolt.

We dodge around people and potholes, laughing wildly, the perfume bottle so small it fits in the palm of my hand, a thing concealed. When I look back, I realize no one has noticed what I’ve done. For the first time since coming here, I am invisible, and it feels powerful, it feels good.

We stop to catch our breath, and I hand the perfume, which I notice with a jolt is called New York, to Fridah. She stares at it and then tucks it down her collar, where my hands had been just a short time ago, but she looks disappointed.
“Don’t you like it?” I ask

She starts walking again, quickly, and I have to jog to catch up. “You did not need to do that,” she says quietly.

I grab her hand, but she keeps walking. “I wanted to give you something,” I say uncertainly, but the truth is, I don’t know why I stole it, I’ve never stolen anything in my life before—at least, before the postcard.

“I do not need you to give me things,” she says, her voice stern, but her eyes look at me with pity.
Part IV

Rachel Bareeba

On the arm of land circling the marina, next to darkened fishing boats, is Great-gram’s favorite restaurant, though I hardly recognize it. The Squalicum Harbor Oyster House, it’s still called. Mom said it had been renovated, but it looks like a completely different place.

Great-gram would have a tizzy if she could see it now.

I take my mother by the arm and lead her inside, where the wait staff takes us to our table. The walls are decorated with fishing nets, anchors, star fish, conch shells from a tropical beach. Only the starfish look like they’ve actually been out to sea. There’s a bar that looks too polished, flanked by parlor palm trees, and an aquarium filled with exotic fish. The wait staff are dressed uniformly, the men in white button-down shirts and black chinos, the women looking the same except for the black skirts that come down to the knees, and suddenly I’m seeing myself back in Uganda, years ago, in my school uniform, the one from Sir Joseph Thomas Secondary School. I hated that uniform—a slender red tie, prickly white blouse, and knee-length green skirt affair—even more than I hated the one-piece blue dress from St. Margaret’s.

It’s just another seafood restaurant, done over as a parody of the fishing industry. The Oyster House I remember didn’t have anything on the walls except for a large painting, done by a local artist, of a fishing boat called the Sea-Nile, a mirror image of the boats on the other side of the windows. I don’t know what they’ve done with the painting.

“New owner,” Mom says when she sees the look on my face. “It does get more customers now.”
I force myself to look at her, this woman I’ve only ever known as mother. She’s pale, and thin as bone. She’s lost most of her graying hair to chemo, but instead of the wig I bought for her, she’s wearing a baseball cap, the old pink one she used to make me put on in Masaka, and this plus her blouse and ankle-length denim skirt ensemble makes her look like a little girl—vulnerable, and intensely naïve, though she’s seen too much to be either of those things ever again.

I pick at the loose skin around a fingernail. “How old would Great-gram be, now?”

“Oh, Goodness. Let me see,” she says and closes her eyes. “She was born in 1913 and died when it was spring. ’97 I think it must have been.”

“She would be 102,” I say slowly. “She could still be alive today, theoretically.”

Mom shrugs. “Theoretically.”

I swirl the water in my glass and watch the ice cubes clink against the sides. “Everything is so different now. I wonder what she would think about it all.”

“God knows,” she says.

I watch her looking at the menu. She holds it up to her face and leans in close; I should talk to her optometrist about her eyeglass prescription. Had she ever looked at the postcard like that? Did she examine each and every human face down to the particular curve of a mouth or streak of dirt on a pant leg, as I had? Had she looked for Great-gram’s face in the crowd? How did she feel when she saw the postcard for the first time? How did she feel about Great-gram? If I had been a braver person, I would have asked her about it long ago. It’s been eighteen years
since she found the postcard in my things at St. Margaret’s, but we still haven’t talked about it, not really.

Mom sneezes, blows her nose into a paper napkin.

“Are you sure you want to be here? We could leave, I could make you barley soup.” I’m worried about the onset of a cough, the twitch of a nose, anything that could compromise her weakened immune system. The kid in the high chair at the table next to us has a runny nose. She catches me looking at her and smiles, her lips greasy with snot. I want to tell the parents to wipe her nose, but of course I don’t.

Mom’s eyes sharpen. “You’re worse than the damn doctors. I still have every right to enjoy myself.” I flinch at the word damn.

“Death is coming one way or another,” she adds quietly.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry. When did you become so apologetic? It’s not like you.”

I look away. The kid in the highchair has started to whine. The father doesn’t seem to notice, he’s telling his wife something as he cuts into his steak, but she’s staring at her daughter with a look of distaste, as though she has eaten something bitter.

I’ve seen that bitter look before, on my own mother’s face. I remember the time very clearly. I had just gotten home; we were living in a different house near our old block in the Happy Valley neighborhood, and I happened to catch a glimpse of her in her room, folding towels. She had that withdrawn, pinched look—the look of a woman who has recently divorced (again). The air smelled of dryer sheets, a sickly-sweet smell I wasn’t used to after years of
hanging laundry to dry in Uganda, and I sneezed. She looked up and saw me, saw my permed and dyed hair, which I had just had done for the first time—the perm at a salon, the black dye in Jeremiah’s bathroom. She didn’t say anything, not with words, she just kept staring at me as she folded her laundry slowly and deliberately, but she had that bitter look. How it had stung me to see her looking at me like that.

“I think I’ll have the crab cakes. I’ve never had their crab cakes.” She says this with effort, as though the mere thought of eating has exhausted her.

I open my menu. “Okay, but it’s kind of expensive. You really think you can eat it?”

Mom looks up at me, aggrieved.

“You know what?” I say quickly. “Let’s have the crab cakes, and the chocolate cake, too.”

She closes the menu slowly and folds her hands together. “Rachel. Why are you doing this?”

The way she says “this” makes me nervous. “I’m sorry Mom. You can order whatever you want. *Really*. You should have the crab cakes, they look so good,” I say, feigning cheerfulness.

Her eyes take hold of mine. “I’m not talking about food. Forget food,” she says with a tired wave of her hand. “I’m talking about *this*.” She reaches across the table and grabs a curl just above my ear and pulls it straight. When she lets go, it snaps back into place. “What are you running from? You’re my daughter, you’re *white*. Why are you trying to be something you’re not?”
Something you’re not. My eyes fill with tears. At the other table, the little girl’s whining
turns into a full-blown tantrum, and I think of my boys, Sam and James, how small and young
they are. I think of them at their boarding school in Entebbe and wonder if they ever cry at night,
after the lights have gone out. They wouldn’t tell me if they did, just as I never told Mom. We
both watch the father take the little girl away, leaving the mother alone with her food, but then I
feel Mom’s eyes on me again.

“After all these years, and you still don’t have an answer for me?” Her voice is softer
now, less confrontational.

I take a deep breath. I don’t want to cry, not here, not in front of her. “I’m just a person,
Mom, a human being. That’s what I’m being.”

“But you’re a white person. You’re white. Not black. You of all people should know why
you can’t just up and do what you’ve done.” She closes her menu. “A lot of people have been
hurt by you doing it,” she adds.

“You once told me it wasn’t polite to see a person’s race, to see their skin color!”

“Rachel, this is different. What you’re doing? Many people are so angry with you.”

My face grows hot, and suddenly I feel the urge to go to the bathroom, but I can’t
remember where it is.

“Who’s angry with me,” I hiss as the tears begin to fall.

Mom looks at me sadly, and as soon as she does I realize what she’s talking about. “Look
at what happened to you and George.”
I push my chair away from the table and stand, but our waiter chooses this moment to appear. “What can I get for you ladies?” he asks, a bit breathlessly, his eyes on Mom. I brush the tears away, grateful he isn’t looking at me, though it occurs to me that I’m no longer young and attractive enough to make men notice me.

“I’ll have the Dungeness crab cakes and a glass of water,” Mom says, her eyes still on mine. I sit down clumsily and flip through the menu. I’m so upset, my hands are shaking.

The waiter asks if I need more time. I smile, he’s so young, he has no idea how that question hurts me. I order the first thing I see—lobster penne, and a glass of wine.

As soon as he leaves, I take Mom by the hand. “What happened with my marriage has nothing to do with who I am.” I say it slowly, enunciating every syllable, but as soon as the words come out, I realize how silly it sounds. Of course it had to do with who I am. Just not in the way she thinks.

Mom pulls her hand away. “I’m worried about the boys.”

The waiter returns with our drinks, and I take an enormous swig of wine. “They’re fine, Mom, really.” I say.

“Are you sure?”

The father from the table next to us comes back with the little girl in his arms. She’s quiet and smiling.

“Of course I’m sure,” I snap. “Wasn’t I okay?” I hesitate for a moment, and then add, “Wasn’t Christopher?”
“Were you happy in Uganda, all those years ago?” She looks away and smiles bitterly.

“Ah, happy is such a bullshit word,” she says with a shake of her head, which makes the bill of the baseball cap hang crookedly over her face. She straightens it and says, “What I think I mean to say is, did you feel safe?”

“Safe, Mom”?

“When I made the decision to move to Uganda to live with Frank, I never really considered what it might be like for you, growing up in a foreign country. I should have been, but I wasn’t thinking of you. I was too devastated, I had to get away from the memories and the pain, and I was still enough in love with Frank to not think about the impact of my decisions on others—namely you.”

I pick up my napkin and start shredding it, and as I do so, the image of Great-Aunt Matilda’s face and the faces of the other adults at another dinner years ago comes rushing back, and I remember now how tense they all suddenly looked, how displeased. Something was said, I can’t remember what, but I do know it made Mom look sad and defensive. It must’ve had something to do with what I would later learn from Aunt Moe.

But why would I be thinking of that now?

I sneak a glance at Mom, aware that I haven’t given her an answer. She’s staring at the table, a look of pain on her pale face.

Then I remember something Christopher had said that day on the beach with Great-gram, the day he said his first curse word—*damn*—in front of an adult. He’d said something about a letter, which I would realize later, after Mom’s confession to me at the equator, was from Frank,
his father, but why would Frank have to send him a letter? Why didn’t he just visit him in person? Unless he was in Uganda, which is why we moved there, since, after all, that’s where he was working. And then I think I understand.

“It was my father who made you want to leave, wasn’t it? Not Christopher. You wanted to leave because Max broke up with you, once and for all, so you went back to Frank, who was in Uganda. That’s why we moved there.”

“Is that how it was, was it?” she says. Her eyelids are heavy, and there are dark stains under each eye. This is too much for her, I think, but for some reason, I can’t stop myself, I can’t stop the momentum of revelation.

“Aunt Moe told me you and Max kept seeing each other after the divorce. But I had no idea how long it had gone on. She didn’t tell me that much. I thought it was Frank you were seeing all those times we stayed at Great-Gram’s house.” I fall silent. There’s so much I want to ask her, like why didn’t Max want to see me, his own daughter? Why did she go running back to Frank? Why did she keep it all a secret? Which man did she really love? Did she even know? But I know she doesn’t have the strength for it. Not now, not ever. I’ll have to accept the mystery.

“People are always talking,” she says in a voice I only barely hear.

The waiter brings our food. Mom looks at the half a dozen or so browned crab cake patties, thick and topped with lemon and parsley, and I know any chance of an appetite she might have had a few moments ago is gone now.
The waiter tells me where I can find the bathroom. I thank him and get up to leave, but then I hesitate. “Yes Mom, I was safe. You’ve always kept me safe.”

She smiles, but I can tell by the look in her eyes she doesn’t believe it, even if I do.

* * *

In the restroom I stare at myself in the mirror and try to see myself as a mother would, as my mother does, as someone who’s known this body since birth, but not the person inside it. My mother doesn’t know me, because I don’t me. I’ve become a matryoshka doll, a doll within a doll within a doll, until there’s nothing left but my chromosomes, XX, canceling each other out.

I push several curls of hair in place, brush a crumb from my cheek, pluck goop out of the corner of my eye, and glance quickly at the color of the skin on my face, the back of my hand, the top of my arm, making sure as I always do when I’m in the bathroom or idle or simply nervous that I’m not starting to fade.

I hadn’t always thought of my body as a sort of dressmaker’s doll—a dummy waiting for someone to give it definition, a dummy that would be interpreted a thousand different ways and argued over and praised or condemned, vilified. I used to think of my body as a means to throw a ball or dodge out of the way as one went flying at me on a hot day after classes, or as a means to kiss and be kissed. I used to clothe it to keep it warm, or cool. I used to use it to read books and ski down mountains, and that had been enough, once.

I run my fingers through the curls on the back of my head and remember the first time I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a black woman reflected back at me. It was in Jeremiah’s mother’s bathroom, and I was watching Jeremiah’s large white hand in my hair.
The toilet flushes, and a woman materializes at the sink next to me and washes her hands. She leaves, and I close my eyes.

* * *

I close my eyes and give in to the sensation. Jeremiah is rearranging me. When I open them, I see a light-skinned black girl with freckles across her face, and short, black curly hair. “You’ll look more like a black girl if you make your hair do this,” he says as he works his fingers through the curls. I think of Fridah with her shaved head, how she would’ve loved to have hair like this.

The smell of ammonia is starting to make me feel queasy. “How the hell do you know what a black girl looks like?” I smile at myself in the mirror, I wink, I pout, I make an angry face.

Jeremiah leans back against the shower stall and studies me. “You’re all wound up.” He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket. “Smoke?”

“Fine, don’t tell me.” I reach for one, and like always, I see Mom’s face, disappointed and worried. “Eh, I’d better not.”

He shrugs and takes one out and lights it. “I still don’t see how you’re going to pull it off, though,” he says as he takes a drag on his cigarette. I smile at the memory of Sister Imelda and the time I went to her class in a t-shirt and jeans. I inhale his smoke, hoping it will cover up the awful hair dye smell. “Easy. I just walk through the door and sit down in my seat, same as always.”
With his free hand he rubs my head hard, until the curls are sticking out all over the place. “Well, all I can say is, if you turn out to be the next John Howard Griffin, I want an autograph.”

“You wish.”

“Seriously, though. I think it’s cool, this new look.”

“Oh you do, do you?” I say as I throw the box of black hair dye in the trash.

“Yeah.”

I cross my arms and lean against the sink. I marvel at the greenness of his gentle eyes, the thick blonde ponytail so much like the one I had until a few weeks ago. He thinks he’s as unlovable as an old shoe. “You don’t have to pretend with me, I know your deepest darkest secrets, remember?”

“Speaking of deep dark secrets,” he says and stubs his cigarette out in the sink. “It’s getting late.”

The walk down the hall to his room lasts an eternity, though it’s over in seconds. I arrange myself on the bed, my eyes averted, and he arranges himself in front of his sock drawer. Jeremiah has rearranged me, and now I help rearrange him. We are rearranging each other, here, now, on his narrow bed. When he’s ready, I get on my knees and back up against him. His eyes are closed, because he’s somewhere else right now, he isn’t here. But neither am I. We go through the motions, and when we finish, I say. “This is more than just a look, you know.”

His eyes are closed, and his narrow chest rises and falls. “I know.”
“I’m not acting. Not anymore.”

“It’s okay, Jeffers. I get it.”

I stare up at the ceiling, at the ancient plastic glow-in-the-dark stars, though they don’t shine anymore, they’ve worn out. “I know you do.”

“I know.” He sounds tired, and old.

“You still haven’t talked to him yet?”

His jaw clenches, though I know he isn’t angry, not at me. “No.”

“You should talk to him.”

The bed creaks. I look over and see Jeremiah pulling on a pair of briefs. I try to feel something, anything, but there’s nothing, not that it would matter. “He’s pretty easy to talk to,” I say.

“So is my grandfather,” he says as he tugs his t-shirt down over his head.

