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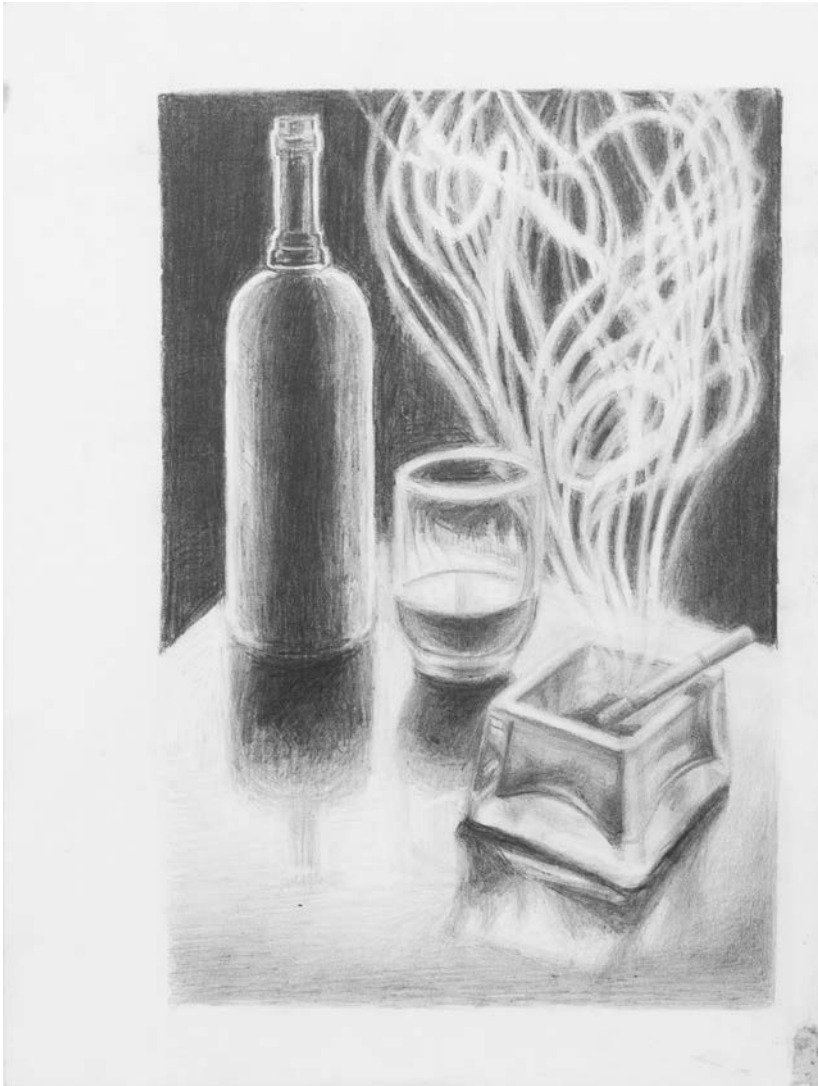
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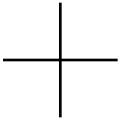
LETTERS 199

You're a working-class organic intellectual if...





G.B. JONES, *NIGHT*. 2011, GRAPHITE ON PAPER. 12 × 9". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