“I thought he was dead.”

“Exactly, asshole,” he says, but at least he’s smiling again.

I get up and pull on my underwear. “All I’m saying is, you never really know.”

There’s the sound of a door opening downstairs. “Hurry up, Jeffers, she’s here.”

I leave my hair rumpled and the top three buttons of my shirt undone as planned and follow him down the stairs.
This part of it is an act, of course, but I’d rather act than do nothing.

* * *

Mom hardly touches the crab cakes. We make a big to-do out of packing them in the Styrofoam take-home box, for later. We both know I will eat them. At home, I heat up a can of soup and line her pills up on the dining table, biggest to smallest. We marvel at the variety of their sizes and colors. I can imagine someone, someone like Christopher, collecting them. Mom looks at all of them and sighs, then uses the soup to swallow them. All of this makes her tired; it’s time to see her off to bed.

* * *

It’s true, what I told my mother at dinner. I was safe, as safe as anyone can be in a consistently unpredictable world. It’s easy to blame mothers for everything, it’s a cop-out, and it happens all the time. Though it wasn’t her fault or the fault of her own mother, it was Fridah who wasn’t safe.

Rachel Jefferson

Fridah is failing her math class at our new school, Sir Joseph Thomas, a coed boarding school in Jinja. Everyone knows it. We know which kid is number one in our class or number 236. Numbers are place values, they hold potential, they carry meaning, they symbolize. Numbers are more than just a row of wooden beads on an abacus. But so is she.

We are sixteen, and that means we are almost adults. Almost.
Rachel Bareeba

Numbers always mean something, although I didn’t know it back then, not really, smart as I believed I was.

Rachel Jefferson

On the end of term report card in front of her is a red mark with the word “Fair” and a comment to “try harder” in her math teacher’s florid handwriting. There are the words “excellent” and “exceeds expectations” from her English, French, and Luganda teachers.

She’s tired and there are dark circles under her eyes from studying late into the night, but at the end of the day, after classes are over, she drops by his office to find out what she can do to improve her grade in the next term. The abstractions of math, she’d always felt, held so little scope for the imagination. But after reading Carl Sagan’s novel Contact, she’s begun to rethink her opinion. After all, wasn’t Sagan good with numbers and imaginative? You’d have to be, to fill the universe with other beings, beings never before seen by the human eye. Though she’d always assumed her imagination was well-developed, she’d had to concede that never, before reading Contact, had she considered the vastness of the universe or her tiny role within it. And didn’t this require an understanding of numbers? She’s hopeful, she tells me, that her math teacher, Mr. Wambuzi, will not only help her with math, but with seeing the world through new eyes.

That same evening, even though she’s the vice president and is supposed to be there, Fridah isn’t at the dance club meeting. The other girls notice, they speculate. But no one accuses
her of anything, not yet. Without her, my pathetic attempts to dance go unnoticed. If she’d been there, she would have danced in that carefree way of hers, as she always had. She would have been supremely herself, looking at me with that secret smile of hers, but after that day, I would never see her dance this way again.

Rachel Bareeba

Inside his teacher’s briefcase, shoved under manila folders and copies of school reports is a lurid romance novel, Uganda’s equivalent of Fifty Shades of Grey, whatever that might have been back then. I can’t imagine Mr. Wambuzi owning something more literary, like The Rape of the Pearl, although I’m sure the title would have piqued his interest. I know this is probably unfair of me. In truth I have no idea what the man read, I never went through the things in his office, although I did have the opportunity, once. Perhaps he didn’t read at all.

Rachel Jefferson

By lights out, she’s in her bunk bed, the one she shares with me, but she doesn’t say anything when I come in. I can tell she isn’t sleeping, but I don’t think anything of it, after all, I don’t always feel like talking either, and so I climb up to my bed and go to sleep.

At the dance club meeting the next evening, she’s there. She has a pack of wintergreen chewing gum: a rare delicacy at Sir Joseph Thomas, or any boarding school here. The girls, who have always adored Fridah for her kindness, whisper behind cupped hands. They don’t whisper
in my ear—I’m too close to her, and for the kids at Sir Joseph Thomas, I’m still too new to be anything more than muzungu; I have seen things. She doles out the pieces, she has enough of them, one for each girl, and when she gets to me and sees how I look at her, she averts her eyes.

*I don’t need you to give me things.*

When the meeting is over, I rush back to the dorm, I’m furious, I dig through my backpack. Which book would she have traded, and how could she? For one lousy pack of gum? It wasn’t like her. Yet all the books are still there, and for a moment I feel nothing but relief. But then the questions come. What then did she trade? Why? I thought I knew everything she’d brought with her, and I was sure she had nothing anyone would want, surely no one would want her used bar of soap or toothbrush?

*Rachel Bareeba*

I may have been menstruating like a woman for a few years by then, I may have read many books, and I may have seen more of the world than many kids my age ever would, but I was still very much a child.

*Rachel*

This is the story about my life, the lives of Rachel, both the old and the new, and the people who touched something in both of them. I’m sure this has occurred to you by now. But a story is not the same thing as a life, not quite, no matter how heavily it might breathe or how hard it might
kick and scream. My point is this: a story can be for entertainment, or it can be for learning how other people see. It can propagandize, it can moralize. It might even do all of these things and more, but rarely does a person’s life behave exactly the way it unfolds in a story or in a person’s memory, and it is because stories have to survive that you can never really know whether everything happened in the manner the storyteller chooses to present them, or rather, as she chooses to remember them.

Let’s be frank, here. What if the storyteller’s just trying to make you keep reading the damn book, just because she can? What if she’s trying to pull the wool over your eyes? On the other hand, what if you’re misunderstanding something, or missing a point? What if you aren’t getting it? Where does that leave the storyteller? Because as Fridah and I read our books together, first by candlelight in her darkened room, and later, by the portable book lights in our dorm—or at least we did until she started disappearing at night—I would slowly come to the realization that books are like matryoshka dolls, too. Every story is really a story within a story within a story within a—you get the point. I am Rachel, and this is the story about my life and the people who touched something in both of me, but don’t take my word for it.

On the other hand, perhaps I’ve been careless; perhaps I actually have made the argument that a story is the same thing as a life. We breathe, we kick. Read on—and we live.
Rachel

On the way to Jinja, Mrs. Namuyangu asks us what we are going to do with our lives. I look at Fridah, who smiles at me. She already knows, she always knew. That question never takes her by surprise.

*What do you want to be when you grow up? What can you see yourself doing?* As if I’m not being anything now, as if I’m doing nothing. As if I could possibly know what the grown-up Rachel will be like. I mean, if I can’t be trusted to vote or drink alcohol or fight in a war or get married and have kids until I’m a grown-up, how can I possibly know what I want to do with my grown-up life before I’m grown-up?

This much I do know: I want to be here forever, sitting next to Fridah, basking in her sunlight.

Rachel Jefferson

When she entered his office at the end of the school day, he must’ve already known how he would manage the thing, how he would trick her and how he would keep it a secret from the other teachers. There was a lot to think about: where to do it, when to do it, and how often could he get away with it? His office would be too risky, students and teachers might drop by unannounced, though that gave it a certain appeal to him, I’m sure, and Fridah would later say that he did have her bend over for him against his desk once or twice. But the most logical place would be in the privacy of his bed. He lived at the school in the same building as the Senior 4 boys, so there wouldn’t be any legitimate reason for Fridah to be seen coming and going from
that part of the school unless she was taking water to the garden behind it, where potatoes, cassava, beans and the like were grown for the school’s kitchen, and so a dirty red jerry can became Fridah’s alibi.

How she could have thought his “offer,” as she would later call it, could be good for her is anyone’s guess. Our parents were far away, and we were young and stupid, as all teenagers everywhere are, although years later I would hear that Mr. Wambuzi got himself fired for “inappropriate” behavior, so perhaps I’m being unfair to teenagers.

I imagine his approach was crude and to the point. You’re a very beautiful young woman, he would’ve said as his eyes touched the most intimate parts of her body in a way a teacher’s never had before. What can I do for you?

But before she can rhapsodize on how wrong she’s been about mathematics, before she can even say Carl Sagan, he’s laying it out for her, he’s telling her what she’ll have to do if she wants a higher grade in his class, which she’ll need if she wants a better future, one with a good career, money, a husband worth his salt. But what does Fridah want for her future? He doesn’t ask, and she doesn’t say, though she knows, she knows she wants to dance, she wants to travel the world and see it as only a dancer may, from the uplifting height of a stage.

Rachel Bareeba

Weeks would go by before I would learn the truth about that little pack of wintergreen gum.

*   *   *

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At seven o’clock I stand outside the bus stop by Bayview Cemetery in the dust motes of the setting April sun, unable to move, Jeremiah quiet at my side, our eyes on the gravestones rising out of the earth in front of us, listening to the rush of traffic on Woburn Street behind us. I close my eyes and try to imagine Christopher’s face as a thirty-year old man, but I can’t, I don’t know what my own little brother would look like.

Jeremiah met me at the bus stop at the last minute, after I gave Mom her pills and tucked her into bed. I’m still wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, the black appropriate for mourning even if the t-shirt and jeans aren’t. Great-gram was interred up in Ferndale, so I haven’t been inside this cemetery since Christopher was buried here twenty years ago, even though Mom came every Saturday in the year after his death, before we moved to Uganda. Every time she asked me to go, I feigned illness or found something that needed to be done, like a homework assignment that didn’t exist. She never bothered to ask me to come here with her when we moved back.

Up the hill, out of sight, I can hear the voices of other mourners, and then it’s quiet. I stand on the edge of the sidewalk and wonder when I’ll have to come here for the next funeral—my mother’s.

I feel Jeremiah’s hand take mine. “Ready, Jeffers?” I look up at him and see how time has changed him. He’s even taller than he was in high school, and his carefully–groomed ponytail has been replaced with a shorter style. Sunlight catches in the small silver earring he’s started wearing in one ear. There are laugh lines around his mouth, as though everything he says is somehow parenthetic, but he’s been spared from crow’s feet, so far. He has aged well, which is no doubt due in part to finally coming out as a gay man, even though doing so has cost him things most of us take for granted.
“Thanks for coming, Jer,” I say and squeeze his hand. “I guess we should go in, now.” He nods, looks at the gravestones. I’m not the only one with ghosts in there. “I guess we should,” he says. A gull calls in the air over our heads, and the sun goes on setting.

We walk up the slope, hand-in-hand. “Remember the time a bull elephant was standing in front of us in the road?” he says. I smile. “Are you talking about when you vomited matooke all over the floor of my Jeep?” He winks at me. “That doesn’t sound like something I would do.”

An elderly couple emerges from behind a large granite headstone resembling the Washington Monument. “Oh it doesn’t, does it?” I say. “Unless there was alcohol involved,” he says after a thoughtful pause. The couple walks towards us slowly, and I see the elderly woman is clasping a bouquet of black roses in her hands. The man, who has her by the elbow, nods at us as we pass, but the woman doesn’t even seem to register our presence, her grief is still so palpable, so recent. A mother in mourning. “There was a flask of waragi in your pocket, I believe,” I say, playing along.

“Ah, well... I suppose that sounds like something I might do,” he says. “So the bull elephant, Rachel. Are you picturing him? One of his tusks was broken off at the tip, and there was a rip in his ear.”

“Yes, I remember him. His name was Edwin,” I say.

He looks at me. “Was?”

“Is. His name is Edwin.”
“But maybe was,” he says. I stub the toe of my shoe on a root. White blossoms dangle over our heads, a plaque on the trunk says it’s an eastern dogwood tree—far from home it’s native home range. It isn’t a very big tree, and Jeremiah has to duck as we walk under it.

“I’d have to check the database.”

“So the fucking poachers got the old codger.”

I sigh. “Yes. He wandered out of the park, though it’s just as likely he was chased out.”

“I see. Are you still trying to protect me, Rachel?”

I squeeze his hand. “Always.”

We pause under a big paper birch tree. A sign halfway up the trunk says it was planted in 1917. So it was a contemporary of Great-gram’s, who was born just four years earlier. I press my hand against the shaggy white bark. It feels cool and solid, a tree of substance. “I remember this tree,” I whisper. “We’re getting close.”

“So Edwin. The old bastard,” Jeremiah says. “He comes barrel-assing down the middle of the road at us, right? And you just sit there and lay on the horn like we’re stuck in New York traffic. And after you’d spent all afternoon yelling at the new vet tech not to honk the horn every time we came to blind spot in the road. Only you didn’t call it ‘honking.’ What did you call it?”

“Hoot. They say hoot in Uganda.”

He slaps his thigh. “That’s right, don’t hoot. Very cute,” he says as we start walking again. My heart bangs against my chest, and my palms slicken with sweat, but either Jeremiah doesn’t notice or he’s being nice.
“So there you are, hooting at that bastard Edwin, and he comes right up to the damn car and starts stroking it with his trunk. I thought I was going to piss in my pants, and there you were just staring the old fucker down and making all that noise with the horn. It’s a wonder I made it out of there alive.”

I smile. “I’m sure it wasn’t that dramatic,” I say.

“Oh, but it was, my dear, it was.”

“Just promise me you won’t tell that story at the presentation.”

He smiles wickedly. “I would never do such a thing.”

To the right of the road, a few rows away, I see the headstone. It’s a simple granite slab, a stone Christopher would have found too common and dull. Behind it I can see where Whatcom Falls Park begins, a dark line of trees. I am walking towards darkness. I don’t know how I’m going to keep walking across the lawn with my heart pounding like this; I don’t know how I’m going to survive it.

My head is filling with white noise; sounds like the buzzing of flies or the hum of a crowd are getting in through my ears. It’s as if the English language has become foreign to me, the way it is to newborns. I know Jeremiah is still talking, I can see his mouth moving, but his words could be wind in the trees, a mere rustling of the leaves. And then I think, it’s the dead people, rising up out of their holes in the ground, surrounding me. Come, is what they say.

* * *

I’m on my knees in front of the headstone, looking at the faded silk flowers. Mom must have put them there, before she got real sick. The sky is the orange of a dying ember. When I look up, the
name etched in the stone, “Christopher D Jefferson,” looks different to me; it seems longer than I remember, more formal, as if he was always out of reach. And it’s glowing, the rays of the setting sun touch it, orangish-yellow, like a kitchen fire in Uganda, and then the letters darken, there’s a cloud obscuring the sun. I sit back on my bottom to get more comfortable. My body feels nonexistent, insubstantial, like it does when I’m sleeping.

There’s someone walking on the path beyond the headstone, I can see the dark outline against the darker line of trees. At first I think it’s Jeremiah, come back for me already. Then I see it’s not an adult, it’s too short. I can’t make out a face or any other details, there’s just a human shape in a white t-shirt. The sun comes out from behind the cloud, lighting the shirt like fire, and then the little person slips into the woods and is gone.

I know I should close my eyes and say a prayer, but it seems easier to sit here in silence, the dew leaching into my jeans, a gentle sea-breeze touching my face. I pull the amber out of my pocket and warm it in my fist.

I hear Christopher talking to me: just talking, very softly, as though there’s a knit scarf covering his mouth. He’s saying something about maps, his voice fast and breathy with excitement. I remember this conversation, it was when we were in the second and third grade, and our teachers had everyone draw a map and roll it up inside a glass jar, like a castaway’s message in a bottle. It was fall, and the jars were buried in the empty plot of earth behind the school, where we planted tomato and carrot seeds in the spring. With shovels we dug in the freshly turned soil until we each found a jar with a map inside, which we had to decipher and explain for homework. One kid drew a map of her favorite playground; another made a map that led from his house to an ice cream shop. My map was a treasure map that led, through a series of
arrows and markers, to a spot in the yard where I had buried a shoebox filled with shells, buttons, coins, acorns, and other tiny prizes.

Everyone’s map was recognizable as a map because it was a map of a *place*, everyone’s that is, except for Christopher’s. He had drawn a detailed picture of the major veins and arteries of the human body, and in his raspy eight year-old’s voice he explains to me, as I sit on the ground in the cemetery under the waning sun, that a map is a source of information—a *representation*—of a body that’s significant to someone for some reason or other. They use simple symbols, he says, his voice rising with excitement, to convey complex *messages*. There were only four symbols on his map, one for each blood type. “The four people of Earth,” he’d titled it. I remember pointing out to him that he would need to draw four people, one for each blood type, but he had just smirked at me.

I can see Christopher in my mind as he was then, his dark curls wild and his brown eyes sincere and urgent. He’s preparing dinner, spaghetti and meatballs, our Saturday night favorite, his practiced hands forming the balls of ground beef as he watches me carefully; it’s important to him that I grasp the significance of what he’s saying, but I’m too distracted, I’m nervous about the knife in my hand, I’m clumsily slicing tomatoes for the salad.

“My map,” he is saying, “is the only map that really matters because it’s the one true map of the *world*.”

I start to argue with him, because of course it’s not a map of the earth, it’s a picture of a person, a boy like him, but then I cut my finger deeply with the knife, blood rushing out everywhere, and Mom hurries us to the emergency room, where a doctor sews me up, three tiny
stitches, and we return home to a late supper. Christopher smiles at me maddeningly the whole time. We never talk about the maps again.

My finger aches with memory.

I don’t hear him anymore. But I feel him all around me, a youthful presence, smelling of dirt and sweat, the distinct aroma of a child’s skin in summer light. It’s as though he’s telling me something, he was always telling me something. I open my eyes and stare at his name on the headstone. You’re home, it seems to say. You’ve always been home.

Rachel Jefferson

At night I lie in my bunk bed above Fridah’s empty mattress, listening to the shuffle of her flip flops as she walks through darkness on her way to Mr. Wambuzi’s. She will be with him but she will be alone. Or not alone, because alone is not the same thing as being lonely. Motherless. We could all use a mother right now.

I turn on my book light under the blanket. I know I have to do something to help her, but I don’t know what. If we were back at St. Margaret’s, I would tell Sister Imelda. But telling one of the teachers here seems too difficult, so I turn out the light and close my eyes. Fridah is there, in my head, her wide eyes accusing. I start scratching at my arms and legs again, until the skin is raw and red. I think about our conversation from earlier in the day. I had begged her for the billionth time to go to the principal and tell him what Mr. Wambuzi was making her do, but this time, instead of shrugging her shoulders, she set her eyes on me in a way I’d never seen before. “You do not understand, Rachel,” she’d said. “How could you. You are a muzungu.”
In the morning, after she has returned, I tuck the book about lynching in the waistband of my skirt. I’m not sure how I will do it. All I can think is that I must. At lunchtime, I peek through the doorway of the cafeteria and see Mr. Wambuzi at a table with the other teachers, sipping tea and laughing, one arm draped carelessly on the back of the chair next to him. The sight of his smug face makes my blood boil, and for a moment I can’t move. But then I realize this is my chance, even if it means skipping a meal and feeling dizzy for the rest of the day.

I want Fridah to find me and tell me it isn’t necessary, because now that I’m walking in the direction of Mr. Wambuzi’s office I can’t believe I’m actually doing this. But she doesn’t find me.

I turn the knob of his office door. Locks are a luxury here, discipline, strict. I tuck *Lynching in the United States* under a stack of folders in the top drawer. This is when common sense should have kicked in, but didn’t. Instead, as I walk away from his office, I fantasize about another teacher finding the book and turning Mr. Wambuzi in.

I’m good at imagining things. The trick is to close your eyes. Don’t see, become blind. Don’t look at the truth.

* * *

It’s visitor’s day, and both Mrs. Namuyangu and Mom have come to see us. We sit under the trees all afternoon, our eyelids heavy and unblinking. Fridah has gotten heavier, but we are too young to realize what this means. The truth of our nights hangs in the air between us, but nothing is said to the mothers. Students laugh and sing; girls and boys in traditional dress costumes walk by. There’s a netball game going on across the lawn, and we watch, feigning interest.
Mrs. Namuyangu laughs, and suddenly I see the train tracks near the Nakivubo Channel, in the old neighborhood, the one Fridah’s family lived in before they moved to a more prosperous one last year. Mom smiles at me and says I seem content. I stare at her as at a stranger. She has traded her purple kitenji for a flower-print wrap-around skirt that fits her like a skin, and she rests her hand on Mrs. Namuyangu’s arm and tells jokes. It occurs to me that my mother has let go of something.

* * *

Home, I think. But it’s not something that will let go of me.

* * *

It’s worse than I thought it would be, although not for Mr. Wambuzi.

A sheet of corrugated metal, the kind you see on roofs here, is prone in the center of the school yard, between two buildings: one for classrooms and one for administrative offices. We file past singly and in pairs, wordlessly. There are students under the metal; you can see the soles of four black shoes sticking out at one end. It looks obscene, somehow, like naked bodies shamelessly exposed in public. All morning and all afternoon, we glance sideways at the black shoes. The metal so blindingly bright we can’t look at it directly, as though what lies beneath is holy. We’ve seen it before—it’s not an unheard of punishment for a boy and a girl who have been seen alone together in compromising circumstances. They will be gone before tomorrow, their thin mattresses stripped bare, their lockers cleaned out. Snuffed out of existence, like candlelight.

At dinner, I don’t see Fridah. I feel nervous suddenly, though I have no reason to be. Who was the girl, I ask a friend from my dorm. Who was the girl? I don’t have to wait for her answer. When she looks at me pityingly, I know. There will be no chance for goodbyes.
I didn’t know it then, but Frida would never see the old Rachel again.

*  *  *

At lunch the next day I sneak into Mr. Wambuzi’s office and remove the lynching book from the drawer, and in its place I leave Fridah’s copy of The Rape of the Pearl. So he doesn’t forget her, though I’m almost certain he will. Instead of going to my next class, I lie on the floor under the bunk bed in my dorm, comforted by nothing and feeling the strange new heart in my chest. The cockroaches avoid me. I cry all afternoon and into the night. I am afraid I will be next. I have come to the edge of the world. It never was round, and there’s nothing stopping someone from pushing me over the edge.

I write to Mom. I tell her what she needs to know. Her response is quick. Fridah is with her family, she says. Stay where you are, she says, as though I have a choice. I’m coming for you. We’re going home. Though she doesn’t elaborate, I know she means America.

Rachel Bareeba

It’s night. I stand just outside her room, the door parted halfway, but I can’t hear her breathing.

“If you’ve come to kill me, you’re too late.”

“Mom,” I say, startled.

“Then turn that damn light off.”

I can just make out her face now, in the semi-darkness. I turn the hall light off and get
into bed with her. She grunts but makes room for me. She asks where I went after I’d put her to bed, but instead of telling her about seeing Christopher’s grave, I tell her a story about a young man, a black man, and how he was hung from a tree like a slain deer.

I tell her about his ruined face, how it could be anyone’s. I describe the pants around his waist, shredded and torn, held up by what looked like baling twine, and about the way the tree seems to bend towards the photographer as though for a better shot, but I don’t tell her about the white faces, how they leered, or about the message on the back. I don’t want her to think I’m making it up.

I tell her that it’s been to Africa, where I must have lost it.

She says, *I knew you had found it. Don’t you remember?* I turn so I can see her, a pale face floating next to mine in the blackness. I had forgotten she knew. Of course. That’s why I don’t have it anymore. How could I have forgotten? I say *That isn’t the problem.*

She thinks there is no problem. I ask her why she didn’t talk to me about it. *It was a long time ago,* she says. *Where is it now?* I ask. *Gone.* There’s a hard edge to her words, a finality. It’s the end of the story.

*I’ll never know everything you know,* I whisper.

*You think I know everything you do?* she says.

* * *

I iron my new pantsuit in the laundry room and slip it on. It’s a little too long in the leg—I didn’t try it on before I bought it—but nothing can be done about that now. Then I go into the bathroom and study my reflection in the mirror. My tanned face is framed by dark corkscrew curls that stop
just above the shoulder. A line of freckles runs up one side of my nose and down the other like a
trail of tiny footprints, and my eyes, tired-looking eyes, are the color of ploughed earth. I look
exactly as I do in my mind—like a light-skinned black woman, if a bit older than I would like.

I could spruce myself up with makeup, but that has never been my way. It’s probably
expected that I should at least have on foundation and mascara, but I don’t have these things, and
there’s no time to run to the store now. They will have to take me as I am. What you see is what
you get.

* * *

Although I’m a native of Bellingham, a biology undergrad with a name tag that says Dylan in
capital letters arrives to take me to campus. He gushes about the chance to meet me, because he’s
thinking about vet school, he says. He goes on and on about his research interests, something to
do with horses, and what advice do I have for him? I’ve never been good with young people the
way Jeremiah is, and I find I haven’t a clue what to say, I hardly know him, how would I know
what would be good advice for him? I mumble something about studying hard and being true to
who you are, and I see that he is disappointed.

I’m taken to the teacher’s lounge, where Jeremiah introduces me to professors and
students. We sip coffee and stare at the doughnuts, not wanting to be the first one to eat, and talk
about jobs. Mostly the students ask about Africa. Some of the questions are a bit odd, but I’ve
become accustomed to this and answer them as politely as I can. What is there to do for fun? Are
there movie theaters, shopping malls? Do you live in a house or a tent? Are there any African
veterinarians?

* * *
In the middle of my lecture, as I’m explaining what it was like to suture Ebenezer, my first elephant patient, I see Jill, the little girl from my Truth Tabernacle days, the one who used to write notes to Christopher. At least I think it’s her—she’s dyed her hair blonde and wears makeup. Her face is fuller, more grown-up looking, and I know without having to see that the green and red of her braces are no longer there. I stop talking for a moment and let my eyes linger over her, the smell of vinyl bus seats suddenly filling my nostrils, but if she knows that Rachel Bareeba was once Rachel Jefferson, Christopher’s big sister, the nerdy girl, she doesn’t let on. I don’t look at her like that again for the rest of the lecture, and yet it’s as though she’s suddenly the sole member of the audience, everyone else is gone, if they were even there to begin with. I answer questions, none of them Jill’s.

When it’s all over, many students and professors crowd around me to thank me or ask more questions. Jeremiah gives me a hug, tells me we are going to Boundary Bay for a celebratory beer. So I’m surprised when, as I walk out of the lecture hall, I see Jill standing just outside the doorway. I’m struck by how short and slight she is, how fragile looking—I remember her being the tallest girl in our grade, well ahead of the rest of us as far as training bras were concerned, and yet now I know without a doubt that this pale slip of a woman is her.

She moves towards me but pauses uncertainly when she sees Jeremiah in the doorway. “I don’t know if you remember me,” she says her eyes darting around nervously, never seeming to settle on my face for more than a second. “I’m Jill McNabb, well Jill Robinson. From school?”

“Yes,” I say. “From Truth Tabernacle. I wondered if it was you. You’ve dyed your hair.”

She tugs at it, shrugging and smiling apologetically. “So have you. I’d heard talk about you. That you’d gone native, that you were, like, acting black?” she says, her eyes suddenly hard.
“But you’re still the same Rachel, always full of facts no one else knows!” she says and laughs, a little too loudly.

I flinch when I hear the words ‘acting black,’ as though who I am is a mere performance.

“And what about you?” I say. “It’s been a long time. Do you still live around here?”

Jill stares down the hall, towards the exit. She’s had the chance to gawk at me, she’s found out all she wants to know, and now she’s eager to leave. “Oh yes, I still live here. I teach first graders at Silver Beach elementary, over by the lake?”

I nod, tell her that’s wonderful, then I introduce her to Jeremiah and we talk briefly about high school—Bellingham High for her, Sehome High for us.

“You look so much like Christopher,” she says suddenly.

I bat at the dark curls on my head and laugh. “It’s the hair, right?”

She raises her eyebrows. “Actually, I thought you guys looked alike when you were kids. Almost like twins.”

“Really? With that blonde hair I’d had?”

She shrugs. “I thought so.”

I try to see his face, but it’s hard, his features are blurred. All I can see is the hair, the dark curly hair, as though the very essence of his being might be contained within it. And then it occurs to me: maybe we did look like twins and I just can’t remember it because I can hardly remember me.
“Rachel,” she says, her eyes now teary, “I’m really sorry I never offered you my condolences after he passed. I was just a stupid kid then, but I can’t imagine how you must have felt. We all felt terrible, just terrible. He was such a great kid.”

I reach out to hug her, but she’s already turning away.

* * *

I come home to find Mom sitting in the darkening living room, reading a book. There’s only the one small table lamp turned on. It throws the room into relief, a topography of light and shade.

“Jesus Mom, can you even see?”

“Of course I can see, Rachel Jefferson,” she says.

I sit down across from her and take off my shoes. “Do you remember Jill Robinson, the girl I went to elementary school with?” I ask.

“Vaguely,” she says without looking up from her book.

I lean back in the chair and look at her. “Surely you remember Jill,” I say. “She used to come over to play. Christopher was always getting love notes from her.”

She turns a page noisily, some romance novel or other.

I get up and gather the dirty dishes from the end table. “Anyways, she came to the talk. She said she thought I looked like Christopher, when I was little. Can you imagine?” I say over my shoulder as I head to the kitchen. I could put the dishes in the dishwasher, but instead I turn on the water and begin scrubbing them by hand, the soapy hot water drawing goosebumps on my arms. A noise behind me makes me jump.
“Do you think you didn’t look like your own brother?” Mom says as she moves slowly towards me.

I turn the water off and dry my hands. “I don’t know,” I say as I lean against the counter.

“Do you think I did?”

“Of course you did,” she says.

“Jill said we looked like twins, though.”

She sits down at the dining table with a groan. “Pretty darn close.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Why didn’t anyone ever tell me before?” I say.

Mom stares at me, incredulously. “Did you need someone to tell you?”


She shakes her head sadly. “Rachel,” she says. “Is this why you’ve been pretending all these years?”

“God, Mom. I’m not pretending. Why can’t you believe me?”

“Well, what else would you call it, Rachel?”

I turn away from her. “Did you have your medicine? You should be in bed,” I say. She gets up and takes my face in her hands. “My little girl,” she says. “I love my little girl,” and then she walks away.

* * *

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She walks away, and it occurs to me that I am her. *Daughter*: A word that suffocates, like a pillow case pulled over your head. She walks away slowly, and I watch her, this woman my mother—a watered down version of Great-gram, a version who didn’t observe a lynching, but who taught me, nevertheless, how to regard others.

She is me and I am her.

*Rachel*

I loosen the shoes from my feet and climb down boulders slick with wet and algae; the sand is moist, cold, still stippled with this morning’s rain. I wade into the water and lie down when it reaches my knees. The wet loosens and unwinds my curls, which blurs into the water like ink around my head. When my clothes are soaked through, I pull them away from my limbs until there’s nothing left to take off. They rock in the water at my side, keeping me company.

My back rubs against the smooth pebbles, my head bobs like a buoy, and the great world spins, pulling my body into its alien skin. The sun is high in the sky, a blinding white face in an endless blue sea. The waves lap against my body, scouring away the blackness I put on, because in America if you can buy anything, you can *be* anything. I roll onto my stomach and bury my face in the water. I open my eyes, wide, welcoming the sting of saline. I pull the brown-colored contacts from my eyes and release them. They float away in the pull of the tide like minute jellyfish.
I roll back over, and a white pelican sails overhead. I’m surprised—I’ve never seen one here before. It must see me, but it isn’t surprised by me—paling naked human—and then it’s out of sight, it ceases to exist.

I laugh, but the only sound that comes out is a deep groan.

Something small and white floats by, and for a moment I think it’s the postcard. As if from the shore I hear Great-gram’s voice, *I guess they don’t care. I know I don’t.* It sounds old, older than memory. I close my eyes. When I open them again, the thing that looks like the postcard is gone.

Bellingham Bay pounds against my skull, eroding me like rock, and I become aware that my teeth are chattering. I reach for my clothes, but all I find are the blouse and pants. They are wet, and I struggle into them. I crawl to shore on hands and knees. Christopher’s agates knock against my kneecaps. You’re home, they say. You’ve always been home.

*Muzungu.*
Epilogue

I would see her one last time, a year before I left Uganda to help my mother die.

It was a hot, dry day in June. Thunderclouds on the horizon were getting edgy. I stood with sweaty palms on Bombo Road near Makerere University, looking in the direction of Central Kampala. I was outside a church, the Watoto Church, and I was trying to convince myself to go inside. I hadn’t attended a church service since high school, and lately I was feeling as though something was missing from my life. Only the hum of the traffic could be heard, it was like white noise really, I hardly even noticed it. And then: where Bombo Road becomes Kampala Road at the Kyaggwe Road intersection was a sudden riot of people, marching and shouting and stabbing the air with signs, some of them clearly homemade, but many of them printed professionally. Several men on bicycles led the crowd with a large pink banner that read *Homosexuality is DEMONIC!* in black permanent marker.

Still, I didn’t move. If the protestors had turned north on Bombo Road, they would have walked right into me, and who knows what I would have done then. But as it was, the protestors—there must have been a hundred or more—crossed the street and continued along Kyaggwe Road. I stood there, swaying slightly, unnoticed as a tree. Signs passed before my eyes. *Exit only no entry. Let’s unite against sodomy. Homosexuality is sin, period. Wanted dead: homosexuality.*

The sound of singing rose in the air above the heads of the protestors. The service had begun, I was late. As if my shyness about walking into a church after more than a decade of absence wasn’t enough to keep me rooted like a tree to the sidewalk, now I couldn’t move
because I felt utterly ashamed. After all these years, and nothing had really changed. I was—once again—reminded that no matter how much I tried, I would never truly belong.

It was almost time to pick James up at his boarding school for the summer recess, 2010, and George and I weren’t doing so well. There had been talk of separating.

We both had expected it, on some level. People were always telling us it wouldn’t work, whether we had asked for their opinion or not (usually, we did not). “I was married to a white woman,” a friend from my vet school days said at dinner the other night. “It didn’t work. It never works,” he said with a smugness that turned my stomach. He had met my mother, and so never thought of me as black, no matter what I said.

But on that day I wasn’t thinking of my marriage to George, or even of James. I was thinking of her—Fridah. Since that fateful day when all I would ever see of her again were those schoolgirl shoes, black with a thin film of red dust, peeking out from under a sheet of unforgiving metal, I never tried to find her. How could I? Just two days later, after hearing about how she was treated, Mom showed up at the school, yelled at the headmaster, and told the Other Rachel to pack. “We’re going home,” she’d said. I thought she meant Masaka, and we did go there, for a few weeks. But instead of enrolling me in another school, she bought plane tickets. All that she would say was that she was done with Uganda. Even if I wasn’t.

I begged her to drive me the two hours to Fridah’s house in Kampala, but Mom refused. I never got to say goodbye.

I wouldn’t return to Uganda until the summer after my third year as a vet student, to do an internship at Murchison Falls National Park, and I thought about seeing her, I knew that I should. “Let her go,” Mom had said above my sobbing as she drove us and our few possessions
to the airport in Entebbe. “She has her place in this world and you have yours.” And so, although I had some free time in Kampala during my internship, I didn’t go to the Mengo neighborhood to see if the Namuyangus still lived there. And when, two years after that, I relocated to Uganda permanently and started my vet work at Queen Elizabeth, I was so focused on my new life as an adult that I managed to think of her but occasionally, when she would rise in my mind unbidden in the middle of the night as I huddled in bed with a book propped on my knees, a candle guttering on the nightstand next to me, or when I found myself weaving through traffic near Centenary park or St. Margaret’s in Kampala, and always it would occur to me that I didn’t even know if she was still alive.

So I was surprised when, from my vantage point on the sidewalk, surrounded by strangers, I saw her. She had come from the same direction the protestors had—heading west on Kyaggwe Road—and when she reached the intersection near me, she turned her head just so and looked right at me. Although her face was a little fuller and her hair was done in long micro braids, I recognized her, those sad eyes, the confident way she held her body, a way that said it was hers no matter what, a dancer’s lithe body, but when her eyes met mine, there was no flicker of recognition. Yet I was sure it was her. She had never seen me like this, Rachel Bareeba with black box braids, brown-tinted contacts, and skin darkened by sun and bronzer spray, but I was sure she would know me, the girl I had allowed her to glimpse, and so I stood there, I waited. The sun blazed down on our heads, the noise of the traffic blurred and ceased. It was the first time I’d ever seen her wearing jeans, and I thought they suited her. She was a short distance behind the protestors, not with them—she wasn’t holding a sign or chanting—but like she was purposely following them. Or so I chose to believe, because how could it be otherwise?
As though she’d heard my thoughts, she looked back the way she had been going, at the
protestors, the last of whom were disappearing around the corner of a building. Then she was
walking towards me so quickly she was almost running, her arms brushing the sides of people in
the crowd, her braids rippling in the breeze like a young girl’s.

I’ve dreamed about this moment many times since, and always, I push my way through
the crowd, I stick my elbows out, I run to her, we embrace.

She stopped just inches from me. “Rachel? Is it you?” she said, looking confused. “What
have you done?”

What haven’t I done?

“Fridah, no,” I said. “It’s not me.”

She was reaching out to touch my arm with her hand, to touch me in a way many children
in Uganda touched the old Rachel’s white skin—she herself had never touched me in quite that
way—but when she heard what I said, her hand fell to her side.

“No,” she said, her voice heavy with disappointment. Or was it disapproval?

The singing in the church had stopped. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was exactly
as I had imagined she would be, yet so different. “Fridah. We should talk. I’d like to talk. Are
you free? We could find a restaurant, have tea.”

Her eyes were roaming up and down my body, taking in the new hair, the unexpected
shade of my skin, the unfamiliar adulthood of my body. She nodded, and we crossed the street as
one, as though we had already agreed on a place. I opened the door for her at the first restaurant
we came to, a rather fancy one that pandered to tourists.
“I have never been here,” she said, not looking at me.

“Neither have I,” I said.

The waiter, a young man with a weight-lifter’s body, led us to our seats.

We watched him walk away. Fridah smiled at me slyly over the rim of her mug. Steam rose out of it in the space between us. “He is, what do you Americans say? Hot. Yes?” She was wearing eye shadow and mascara, and she raised her plucked eyebrows. I blushed.

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose he is.”

She laughed quietly and took a sip of tea. There was a mole just above her collarbone. Since when did she have a mole above her collarbone?

And: how could I ever make her understand?

“Fridah. I’ve thought about you often,” I said and paused.

“You have thought about me, have you?”

I looked down at the tablecloth. It was red, bold as blood. “Yes,” I whispered.

She put her glass down on the table, hard. “What happened to you? You never came to see me. I know you know what happened, everyone did.”

“Fridah, I couldn’t.”

“It was like you never existed. You were gone, even your books were gone.”

I looked up at her, surprised. “No, I left you books.”
She shook her head. “Vicky came to see me. Vicky. We were not even that close, she was your friend, and still she found out, she came to see me.”

I thought of Vicky, how she was always talking about leaving school, growing her hair out, leading on a long line of boys, freedom.

Fridah reached into her bag and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She shook one out, lit it.

“Why do bazungu have their hair done in braids when they come here?” The way she said it, it sounded like the opening line of a joke. She took a drag on her cigarette, blew the smoke out of the side of her mouth.

I closed my eyes. “I don’t know. Why do they?”

“Banange. Why do you?”

“I’m a mudugavu. I’m black.”

She laughed. “Rachel, be serious.”

“I am. I stopped being white since, I don’t know.” I picked up the cloth napkin from my lap and twisted it in my hands. “Maybe it was since you.”

Fridah looked at me, astonished. She mashed her cigarette out on the expensive-looking tablecloth, her eyes never leaving mine. There was a dark mark on the cloth, now. I cringed.

“Rachel,” she said softly. “You have too much money to be mudugavu. I always thought you understood that.”

“It’s not about money.”
“It is very much about money. Only a muzungu would say it is not.”

“Is that why you loved me? Because of money?”

She looked away, out the window. “How you can ask me that, I do not know,” she said, her eyes fixed on something far away.

The waiter returned with our food. Goat stew over matooke for her, a vegetarian broth over matooke and French fries on the side for me. Fridah looked at my plate and laughed.

“What’s funny,” I said irritably. Nothing felt right. Either she was too different, or I was.

She took a bite of meat, wiped her face on her napkin. “We were so young.”

“We’re still young. Some days,” I say defensively.

She raised her eyebrows. “Maybe today we are young.”

There was so much I wanted to ask her, so much I wanted to say, and yet the words were missing. Instead I pointed out that I never did get her autograph. She laughed. “I am not dead yet.” The empty tables around us began filling up for dinner. We watched the other people, as if they were the ones we had really come to see.

She nodded at my left hand. “You are married. Have you any children?”

I watched her carefully. “I have two boys. You don’t seem surprised.”

“Surprised?”

I shrugged. “What about you?”

She poked at her matooke. “There is nothing to say. Nothing interesting.”
“I doubt that.” I glanced quickly at her ring finger. I’d been avoiding it, but couldn’t any longer. It was bare. Was that relief I was feeling?

“Does your husband know?”

I nodded. “He knows. He’s black, but he knows. He knows my mother, of course.”

Her eyelids lowered. “I see,” she said.

Her phone buzzed in the emptiness between us, and when she looked at the screen, she smiled—a private smile, one I had known once, and I knew my time with her was running out.

“When were you doing at that awful protest?”

“She? What protest?” she said as she typed something.

I blinked. “You know. The anti-homosexuality protest. You were walking behind it. Right before I saw you. Surely you don’t agree with it?”

She looked up at me, her eyes grim. “I do not, but I do not agree with either side.”

Somewhere a baby cried, a man laughed. “I don’t get it. How can you not agree with either pride or anti-homosexuality?”

She reached out and cupped the side of my face with her hand. I closed my eyes and breathed in her smell. That much, at least, was still the same. “They are not our words,” she said quietly and stood.
“You are leaving,” I said and got up quickly, my chair scraping against the floor.

She opened her purse and pulled out a wallet. “I have to go. I should not have stayed.”

“Please, I’ll pay for the food,” I said. “This was my idea.”

“This was not anyone’s idea.” She laid the money on the table between us. “It was lovely to see you again, Rachel.”

I opened my mouth to say something, something that would let her really see me, but in that moment she turned and walked away.

I understood then that I would never see the Fridah I once knew again.

And so I stood there, watching until she danced out the door, into the warmth of the equatorial sun.
Afterword

*Muzungu* is a novel that explores how a white person, particularly a white woman, becomes white, even as she attempts to hide her white privilege from others by presenting herself as a black woman. At its broadest level, my argument in this creative dissertation is an extension of the arguments put forth by both Toni Morrison and Ruth Frankenburg, respectively—namely, that race shapes the lives of American white women, sometimes in different and surprising ways (though there are clear patterns of similarity), and that the process of becoming white often occurs through the use of what Morrison terms a ‘serviceable Africanist presence.’ Storytelling felt like a natural means to explore the everyday lives of white people and how they develop a white vantage point or ‘white gaze’ through which people of color come to be viewed. It is a process that has allowed me to go beyond merely analyzing specific patterns of racialized behavior I have observed in society and literature, and instead *live* those experiences through characters so that I might better understand them, and most importantly, my own identity as a white woman. Reading allows us to witness the private, inner thought process of another person; writing fiction takes it a step further by allowing the writer to *participate* in it. Rachel, the young white female character central to *Muzungu*, is a manifestation of myself in a time and in places I have otherwise had only partial access to in my own life, if at all, but she is also a unique individual who grew from my thoughts and feelings as the particular development of the plot and her subsequent relationships with other characters unfolded. She is both me and not-me. As Morrison says in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the subject of the dream is the dreamer (17), and indeed, much of the time as I wrote, I was not consciously thinking of the vast body of literary criticism and whiteness theory that has informed my work,
but rather, I dreamed it; I experienced it as a series of images that reveal something about my own way of seeing as a white woman, my anxieties and my desires.

Whiteness as an identity is, as Frankenburg argues in *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters*, a vantage point from which the self, others, and society are viewed (1). How, therefore, are white people of the twenty-first century perceiving race and living it, particularly in the context of America’s history of white-on-black violence (such as familial ties to a spectacle lynching) and the white guilt typical of post-civil rights America? For Morrison, the white vantage point is formed and maintained by manipulating the representation of black identity to suit the conscious and unconscious desires of white people, a phenomenon that abounds in white nineteenth and early twentieth-century American literature. What might this manipulation and representation of black identity look like in twenty-first century white literature? To explore this question and others, I created a white female character and a plot involving three major themes: the guilt and trauma of being associated with a spectacle lynching and how that impacts one’s thoughts, actions, and relationships; passing for black as a means of manipulating both black and white identity; and the process of maintaining white privilege under the guise of denying or discarding it by seeking intimacy with an Africanist presence. Though each of these themes alone could be the focus of an entire novel, I believe the tension between the desire to deny one’s white privilege while maintaining it links these themes together in important ways to reveal how a uniquely twenty-first century white gaze has evolved through the manipulation of an Africanist presence.
Morrison’s Africanist presence, as a trope, refers to the representation of African peoples in white American literature, a representation allowing the white writer, and by extension the white readers, the freedom to contemplate the taboo, such as sex, power, class, nationality, and of course, freedom. What makes it so powerful is its dual nature. While allowing white people the safety and freedom to explore a forbidden topic, the Africanist presence also functions as a means of control, in which not only blacks, but whites are bound and defined, albeit in vastly different ways. Because my novel explores ‘forbidden’ topics—namely race and sexuality—in the context of lynching, white guilt, white privilege, racial transgression, and migration, part of what I will attempt to do here, on a small scale, is explore the ways in which the black characters in my story, and especially Fridah, function as the Africanist presence and what this might reveal about the nature of whiteness in the twenty-first century.

One manner in which the Africanist presence has been used by white writers to delineate and enable whiteness as a contemplation of privilege, freedom, and white identity is through the eroticization of the black body as an exotic “Other.” Morrison describes, for example, how blackness often represents illicit and potent (hetero) sexuality in white American literature. The Africanist presence acts as a shadow, she argues, one in which, via imagery, characterization, action, and dialogue (or lack thereof), it is stripped of the power and potential as a human being, made impotent, always following at the heels of images of whiteness as strong and in control (33). Without it, there is nothing to reveal the power of whiteness. For this reason it is perhaps fitting that I discuss Fridah and her role in the novel before starting with Rachel, the main character. While Fridah is not introduced until page 138 in Part II and almost completely
disappears from the narrative in Part IV, she is central to understanding who Rachel is and how she comes to perceive the world with a white perspective.

In spite of what it can tell us about Rachel and the nature of whiteness, I find the idea of the Africanist presence appalling—how black characters are bound and manipulated, how they are stripped of their autonomy and humanity in the service of the white characters, and so it is my hope that I have created a character in Fridah who resists my own attempts, however conscious or unconscious, to bind her completely to the service of enabling Rachel’s whiteness as well as my understanding of whiteness. It is my hope that I have allowed her to be more than a mere stock character, a serviceable character, a slave to the theoretical questions driving my plot. I am not sure how well I succeeded, especially given what happens to her. My objective was to create a young woman who shares similar interests with Rachel, such as a love for the written word, but I also wanted to create differences between them—how they might understand a book, the motives behind the actions of other people, the lynching postcard, and sexuality, for example—differences Fridah, as a black character created by a white woman, is not forbidden from expressing, even in the face of whiteness. That resistance did not come entirely from me, it also from her, through the form of her love for dancing, which was a trait of hers that I had not planned or seen coming although it suits her—dancing being the thing that allowed her to claim her body as her own, dancing as freedom of movement but also as something that is seen by others.

Fridah’s resistance against being merely an Africanist presence rather than fully human comes in the form of her relationship to Rachel from the very beginning—she is not afraid, at times, to disagree with Rachel or to speak her mind or to reveal her anger. And it is not until Rachel develops her friendship with Fridah that she begins to see black people in a new way, as
complex and dynamic, and not merely as the archetypes she learns to see from Mary, her mother. An example of how she sees African Americans prior to living in Uganda is the bus scene with Mary. Mary’s own conception of blackness is complicated—she has a relationship with Frank, a black Ugandan, and a son—Christopher—with him. But as we see in the bus scene on page thirty-four, Mary is quietly prejudiced against some of the black people she encounters, and Rachel notices. Of particular interest to Rachel is a black woman her mother won’t look at, and Rachel is aware of the significance of this, even as she doesn’t entirely understand it. Because of her mother’s refusal to look at or speak to this woman, she comes to represent, in Rachel’s eyes, the belief that one can be free to fabricate one’s own identity, especially an identity not bound to her mother. In fact, one could argue Rachel not only desires to emulate this woman, but to actually be her. To Rachel, this woman, with her brightly-colored African print outfit, someone her mother won’t see, and who appears to be so unlike both her mother and herself, becomes exotic. She represents what could be, if only she were not her mother’s daughter. And so, this story is as much about her recognizing that she is very much her mother’s (white) daughter in part because of how she views race, as I will discuss below, even as she passes for a black woman.

Her desire for intimacy with Fridah, however, is due as much to their similarities as it is to their perceived racial and cultural differences, and this is because it was my wish that Rachel might learn to see black people as equals, as fully human, even as she struggled with white guilt and privilege, even as I created a story that would allow me to understand what whiteness looks like in the so-called “post-racial” era. If Fridah had been merely an archetype, merely exotic—an Africanist presence—and nothing more, I don’t think Rachel would have been able to see, years later, that she had not in fact freed herself from whiteness once she began passing.
Although it is a black man, her teacher Mr. Wambuzi, who repeatedly rapes Fridah, it is the subsequent dynamic resulting between Rachel and Fridah that leads me to believe I cannot get away entirely with saying that Fridah never serves the role of the Africanist presence for Rachel and the plot of her story. The very fact that she is raped while Rachel is not becomes a mark of their racial difference. When Rachel implores Fridah to tell someone, another teacher, what is happening, Fridah refers to her, for the first time, as a *muzungu*, as someone who cannot understand the situation because of her position of privilege in society. She would call her a *muzungu* only one other time. The implication here is that this could not happen to her, a white girl, and that Fridah, as a black girl, would not be believed against the word of a teacher. Fridah becomes bound and serviceable to a man and to Rachel, but she maintains her voice, and it is her voice and how she uses it that helps Rachel, years later in the Epilogue, to begin the process of seeing her white identity. Her role as an Africanist presence is one that allows her autonomy but only when it is convenient and even serviceable for the progression of Rachel’s plot.

Like Morrison’s depiction of Jim from *Huckleberry Finn*, Fridah—as a black person who has been wronged, as someone who could have been helped had Rachel told someone what was happening (or so Rachel believes)—represents the yearning of Rachel, and by extension all whites, for love and forgiveness, which Fridah more or less denies her when she calls her a *muzungu* on page two-hundred forty-six, and when she abruptly leaves Rachel after their brief reunion in the epilogue. And it is apt of Fridah not to assuage Rachel’s guilt, because as I worked through the story and wondered where it would take me and how it would end, I began to realize there was nothing in Rachel’s actions that suggested a desire to give up or share her white privilege or use it for the purpose of achieving racial equality, a similarity she shares with Genna Meade in Joyce Carol Oates’s novel, which I discuss below. She does not want to be a racist, and
the lynching postcard symbolizes, in her mind, the essence of racism, of something violent
committed by whites against blacks. While she does have moments throughout the story in
which she recognizes aspects of her economic privilege, reinforced by frequently being referred
to as muzungu by black Ugandans, she fails to fully recognize how her economic privilege is not
merely an aspect of her Americanness but of her whiteness, and that this is as much a part of
racism as is her great-grandmother’s attendance at a brutal lynching.

Fridah returns to the story in the Epilogue, which takes place, chronologically, before
Rachel understands that even as she claims to be black her white way of seeing has not changed,
and neither has her white privilege, guilt, and denial disappeared. And so, Fridah once again
serves to push Rachel towards seeing her whiteness, although it will take Rachel a few more
years to process what Fridah is trying to tell her.

While more than one motive for Rachel’s racial transgression developed as the story
unfolded, the explanation Rachel gives to Fridah when they are reunited as adults is perhaps the
most interesting and even unexpected (it certainly surprised me as I was writing the scene): “I
stopped being white since, I don’t know. Maybe it was since you” (263). Even Rachel sounds as
though she is discovering the answer for the first time in that moment. Through the way she says
it I wanted to create ambiguity, here. On the one hand, Rachel’s answer could sound as though
she is suggesting Fridah has “turned” her black or even “contaminated” her with her blackness.
On the other hand, it represents Rachel’s yearning to be loved, and as someone who feels guilt
about the lynching postcard, this perhaps reveals her fear that she is not lovable because she is
white, because she is so visibly connected to her great-grandmother’s history. There was also the
desire to blend in and belong in Uganda, something Rachel couldn’t do as long as she was seen
as white, as a muzungu, as an exotic racial Other. I also wished to suggest that Rachel chose to
identify as black because she felt closest to black people, especially her brother Christopher and of course, Fridah. But it is perhaps the very thing I hoped to avoid doing—using Fridah as an Africanist presence—that is the most compelling motive for Rachel’s passing. Rachel desires forgiveness, and, having not found it, seeks to rid herself of what she sees as the problem—the appearance that she is connected to whiteness and what it signifies. Fridah, however, disagrees that Rachel can be black, because she has “too much money to be mudugavu” (263).

Thus, both women are bound to their own particular racialized way of seeing the world, other people, and their own place within society. Though her time in Uganda as a child and as an adult has influenced her world view, Rachel has not let go of aspects of the myth of the (white) American Dream. She sees herself as an individual, free to choose to be whatever she likes, a very white way of seeing. Fridah, on the other hand, sees that as impossible, instead recognizing that the materiality of one’s origins determines one’s identity.

Originally, as stated in my precis, I wanted to explore what might happen once a white woman, who has a same-sex desire for a black woman, realizes it is a desire that relies on othering blackness as exotic. Could she recognize how that gaze dehumanizes the black person, and by extension, herself? What would happen to how she perceives herself as a white woman? What, if anything, would happen to her white privileges? The difference between the original plot and the actual story that resulted is how, and when, those questions are answered. Initially, I had anticipated that the story would be preoccupied with Rachel’s awareness of how she sees blackness. Instead, I discovered how easily it is to slip into the quagmire of white guilt and remain stuck there. Rachel cannot see how she misunderstands and misuses blackness until she is able to see that she cannot deny her whiteness, but white guilt is not something one easily escapes. This process, I found, takes time, and so Rachel is well into her thirties by the time she
begins to see that she cannot simply escape who she really is, and has been all along—a white woman.

I chose to end Rachel’s story by giving Fridah the last word, having silenced her as I had so abruptly after she was expelled from school (and from the narrative itself, more or less). As the story developed, I felt she was a catalyst for the potential change in how Rachel understands herself in terms of race. Fridah knew her and loved her as a white person years before, and also has, as a Ugandan, an interesting perspective on whiteness as something bound primarily to economic status. It would not be easy, I felt, for her to accept whatever Rachel had to say about why she has altered her racial identity.

During the final scene in the epilogue, Rachel becomes suspicious of Fridah’s proximity to an anti-homosexuality march taking place on the street where they ran into each other. Her suspicion, I felt, was based on Fridah’s apparent resignation toward what had happened with her male math teacher, as well as feelings she still harbors for her without knowing what Fridah’s sexual orientation as an adult might be, and her questioning serves as a means to find out. However, it becomes something more than that when Fridah reveals that she does not agree with either side, an answer that surprises Rachel, who believes one must have an opinion about it one way or another. It is Fridah’s answer, “They are not our words,” that reminds her of their cultural differences, differences steeped in the social construction of race (265). The average American reader likely wouldn’t grasp her meaning, which refers to the replacement of Ugandan / tribal socially-constructed ideas of sexuality with Western, Judeo-Christian ones. For Fridah, the words ‘pride’ and ‘anti-homosexuality’ used by Rachel are Western inventions that do not necessarily represent, historically, the scope of Ugandan cultural perspectives and practices of sexuality, a perspective she chooses to adhere to out of a sense of cultural pride, and perhaps also because it
most closely aligns with her own experiences. It was my intention that this should serve as an opportunity for Rachel to see that her vantage point remains that of a white female American, and not black or Ugandan, although I think her experiences in Uganda certainly enrich her perspective. And so, I suppose Fridah is serviceable to the last, but in a manner that I hope is different from the typical Africanist presence—one that is completely bound to supporting whiteness. Instead, I feel she serves to remind Rachel that blackness is not something she can take for herself.

In fact, Fridah’s perspective was instrumental to convincing me that Rachel can never truly be black. I agonized over whether I had made the right decision to have Rachel step into the bay after her conversations with Jill at the lecture and allow her brown contacts to float way, with the intention of suggesting that Rachel was no longer going to pass for black. It wasn’t until I wrote Fridah’s scene in the epilogue that I knew for sure that this was the right choice. Before that, I wondered: what if someone like Dolezal really is a “hero” for staying true to what she believes—that a person can chose their own racial identity based on how they feel? What if Dolezal’s actions, and my character’s actions, as a means of revealing the social-constructedness of race, are essential to moving towards a society that is no longer built upon an institutional system of white privilege, a system that still relies on knowing who is what race? I’d worried that I’d made the wrong choice somewhere in the plot that led to Rachel’s decision. What if I’d gotten it wrong? But in the end, Fridah reminded me: to truly achieve racial equality, white people first need to acknowledge the institutional racism of white privilege and the myriad ways it informs and benefits us white people in our ordinary, daily lives. Fridah loved Rachel, and that was somehow necessary to the story and perhaps to me too, and so she would not allow Rachel
the illusion that race does not have very real physical and social ramifications in both of their lives.

*Why Rachel Dolezal altered the premise of my story*

Prior to learning about Rachel Dolezal, drafts of my novel, in accordance with my precis, were about a white college-aged woman named Rowan who finds a lynching postcard belonging to her great-grandmother and develops feelings for her black roommate. Like Rachel Jefferson, Rowan then traveled to Uganda and experienced being a racial “minority,” a status that emphasized her white privilege. It was my intention to explore the relationship between family and the intergenerational trauma of lynching, the psychological impact of white guilt, and how this might affect black-white relationships, and in its current form, my novel does explore these aspects of race relations. However, I felt that in my early plot synopsis too much emphasis was being placed on overt racism, which many white people assume is the only form of racism, and one associated with fringe groups like the KKK and tragic events relegated to history, rather than as something relevant to their own daily lives, and not enough emphasis on covert or institutional racism, which is far more pervasive in the minutiae of our daily lives and harder for white people to see. I struggled with how to render an image of institutional racism that fit the storyline so it would be as palpable to the reader as is the image of the lynching postcard. I did not want it to be easy for a white reader to dismiss racism as something that happened in the past, like lynching, or something that only “bad” people did. I wanted to show how racism continues to impact us in the present, and for this reason much of my novel, in its current form, is about the process of beginning to see white privilege, typically rendered invisible to white people, and how arduous
and slow that process of seeing can be. And quite frankly, it takes Rachel a long time to get there
because it has taken myself a long time to get there, both in my own life and in Rachel’s, even
though I’m familiar with whiteness studies. And so I began to think about possible
representations of institutional racism that would be as graphic and poignant as a lynching
postcard.

Here is where passing for black comes in. I’ve always been fascinated by African
Americans passing for white because doing so, I think, reveals race as a social construct rather
than a biological imperative. But when the story of Rachel Dolezal—a white woman passing for
black—broke the national news in June of 2015, I realized not all forms of racial passing are
equal, though it would take writing out an entire draft of my novel to realize just how different it
is for a white person to pass as a member of another race and to continue claiming such an
identity even once passing is no longer feasible, as Dolezal has done. When I first heard about
her, I wondered if Dolezal was suffering from a more extreme case of white guilt, or if she was
exploiting blackness for some reason or another. Though I didn’t know if guilt explained
Dolezal’s motives, I knew I had a way to render guilt and privilege into something tangible for
the reader.

As a result, part of what my novel explores is a white person’s rather unusual desire to
pass for black, especially given that—as the story itself would remind me—white people
technically aren’t supposed to cross the race line, either. It is well known that passing for white
affords safety and economic opportunity in a nation built upon systems of privilege for white
people; therefore, passing for black must mean a white person is giving up those systems, those
white privileges. But is this really the case? Or is choosing to redefine your race—even though
there is no outside pressure like racism to do so—simply another manifestation of white
privilege? While I had my theories, I wasn’t sure. If Rachel Dolezal and Rachel Jefferson pass for black, are they helping to dismantle the institutional system of white privilege, or do their actions support and maintain it?

In her interview of Dolezal for the Stranger, Ijeoma Oluo discusses the problematic ways Dolezal views whiteness as synonymous with upper middle class economic privileges, and blackness as something she learned about from National Geographic and Sports Illustrated, magazines that, as Oluo reminds us, are known for fetishizing black life. In other words, Dolezal denies the role white privilege has in her life, either as a white child or as an adult identifying as black. Either she is unfamiliar with the work of Peggy McIntosh, or she does not see how it applies to more than one’s economic status. Oluo even suggests Dolezal sees her childhood as slave-like, because in her memoir Dolezal emphasizes that she worked since age nine and bought her own clothes and shoes, which she says was not a “typical American childhood.” Oluo, on the other hand, characterizes Dolezal’s childhood growing up homeschooled in Montana as sounding “very white,” and indeed, the fact that Dolezal used the phrase “typical American childhood” without any reference to race sounds very much like something a white person would say.

Dolezal’s and Oluo’s different perspectives are fairly representative of the divide in opinion between people who support Dolezal’s chosen identity and those who denounce her for it. Many people I’ve discussed Dolezal’s passing with supported her as an individual who is simply expressing her autonomy and who should be left alone. This was a view expressed mainly by white liberals, although a very small number of black people I spoke with expressed this line of thinking, too. One (white) person even characterized her as a “hero” for maintaining her stance on her racial identity in the face of harsh public scrutiny. But many others, mainly people of color, share a view similar to Oluo’s, one that recognizes the crux of the problem, as I see it,
for Dolezal: the fact that a Black person who isn’t light-skinned cannot claim to be white. Most know it probably isn’t advisable to try. A white person, on the other hand, can claim a black identity simply by feeling an affinity for blackness and black culture, whatever that might mean to them, and while public scrutiny has clearly arisen in Dolezal’s case, she is still able to cling to the fantasy that she is black. It isn’t as dangerous for her to do so. In fact, Oluo cites Dolezal’s passing as nothing more than a manifestation of her white privilege, a viewpoint I have come to share after completing my novel. What Oluo means is that Dolezal’s ability to pass for black and then continue to claim a black identity for herself even though it has been revealed on national television that her parents are white is itself a symptom of white denial, of a white way of (not) seeing the world. In this sense, Dolezal hasn’t escaped being white.

If a person’s whiteness doesn’t simply disappear when passing as black, how might we understand passing as black in the context of the Africanist presence? In what ways might altering one’s physical appearance and claiming a black identity render blackness ‘serviceable’ to whiteness? To white guilt and white denial? Through Muzungu I explore the possibility that passing as black is really another form of whiteness, one in which the gaze of the person remains white—oblivious and unseeing, either intentionally or not, and one that is dependent on representations of blackness as a serviceable persona. Given this, I wanted to know what might happen to white privilege—how it might disappear or reappear or evolve at different points in the story, if at all.

We may never know what prompted Dolezal’s decision to pass for black and identify with blackness, but I did find, in addition to denying white privilege, examples of white guilt in regards to relationships within her family. As Dolezal recounts in her memoir, In Full Color, her parents adopted four black children, whom Dolezal claims were treated much more harshly than
she and her white brother ever were, although she is also quick to point out that her family life in general was not cheerful and loving, suggesting an eagerness to disassociate herself from it. Although she did not form a close bond with either her parents or her white brother, she did become close to her adopted siblings, whom she spent considerable time caring for by doing their hair and shielding them from her parents. As I read, I began to wonder if a sense of white guilt motivated her to distinguish herself from her white parents, their actions, and what those actions represented.

I had not read Dolezal’s memoir until I’d already written approximately three-quarters of Muzungu, in which Rachel Jefferson’s family life was already established. And yet, interesting parallels between the two Rachels surfaced: both came from a working-class, conservative Christian household. Both felt like outcasts among peers. Both would form close relationships with a black person. But there are also significant differences between the two, ones I did not wish to change, such as Rachel’s close relationship with her brother and great-grandmother, the discovery of the lynching postcard, and her experiences with race in Uganda, because although Dolezal’s experiences with passing served as a stimulus for my novel, it is not meant to be merely an account of her life.

*What white looks like in Uganda*

Muzungu, from Luganda, a local tribal language, means ‘white person,’ and while all white people, regardless of nationality and class, are automatically referred to as bazungu (pl.), a black person, or mudugavu, can become a muzungu if and only if he or she attains wealth, although they will not entirely lose their mudugavu identity. Race is intimately tied to class, one that does
not appear to distinguish between white elites and the white lower classes to the same degree seen in the United States, and the definition of whiteness is synonymous with the status and power of monetary wealth—something all white people are generally assumed to have. White skin denotes economic opportunity. White people automatically have *muzungu* status, while black people *might* have it. That there are whites at or below the poverty line, or even working class, is inconceivable to many Ugandans, especially if they have not traveled outside of the country. This conception of race, including the somewhat flexible nature of the categories, shares similarities with Dolezal’s conception of race—both view wealth as the definitive marker of whiteness. If you don’t have wealth, you aren’t white. But in Uganda, if you have white skin, you must have wealth.

During my travels in Uganda, vendors, taxi drivers, and other businesspersons assumed I had more money than I actually did. They would charge twice the amount for me as they would for a black person, and they always assumed my husband was not my husband but a local I hired to buy objects and services for me at the local price. Even among children, it was clear to me that they understood *muzungu* means money. For these children, seeing a *muzungu* is an exciting, lucky moment, akin to seeing a celebrity, one that might mean the chance to get candy or money. Perhaps more revealing, the relative of an in-law, a little girl of about four or five, touched my arm and asked where I had gotten it, as though my white arm was something I had purchased (and perhaps she could, too). My response, which was immediate and unscripted—an unconscious habit of whiteness and very symbolic of the relationship between whiteness and class—was that I had gotten it at Walmart. I incorporated this interaction into Rachel’s story during a visit to the orphanage, where her mother Mary volunteers.
Although Mary is a single, working class mother by American standards, she still has the unquestioned ability to travel globally and provide aid to charity organizations—trademarks of white privilege. Indeed, much of Rachel’s awareness of her whiteness in Uganda comes in the form of her economic privilege and how it contrasts with that of her black classmates at boarding school, including the ones who come from families of higher economic standing. Christine Nandawula comes from, as Rachel explains it, a family with money, and this is symbolized by the two extra pairs of shoes she carries around in her bag in order to protect them from being stolen, because even for her family, they are expensive items. This contrasts with Rachel’s relatively blasé attitude towards clothing and other items. She doesn’t worry about having them or not having them, because she has always had them. Instead, she is more concerned with toys, books and other items of luxury, such as the freedom to dress in less gender-stereotyped styles.

Rachel’s love of books also opens her eyes to economic differences between Uganda and America. When she meets Fridah and discovers they both have a love for the written word, she shows her the backpack full of books she’s brought and notices Fridah’s almost fearful reaction to the sheer number of them. Though Fridah loves to read, she is aware of only one book in her house, one that belongs to her father—*The Rape of the Pearl*—and she has to hide the fact that she is reading it. Later in the story she discovers a romance novel in her brother’s room, and that too is stolen and read in secrecy. Rachel feels a sense of shame when she thinks about the extravagance of books in America, so much so that she never talks about it with Fridah.

Perhaps more telling is Rachel’s response to Fridah’s mother, Mrs. Namuyangu, as they sit chatting in the car during traffic. When asked what she wants to do with the rest of her life, Rachel says she would like to observe people, a choice not based on the need to be economically practical, because while she thinks about the homeless people she has seen begging on the streets
in both America and Uganda, the idea that this might happen hardly occurs to her. Mrs. Namuyangu, on the other hand, follows up this conversation by asking Rachel to take Fridah to America with her someday. For Mrs. Namuyangu, Rachel is seen as a pathway to economic opportunity. For the young Rachel, an economically stable future is a given, a white privilege that is not recognized as such. It is not something she has to think about, and so she does not see it as such.

*White guilt and homoeroticism in Black Girl / White Girl*

After several close readings of Joyce Carol Oates’s novel *Black Girl / White Girl*, white guilt became particularly fascinating to me as a problematic symptom of seeing with a distinctly white vantage point. In this story, the protagonist Genna Meade, an upper-middle class white college student, is unusually aware of and forthright about her white privilege and white shame, and because of this awareness, she is highly motivated to impress upon her civil rights lawyer father that she is not a racist, so much so that she is convinced that the way to gain his attention and esteem is by befriending her black roommate, Minette Swift, and her desire to do so and her subsequent fear that she is failing gives shape to the plot of the story. Her awareness of her white privilege leaves her yearning for acceptance and acknowledgement from black people she does not even know. During a guided tour of the college museum devoted to Genna’s ancestors, Quaker abolitionists who founded Schuyler College, she notices the one black family in attendance: “I prepared to look quickly away and felt a mild pang of disappointment, when the dignified black man took not the slightest notice of me” (30). What makes this example so interesting, especially in terms of Rachel Jefferson’s story, is the emphasis placed on being seen.
Genna doesn’t expect the man to speak to her, but she does long to be seen by him even as she pretends *not* to acknowledge him by returning his gaze, had one occurred. A little while later, as the tour guide is talking about Genna’s great-grandmother and her role in the Underground Railroad, Genna’s thoughts once again return to the black man and his family: “I felt a childish thrill of pride. I was embarrassed at being a Meade in this place and yet, invisible and anonymous, I loved hearing such words. I glanced over at the black family to see how they were reacting. . . .” (37). This quote captures the tension she feels between shame for her white and economic privileges—a shame that leaves her feeling comfortable only if her relationship to the wealthy white founders of the college remains unknown in the context of their wealth—and pride for being related to those very same people in the context of their abolitionism. She does not want to be seen by others as privileged, but just as strong is the desire to be perceived as not racist, in this case through the ostensibly anti-racist actions of her wealthy ancestors, and so once again she looks at the black family, hoping to see expressions on their faces that might assuage her guilt and validate her pride. This scene occurs during orientation, prior to her meeting Minette, and perhaps serves as the impetus for seeking acceptance and acknowledgement in the form of a friendship with her.

Though she is aware of how white privilege and guilt informs her life, Genna’s gaze is still very much a *white* gaze. This is especially evident in the way she frequently portrays Minette—portrayals that render Minette as a serviceable, Africanist presence. At times she describes Minette as child-like, in contrast to the depiction of herself as an adult who knows what’s best for her: “But I felt that pinprick of opposition in my roommate, the obduracy of a child, that roused me to a kind of combat for Minette’s own good” (50) and “Except for her wide hips and sloping breasts Minette might have been a precocious twelve-year old schoolgirl.
dressed by her mother for a special occasion” (11). And yet, more often than not, as an Africanist presence, Genna’s perception of Minette did more than simply make Genna feel mature and intelligent. Her perception often caused Genna to feel unsure of herself: “From the start, Minette was an enigma to me. A riddle, and a dazzlement. I felt clumsy in her presence. . . .” (11). Here we see Genna feeling the opposite of strong and in control. The word “clumsy,” when paired with other key phrases and actions throughout the story, also hints at a homoerotic attraction, which I discuss below. Interestingly, Genna’s feelings of powerlessness follow characterizations of Minette as mysterious and unknown, as an exotic other beyond her understanding and therefore at risk of being beyond her control. A paragraph later, Genna thinks “I will make her like me. I will!” (11). Her almost violent insistence that Genna will, somehow or other, make Minette like her is central to understanding the modern white perspective, a perspective that, once it is able to “see” the system of white privilege, demands to be absolved of subsequent guilt and shame with little or no reparations or changes to that system.

The role of family in the perception and manipulation of race and whiteness is evident throughout the novel. Her father teaches her about white privilege and tells her about the picture of a lynching that hangs from the wall in his office. In fact, this is one of only a few times the reader sees father and daughter together. As I mentioned above, the motivation to “make” Minette like her stems from the desire to please her otherwise aloof and demanding father, but her desire also reveals itself to be something more. She fantasizes about taking Minette and her father out to dinner together and imagines conversations between her parents about their friendship, none of which ever actually occurs. During a phone conversation with Max, however, when she is lamenting that Minette doesn’t seem interested in seeing her as a “sister,” as something more than “just a white girl,” she says: “But I try. I try, Daddy. ‘I stand outside the
white race’—you’ve said. I try so hard” (166). They disagree, with Max explaining that he now realizes white people cannot stand outside their own race, and that Minette might not want her as a sister. It is at this point that Genna breaks from her father by expressing her disagreement—something she would not have done in the past. Her discomfort with feelings of white guilt and shame overshadows her need to feel connected to her family. She no longer desires to be agreeable, to please Max. It is no longer enough. Instead she tells him that he doesn’t know Minette and he doesn’t know her, and that they at least have to “try.” From that point on, Genna’s motivation to “make” Minette like her becomes less about father-daughter dynamics and more about Genna’s need to ease the intense feelings of guilt and shame that plague her throughout the story. Minette is the serviceable Africanist presence even and especially beyond the grave, because ultimately, the novel, which the adult Genna claims is an inquiry into the death of Minette, is in actuality a meditation on the contentious relationship between herself and her father, a relationship that is, by definition, shaped by their shared white privilege and guilt. One could say this novel reveals how the social construction of race enforces the behaviors and relationships of white people. The threat of stepping outside of the prescribed roles of whiteness causes contention between Genna and her father, and as I discuss below, it causes potential problems for the plot, too. Or rather, it leaves us with only one possible solution to the ending.

Genna’s fear of being perceived as racist is so intense that I believe she craves a more intimate connection with Minette than what friendship alone could offer in order to assuage her guilt. On the surface, she describes the bond she desires with Minette as a familial one. Even before the break with her father occurs, her fantasies shift from imagining her family connecting with Minette to imagining herself with Minette’s more conservative family during the holidays and attending church with Minette. She uses the word “sister’ on more than one occasion to
describe their relationship. But in the subtext, never directly acknowledged by Genna at any point in the story, is the homoerotic desire—evident at times in her unusual descriptions of Minette, her obsessive thoughts about her, and her otherwise inexplicable actions. The closest she comes to recognizing her desire occurs during a meeting about another racist incident on campus targeting Minette: “. . . and felt so powerful an attraction to her, impossible to comprehend as to rebuke” (207), demonstrating an awareness of her attraction—one that it is important to note follows a racist incident targeting Minette—but one she finds too mysterious to comprehend. When Genna learns from another friend that Minette has been seen with a man, Genna feels jealous and convinces herself he’s not her boyfriend, that it is something else. And then when she sees them together, her jealousy becomes more apparent: “I wondered if those lips were swollen from kissing. I did not want to imagine Minette Swift kissing, and being kissed” (155). Even so, she is unable to consider the possibility that her feelings for Minette are romantic in nature, and instead we see the tension between thinking about Minette kissing and how taboo such a thought is—so much so that she has to tell herself she doesn’t want to think about it, after having just made it clear that she does think about it. A few paragraphs later, she wonders why she is upset, and then declares that she is not upset. A similar tension is apparent in her descriptions of Minette: “Her face fascinated me, it was the most striking face I’d ever seen close up, on one so young: fierce, sharp-boned, round, rather flat, with dark skin that looked stretched tight to bursting. You felt that, if you dared to touch that skin, your fingers would dart away, burnt” (10). Minette’s face is “fascinating” and the thought of “daring” to touch “that skin” leaves her feeling she would come away “burnt”—a reference to Minette’s blackness, to lynching, to her feelings of shame and guilt (especially, as we learn by the end, in regards to her father’s role in the death of a black security guard), and to homoerotic desire for the racial other
as taboo. Her desire is erotic and it is also possessive: “Her only friend! Her only friend at Schuyler College” (143).

And yet, in spite of her need to use black people like Minette and her family as a means to constructing an anti-racist persona, there is evidence suggesting, in moments it benefits and protects her, that she doesn’t want to lose the very privileges of whiteness that cause her so much shame. For example, when the dorm supervisor, Dana Johnson, questions Genna about her knowledge of a racist letter left in Minette’s campus mailbox and evokes the college honor code to remind her that lying is grounds for expulsion, Genna becomes indignant, and reminds herself that she cannot be touched, and that Dana Johnson, even though she is a white woman, is not as privileged as she is: “Our honor code! Dana Johnson was new to Schuyler College as I was. She had no right to speak of its tradition so familiarly. I would have liked to tell her: my great-grandfather founded this college. My grandfather gave millions of dollars to this college. My father is Max Meade, no one is going to expel me” (182). Thus, while her upper class white privilege may embarrass her in front of both black and white people, ultimately, it is evident that she has no desire to lose those privileges, particularly when threatened or challenged in some way. Instead, she chooses to assuage her guilt and shame by attempting to present herself as a close intimate of Minette’s. In this light, being Minette’s friend would accomplish little as far as true racial justice is concerned.

Black Girl / White Girl reinforces the significance family plays in the development of a white vantage point—one that includes feelings of guilt and shame, a sense of entitlement, unconscious habits of whiteness, and the ability or lack thereof to recognize one’s role in institutional racism. And like Dolezal’s family dynamics, it influenced me to create in Rachel Jefferson a character who doesn’t want to “be” what her heritage represents. Genna expresses a
similar sentiment when she says to her mother during a phone conversation about her future in the context of her ancestors: “I don’t want to be a ‘Meade.’ I want to make my own way.” And so, in *Muzungu*, when intimacy with Fridah fails to assuage her guilt and shame, Rachel attempts to make her own way by going a step further than Genna had by passing for black—an act that attempts to deny family and whiteness, but which actually ends up emphasizing their significance. And like the adult Genna, the adult Rachel eventually recognizes that she cannot escape her family and her whiteness, no matter how much she desires to.

While Minette’s death is deemed accidental, the result of candles starting a fire in her dorm room, her death is not accidental in terms of the plot—one that lays bare the psyche of white American culture. Her death serves to reinforce the shame and guilt Genna feels, particularly in the context of her father’s role in the Dow chemical plant bombing and the death of a black security guard. Her death also prevents Genna from having to recognize and process her homoerotic desire—a feeling with implications so taboo in terms of sexuality and race in America that it never fully escapes the subtext. And finally, her death is necessary because it allows the plot to refocus attention back to the relationship between Genna and her (white) father. On the one hand, this makes sense: it redraws attention back to the family, the origin of our racial identities. On the other hand, it prevents Genna from having to learn how to move beyond the debilitating effects of white guilt. While it draws attention to the negative psychological impacts of white guilt and how it effects relationships, the story leaves the reader with no answer for what to do about the inequality of white privilege once we are aware, as Genna is, that we have it.

My reading of both Dolezal’s passing and Genna’s desire for intimacy with Minette share similarities: they both attempt to use blackness, to render it serviceable to their individual needs
in the fashion of the Africanist presence, in order to ease feelings of shame and guilt. In
Dolezal’s case, as mentioned above, she cites lower economic status to disassociate with white
privilege and further align herself with blackness. In addition, much of what she understands
about blackness and whiteness stems from her family’s perspective of race. In Genna’s case, her
knowledge of race is also learned from her parents, particularly her father, who teaches her about
white privilege: “As Maximilian Meade would have said, I’ve been born to unearned privilege,
in my white skin” (98). She too attempts to use blackness, specifically homoerotic intimacy with
Minette, to escape aspects of her white identity that leave her feeling shame and guilt: “Not this
life of shame. Privileged shame in a white man’s skin” (25).

Critics have remarked upon the homoeroticization of the black female body by white
female characters in works such as Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and Sherley Anne
Williams’s *Dessa Rose*. How might white homoerotic desire for the racial Other destabilize the
power of whiteness—a power that traditionally aligns with patriarchal heteronormativity—if at
all? What are the ways such a desire reinforces whiteness and lends it authority? Ultimately these
questions revolve around a much broader question, once posed by a professor of mine some
years ago: would love (of any kind) between black people and white people have been possible
during slavery? A question which, given the institutional racism that continues to define
American society, culture, and the economy of the 21st century, could be asked of today. If love
is possible, what happens to the white partner’s privilege, if anything? What happens to that
person’s white identity, to whiteness itself, if anything? What happens to the serviceability of
blackness, if anything? My positing these questions here does not indicate the intention to come
up with possible answers in the way of research, such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this
dissertation, but these questions were at the back of my mind as I wrote, questions that no doubt shaped the actions, dialogue, and imagery that would form Rachel’s story.

Great-grandmother Marjorie and the lynching postcard

Part of what I’ve chosen to explore in Muzungu rests on the premise that racism has a negative, even dehumanizing effect on the psyche of white people, often manifesting in the various forms of white guilt, denial, and violence. Rachel’s decision to disown a central part of herself by passing for black is, I believe, a manifestation of the trauma she experiences from multiple sources in the story, including the discovery of her great-grandmother Marjorie’s connection to a lynching, in which Marjorie was not, if one can believe her blasé message on the postcard, horrified by it. Though not all white people will discover that a relative participated in a spectacle lynching or other forms of violent, overt racism, many will at some point experience painful, confusing feelings of guilt and denial. However, I wish to use caution when looking at the trauma that can occur when a white person, like Rachel, begins to see that to be white is, in fact, to have a race, and most importantly, a race with a set of unearned privileges in a long history of violence, because while this awareness typically leads either to white guilt, in which an individual is overwhelmed by how pervasive racism is, or denial—often beset by feelings of anger as well as guilt—in which an individual refuses to acknowledge institutional racism, by no means do I wish to imply that the psychological trauma that can result in any way compares to the trauma experienced in the daily lives of black people and other people of color. I agree with Beverly Daniels Tatum that only white people can be racist, because only white people can benefit from being racist (129). Tatum explains why using David Wellman’s definition of racism
as a “system of advantage based on race,” and points out that the lack of cultural and institutional systems of support for people of color means that while some people of color can be prejudiced in their words or actions, they cannot be racist (129). In other words, there are no institutional benefits for being racist as there are for whites. In addition, while I believe that committing both overt and covert acts of racism dehumanizes the perpetrator, it rarely compares to the trauma of being a minority. In fact, part of what I explore in my story is the ways in which Rachel’s attempt to escape both her discomfort and the source of her discomfort—white privilege and her ties to racism—is itself a manifestation of the very thing she wishes to escape, her whiteness.

Shortly after seeing the lynching postcards in class as an undergraduate, I read James Baldwin’s short story Going to Meet the Man. It helped me understand how a white person, particularly a white child, develops a white way of seeing and becomes white in the context of explicit racial violence, effectively being frightened into glorifying that racial violence and even reveling in it, and most importantly—needing it in order to maintain a sense of self that is dependent on white privilege and supremacy, neither of which has much meaning without the existence of an Africanist presence or black “other.” This would be especially important for the development of a secondary character in my novel, Rachel’s great-grandmother Marjorie. Unlike Rachel, for whom a white vantage point is shaped much more covertly, both Jesse’s and Marjorie’s white way of seeing culminates with a clarifying moment—the moment when a person of African descent is savagely murdered during a spectacle lynching.

In Baldwin’s story, prior to the lynching, Jesse—who is still a young boy at the time that his parents take him to a lynching—is friends with a black boy his age. Jesse thinks of his friend as black, but his ideas about his friend and their relationship are not yet fully racialized, he does not fully understand the social implications of “black” and “white” until the lynching. What
changes is how Jesse recognizes himself as a white person in relation to black people but also other white people. He is shown where his place is, a place that ends with a line he cannot cross, and on the other side is his friend. While my novel contains neither scenes of Marjorie at the lynching nor how her identity as a white woman develops in that context, Rachel intuitively understands that the lynching has changed Marjorie in some way, and her knowledge of Marjorie’s participation changes her. In fact, it alters her relationship with her great-grandmother, whom she no longer trusts so completely, although her shock and distrust does not mean she is less complicit in racism than Marjorie is. In fact, she has inherited a relationship to institutional racism, a relationship that is shaped and reshaped during the day-to-day moments in her life even before the discovery of the postcard.

In Going to Meet the Man, the terrifying trauma of the lynching (and I do believe lynchings are meant to evoke terror for white people too—the terror of crossing the race line, and of not being perceived by others as “white”) becomes, for Jesse, something more when he sees how his parents react to the murder. Jesse’s mother appears physically transformed by the violence, and through her erotic response to what happens to the black man, she is rendered unfamiliar and exotic to him: “Her eyes were very bright, her mouth was open: she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her, and more strange” (1760). In a sense, Jesse has become an unintentional voyeur, a voyeur of sexualized racial violence, and as we see later in the story, the relationship between lynching, white supremacy, and compulsory heterosexuality impacts his sense of self and his relationship with his wife. But it is the body language of his father, which informs how Jesse ultimately perceives the lynching and thus, his conception of who he is expected to be. His father arrives on the scene of the lynching breathing heavily, and it isn’t until the black man has been violently castrated and burned alive that his father is (postcoital) calm:
“His father’s face was full of sweat, his eyes were very peaceful. At that moment Jesse loved his father more than he had ever loved him” (1760). Lynching the black man sends the message that he is weak, and through the act of emasculating him, Jesse’s father and the other white men appear to be the opposite—strong and in control, their masculinity unchallenged. It’s as though, by having brought Jesse to the lynching, he’s being given a choice: be like us, or be like this black man.

It is, in effect, the defining moment that provides the vantage point from which Jesse views himself, others, and his relationship to society. It is when he becomes, for all intents and purposes, white, and more specifically, a white heterosexual man. Indeed, Baldwin seems to imply that Jesse cannot be a white heterosexual man without the serviceability of the Africanist presence, for it is not until he reimagines the horrifying details of the lynching—including the erotic responses of his parents as the black man is tortured, the castration of the black man, and the memory of hearing his parents make love later that night—that he himself is finally able to have sex with his wife after having had his white masculine authority challenged by a black man earlier in the day.

Baldwin’s story reveals how racism and a white perspective are transmitted from generation to generation, especially through family. I felt it was important that my novel drew attention to this because it is not unusual for white people to say that racial violence, like slavery and lynching, are unfortunate events of the past with no relevance to the future and therefore no relevance to their own lives. I wished to use the discovery of the postcard, in part, because I wanted to reveal the ways America’s past relationship with racism continues to haunt us today. The guilt Rachel, a child of the post-Civil Rights era, feels for having loved a member of the family who participated in the murder of a black person remains with her even as she passes for
black during her adulthood years, and so, though it is one of the events that pushes her to pass as
black, it is also one of the reasons she can never truly be black.

In the first draft of *Muzungu*, Rachel did not discover her great-grandmother’s postcard until after her death. I had chosen to do this because it mirrored my own experience with my grandfather and my belated knowledge of his potential role in the KKK—an example of the pervasiveness of white silence, a silence that allows racism to flourish. However, it soon became apparent to me that the link between overt racism and covert racism was missing from my novel. I was concerned that I had not made it clear that events of the past have an impact on white people in the present and not just on black people. There was no way to show how the lynching might have affected Marjorie, and there was no way to show how Rachel’s knowledge of it altered their relationship—as I felt quite certain it would.

When I began writing the preface to this introduction, I was reminded of how important the lynching postcard is, especially given that Marjorie was not a long-deceased ancestor from the distant past, unknown. This was someone she had known for most of her childhood, someone she was close to, someone she loved. And so I realized it was necessary to have her find it before Marjorie’s death. However, I chose to delay Rachel’s interrogation of Marjorie until later in the story for four main reasons: to heighten the suspense, to force Rachel—still very much a child—to make her way in Uganda with a new and frightening view of the world and her place within it without having any explanations about race and racism from an adult, because asking a loved one about something like this isn’t something I think even an adult would rush to do, or do easily, and perhaps most especially, because I wanted the reader (and by extension, myself) to experience her trauma, to sit with it for a while, and to see how that trauma would unfold and reveal itself through her interactions with other people. How do you talk to someone about their
role in racial violence like a spectacle lynching? I certainly didn’t know, just as Rachel and Marjorie didn’t know. America hardly knows, especially white America.

And so it is Marjorie who brings up the postcard to Rachel. She did so, I think, because she was dying, and because she didn’t want that to be what Rachel remembered about her. In fact she seems both sad and angry at Rachel for having found it. She didn’t want Rachel to misunderstand, to hate her, her explanation to Rachel being simply that she was young. I also think that, while she herself still harbored prejudice against black people, she felt remorse for having attended and condoned the lynching, perhaps especially after the birth of her biracial grandson Christopher. Rachel’s response is, I think, typical of a white perspective: she remains polite when discussing anything to do with race and racism, even resorting to lying about what she thinks about the lynching in order to assuage Marjorie’s guilt and to avoid having a real conversation about it. Not once do either of them actually name what they are talking about—Marjorie refers to the postcard as “it,” and Rachel, whose immediate response is a feeling of dread, knows without being told what “it” is. While both have finally spoken aloud about the postcard, and to each other, they still remain more or less silent about it. This is in part, I think, because of Marjorie’s failing health, but it is also because it is easier this way—they both take the easy way out, and nothing is really resolved, a discussion with depth never takes place. In spite of Rachel’s gentleness with Marjorie in this moment, she still does not understand how Marjorie could have participated in the lynching, and her feelings of anger, guilt, and shame are not alleviated. Given the generational differences and the shift in emphasis from a more overt racism typical of the time period during Marjorie’s youth to a more covert racism typical in Rachel’s, she is as yet unaware of the pressure whites feel to conform to a white way of seeing, and so she carries her anger, confusion, shame, and guilt with her into her adulthood.
After Rachel and Fridah have their first romantic encounter, Rachel admits to Fridah that she’s looking for her great-grandmother in the pictures of a book about lynching. Fridah is momentarily confused, thinking this means Rachel’s great-grandmother was a black woman, to which Rachel responds that her great-grandmother did something bad. Fridah, adept at reading subtext, is quick to tell her that she (Rachel) is not bad. She understands that Rachel feels somehow guilty for Marjorie’s actions, and that they must imply something about her—namely that she’s racist. But even so, Rachel is not convinced that she isn’t somehow implicated, and to a degree, she’s right, although she is unable to recognize how exactly she is implicated—as a product of generations of institutional racism and the construction of a white way of seeing. In Rachel’s young mind, she believes she is implicated in the death of the black man. Her mistake reflects a basic misunderstanding of racism.

*Family and whiteness*

The novel opens with two themes I hadn’t (consciously) intended to explore, though they would become central to the story because they are central to whiteness: the significance of looking—especially when looking pertains to race and dominance, or the white gaze—and the relationship between mother and daughter, a relationship that would remain influential to the novel’s end and shape Rachel’s gaze as white.

Mary influences Rachel’s perception of African Americans and black Africans in a number of ways, and often unintentionally. For example, Rachel recounts a childhood memory of riding the bus with her mother on a Sunday. She pays attention to which people her mother chooses to converse with—African Americans who, like themselves, are dressed for church—
and those she does not. She notices the people her mother looks at and the people she ignores. It is the African Americans her mother chooses to ignore who intrigue Rachel the most. In fact, Rachel is so intrigued by an African American woman on the bus that she desires to imitate her, to be like her, because this woman fits Rachel’s conception, paradoxically, of someone who appears to be free—free to reinvent her public image. And free, of course, from her white mother.

What Rachel refuses to see, until much later, is how her family, especially her mother, has shaped her as a white person, one who can never truly “be” black. For example, as they are waiting for their flight at the Cairo International airport on their way back to America to care for Marjorie, Mary, seemingly out of the blue, points to the darker-skinned people in the waiting area and tells Rachel that she should not see their race, that instead she should see their humanity. This is confusing to Rachel, because the implication is that to see another person’s race is to see them as not fully human, that it is somehow wrong. It is not, as Mary explains it, “polite.” It is, from Mary’s white perspective, shameful. And indeed, Rachel’s response is a mix of confusion and shame. She is confused because she does see racial difference, and so also does Mary. After all, she had to see racial difference in order to point it out and tell Rachel not to see it, although this does not occur to Rachel in any way that she can, at that point in time, articulate. She does insist that Frank and Fridah are black, and Mary glares at her and counters by saying they are people. Mary’s body language, more so even than her words, affects Rachel and emphasizes a white way of seeing, one that is “correct,” “polite,” and not shameful. As a result, Rachel feels a strong sense of shame for having “seen” race, and the image of the postcard comes to her mind, reinforcing her belief that she is racist, that she is bad. All of this serves to make it more difficult for Rachel to see white privilege in all of its forms and her relationship to it even
as she uses it to claim a black identity for herself. This scene is the only time in the story, and
indeed, in Rachel and Mary’s relationship, when Mary openly discusses race with her, in spite of
the fact that race is significant to their various relationships with other people and to their time in
Uganda.

Because much of post-civil rights-era institutional racism is communicated at the
subconscious level via the gaze and other forms of body language, much of the trauma of
Rachel’s racialization as a white woman occurs through silent, everyday moments that are hardly
recognized as such. There is a lack of direct, meaningful dialogue with her white elders when
key moments of racism or racial tension arise. After the scene in which she discovers the
postcard in her great-grandmother’s house, instead of approaching her great-grandmother,
allowing for the potential to have a meaningful dialogue with her about it, Rachel reacts rudely
to her without explanation. Already she understands, on some level, that this is not something
people talk about, that it is shameful and should remain out of sight. Instead, she carries her
confusion and shame, along with the postcard, to Uganda, in silence. There are, however,
moments during this time when she contemplates showing the postcard to someone, a Ugandan.

The discomfort caused by Rachel’s conflicting desire to be seen but not gazed upon
becomes apparent during Rachel’s earlier experiences at boarding school. As she struggles to fit
in among the other girls, she is often referred to in the third person as “the muzungu,” and is
constantly stared at, which further alienates her from her surroundings. In essence, the act of
being stared at causes discomfort because it transforms Rachel into an “Other” by emphasizing
her whiteness. The contrast between this and her experience in America is very revealing when
compared to the bus scene mentioned above, in which Rachel learns the subconscious habits of
the white gaze by observing and imitating her mother. They are the ones who are doing the
looking, with their white gaze, at the African American passengers, and they do so from a position of belonging, of status, and of dominance. However, being looked at, not as a *muzungu* or outsider, but as someone with the privilege of belonging, is also something she desires, especially given the guilt and shame she feels in being connected to racism. For example, during a conversation about boys with a new friend, Vicky, who is looking intently at Rachel as they talk, the moment it becomes apparent that Rachel has no sexual experience with boys, Vicky looks away. Any potential connection between them in that moment is lost, as is the chance to be held in high esteem, to have status. In effect, the act of looking away signals to Rachel that she is not interesting. The lack of eye contact provokes her to imagine showing the postcard to Vicky in the attempt to appear more interesting, to elevate her status as someone connected to a horrific spectacle in American history. As if that isn’t enough, she considers lying about her great-grandmother’s role in the lynching, claiming her to be a murderer, rather than as the “mere” observer that she was. These thoughts so shock her, however, that soon after having them she flees Vicky, without explanation. Guilt causes her to feel so disturbed by her thoughts and the fear of the judgment she imagines Vicky would make about her that her reaction is physical, her breath literally catching in her throat (also a not-so-subtle reference to being hanged), and she has to check to make sure the postcard is where she left it, that no one has, in fact, *seen* it. It becomes clear in these examples that seeing and being seen denote power and status in different ways, and is often the result of one’s racial status and connection within a community.

I chose to have Mary find out that Rachel had the lynching postcard—an aspect of Marjorie she herself had not known about, because, given the fact that Rachel takes it with her wherever she goes, it seemed likely someone would find out about it, in fact it seemed to beg to be seen by more people, and because I feel this story is very much about Rachel and her
relationship with her mother. And yet, it felt plausible that very little would be said between them about it, given their “polite” white perspective on race. Instead, Rachel overhears her mother pleading with Frank to talk to her about it, but he doesn’t understand why this duty should fall to him. Mary’s explanation is that it would be better for Rachel if he did, because it (his blackness) would imply that he is okay with Marjorie and with her, in spite of the postcard (and their whiteness). While this likely is a large part of her motivation, Mary’s own white guilt prevents her from dealing with it, as does her white vantage point, which sees race as something shameful, something that is impolite to talk about. She has no idea how to talk about it, and prefers to hide behind silence.

Mary is also influential in Rachel’s decision to stop passing for black. When she tells her what Jill had said to her about how much she had looked like Christopher when they were children, Mary is surprised that Rachel hadn’t realized this on her own. As they turn away from each other, it occurs to Rachel that they aren’t so different after all.

Christopher and white silence

When I began writing *Muzungu*, I had no intention of having Rachel’s brother, Christopher, die in a tragic accident, nor did I expect he would be much of a presence in the story, or that I would grow to like him so much. As he gradually came to life to me as an individual, he seemed somehow shrouded in mystery and tragedy, and I became intrigued. There was something about him that demanded more attention. Perhaps this is because I would come to realize that he is biracial and not fully white like Rachel, and in American literature, the figure of the tragic mulatto is still a fairly common trope, although it is slowly being replaced by biracial characters...
that are anything but tragic victims, and so I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that he’s actually black, especially given that *Muzungu*, as an exploration of white life, is ultimately a story about family secrets involving race. Ultimately, it is the secretive manner in which his family handled his racial heritage that is as much the part that renders him a tragic victim as is his actual death in a skiing accident.

Why did Mary never discuss his parentage with him? Why did he have to find out by rumor and from intercepting a letter written to him from Frank? On one level, Mary’s shame about the affair with his father while she was still married to Rachel’s father *might* seem like enough of an explanation given her identity as a conservative Christian woman who shouldn’t be engaging in extra-marital affairs, and because, as Rachel would find out later, she was actually torn between her love for both men. But this is merely superficial, a cover Mary uses to ignore her family’s discomfort with Frank’s blackness as well as her own contradictory feelings about him, feelings—both conscious and unconscious—learned from her family. I think, also, she thought it was best to raise Christopher with the belief that he was white, so he would not have to live with the knowledge of how his relatives viewed the situation—not him personally, but his blackness (or so they would put it, as though the two could be separated). But such a secret is rarely maintained, as was the case for him during his short life. The silence surrounding Christopher’s racial identity isn’t total, particularly where people outside of the family are concerned. During a moment of strife between Rachel and her brother, she recalls that Christopher had asked her if she had ever wondered why they were different. Her uneasy response reveals she knows, even though she can’t articulate what exactly she knows, that he isn’t referring to gender differences, and his question leaves her feeling nervous. The pressure for the siblings to recognize their differences, both in terms of their race identity and how it is
presented comes, for the most part, from outside of the family. It is their peers’ lack of silence about Christopher’s perceived physical differences—his darker hair and skin tone—that prompt the two to begin acknowledging their racial differences, albeit at different times and in different ways.

His death was not planned; it merely occurred to me one day that it would happen, perhaps as a means of propelling Rachel and her mother to Africa, although her mother, as a person interested in missionary work, would not have necessarily needed such a push to go. As with many of the plot choices I made, the reason for his death was not immediately clear to me. His death, which Rachel felt responsible for, certainly added—in conjunction with his biracial heritage and the family’s varied responses to blackness—to Rachel’s confusion and guilt about her whiteness. In a sense, like Fridah, he too becomes serviceable, but it is my hope that white readers like him as much as I do, and are affected by his situation and how he could not be whole as long as his heritage was withheld from him. Part of the tragedy of his untimely death is that Rachel got to know his father, Frank, while he did not.

It could be argued that Christopher’s presence in the novel also plays with the idea of passing. If he doesn’t even know he’s black for most of his short life, then what is race? He wasn’t passing if passing is something one does intentionally, and he was being raised by his white mother alongside his white sister. As I perused opinion pieces and blogs on the internet, it became clear to me that many black people disagreed that Rachel Dolezal was black because, they argued, being black for them was growing up eating particular foods and having their hair done in certain styles, among other things—cultural things, things not a part of Christopher’s life. It was also being called the “N” word for the first time. Other than being asked, now and then, by his classmates about whether or not he was adopted because he was a bit darker than
Rachel, Christopher’s cultural experience was largely a white one, perhaps even more white than Rachel’s, because of her time spent in Uganda, although he didn’t experience the degree of white guilt, shame, denial, and privilege that Rachel did.

One of the most important moments in the story that leads Rachel to forgo presenting herself as black occurs because of Christopher. At the end of her talk at the university about her work with elephants in Uganda, Rachel talks to Jill, a woman from her elementary school days who knew both her and Christopher. As they talk, Jill mentions she had heard that Rachel was living as a black woman, and towards the end of their conversation, she mentions that she thought Rachel looked like Christopher. Rachel assumes Jill means she looks like him now, with her dark curly hair and tanned skin, but Jill corrects her, saying she always thought they looked alike when they were kids. Rachel isn’t expecting this, she’s surprised, and it reveals much about how she views race. Even though she says, more than once, that Christopher looks quite a bit like their mother if one would only look beyond color, her reaction here suggests even she didn’t always do so, even though she loved him very much, and it suggests she felt they must ultimately be different, somehow. She is surprised to realize this, and it is this moment, more than any other, that moves her to return to “being” white. Her reaction and subsequent decision also suggests how much of an influence her relationship with Christopher, her later knowledge of his black heritage, and her guilt about his death, was in her decision to pass as black.

Conclusion

As I felt the novel drawing nearer and nearer to some sort of ending, I agonized over whether or not Rachel would attempt to maintain a black identity or acknowledge her whiteness. Would she
recognize the privileges she has as an American of European descent? Would she recognize how she gazes at the world and others with a white perspective? I didn’t know what she would decide. What was she capable of seeing? What was the “correct” answer for the story, and would it accurately reflect real life?

Sometimes consciously, but more often subconsciously, I formed the plot of Muzungu through several events in Rachel’s life, events that would allow me to explore the emotional terrain of 21st century whiteness, encompassing white guilt, shame, denial, and privilege, within America and abroad. Rachel Jefferson’s decision to pass for and identify as black can be analyzed through her experiences as a white woman struggling to come to terms with the trauma of the lynching postcard, the accidental death of her black half-brother, spending part of her childhood in Uganda, and experiencing a same-sex, biracial relationship that would challenge her to reassess her worldview, all of which supports the argument that racism impacts white people, too. With the exception of the lynching postcard, none of these events could be said to be examples of overt racism involving violence perpetrated against a person of color, rather, they are symptoms of covert, institutional racism, or the system of advantages made by white people solely for white people. Rather than focusing in detail on just one of these, I felt it was important to explore how one event—in this case the discovery of the postcard, but also perhaps the family’s secret about Christopher’s blackness and the guilt Rachel feels for his death—leads to other instances of racism, specifically covert racism or white habits of privilege. In fact, these two examples share something in common: both are family secrets that reveal how whiteness is a learned perspective passed on from generation to generation. How Rachel’s family addresses these issues, or more accurately, does not address them, impacts Rachel’s thoughts, behaviors, and interactions with people of color. They also influence how she feels about herself, which, for
the most part—as far as being a white person is concerned—has become mostly negative, hence her desire to escape being seen by others as white.

The more I talk to other white people who lack a basic understanding of the different types of racism and how they operate, the more I see how confused they are by the use of the words “white person,” “racist,” and “racism.” For many white people, they grow up with positive memories of their youth and their family and their schooling, and then one day, or perhaps more accurately, over a succession of days throughout their lives, through images on television, jokes, overheard conversations, sensational news, body language, etc., they come to associate “white person” with “racist” (as in the KKK) and “bad.” They either come to associate themselves as bad because they are white and therefore racist, or they assume other people believe it about them. What they fail to understand is that what is “bad” is the existence of institutional racism, a system of advantages in place for only white people. As McIntosh explains in *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, most white privileges are not negative, rather, the problem stems from the fact that they aren’t available to everyone. This is what is so difficult for white people to understand. The problem with how many people view racism and cling to a white-as-victim stance when confronted with racial inequality is the result, perhaps, of the imprecise and abstract nature of language. It is inaccurate to say that “white people” is synonymous with “bad” and “racist,” and yet this is precisely what often happens, resulting in confused, defensive behaviors and attitudes, such as white guilt, white denial, blaming people of color, and white-as-victim attitudes.

Rachel Jefferson is no exception. As the scene in which she explains to Fridah why she has a book about lynching reveals, she believes she is bad. She never says why, but it’s clear she has made the negative association between “white” and “racist.” This reveals why racism is so
successful, its success relying on these kinds of symbolic associations and assumptions made by average white people who are neither members of the ultra-wealthy nor perpetrators of overt racism. Rachel takes her white guilt a step further than most white people by attempting to physically escape from it. She uses blackness to free herself from guilt and responsibility, although her guilt and ties to the past prevent her from succeeding. It does not occur to her that moving beyond white guilt and fighting racial inequality does not require her to relinquish her heritage. In fact, after writing this novel, I believe that fighting racial inequality is best served by acknowledging one’s white privileges rather than denying their existence.

If I were to continue work on this story, I might consider including additional scenes that explore how Rachel moves forward as a white person with the intent of combating covert, institutional racism in her daily life. This is another aspect of being white many people struggle with once aware of institutional racism and white privilege. I imagine many of the scenes would also reveal how Rachel continues the difficult process of becoming more and more aware of her various white privileges, many of which were invisible to her as such and taken for granted, and I imagine her battle with white guilt would not be completely over, either. Scenes involving her biracial children and how she interacts with them would be important additions. Flashbacks of her adult life as a black woman in Uganda and with her husband would add more insight into her mind as well.

And so it seems the question isn’t really whether a white person like Rachel can pass for black—after all Rachel Dolezal, who claims to “feel” black and not white, is only one example of a successful passing, if but for a time, John Howard Griffin being another—but rather should a white person pass for black, whatever their personal motivation? Is it fair for a white person to pass for black? Is it ethical, given the fact that the majority of black people cannot feasibly pass
for white and have access to white privilege, and that white people passing for black can easily return to being white and benefiting from the privileges of whiteness at any time? Rachel’s relationships with her great-grandmother and the lynching postcard, with her mother and the development of her perception of race, with her brother, and with Fridah all gradually helped me to understand that it is not entirely ethical for white people to pass for black or claim to “be” black. An ally, yes. But given institutional racism and white privilege, not owning up to one’s whiteness is certainly not ethical, regardless of how one might relate to or identify with a person of color excluded from white privilege.

This is not to say that people like Rachel Dolezal should be publicly humiliated for their decision to identify and/or pass as black, for the danger in doing so is that we turn such people into scapegoats, much as we have with groups like the KKK, rather than focusing on ending the day-to-day ways institutional racism is maintained by all white people. In fact, I hope my story reveals Rachel’s humanity, and I hope the reader is able to relate to her and feel for her, even if they don’t agree with her decision to pass. I still feel that racial passing is important as a means of revealing the flaws in the system of race-based privilege—a system based on the ability of a person to recognize, just by looking at their body, how a person should be treated. If a person can hide the racial legacy they inherited at birth by modifying their body, then at least some black people can access white privilege, and white people can defect—an act that implies whiteness is undesirable—and the system and the elite it benefits are at risk. Perhaps more importantly, not only does Dolezal not desire to be treated as white by others, she doesn’t desire to be white. Even if her desire is the result of white guilt, even if it is an example of her white privilege, it suggests whiteness isn’t necessarily desirable. It would be worthwhile to study the potential ways in
which passing for black upsets institutional racism, as well as how exactly it serves to maintain it.

The entire process of exploring whiteness through characters in a novel has been an interesting and unexpected experience. I didn’t think I wouldn’t know how the story would end until I wrote the end scene. I didn’t realize it would take me so long or so many drafts to finish. I didn’t think it would be so difficult to write about the writing of it. It has made me realize how important the use of imagery is in exploring difficult and emotional subjects like race and racism. And although I’d often heard other writers speak of how the characters seem to do things or make decisions of their own volition, I didn’t really understand that until Rachel Jefferson. I thought I knew everything I needed to know about what my dissertation was going to be about when I first began. Instead, I came away with a greater awareness and empathy for white people who struggle to understand racism than I had going into the project.
Bibliography


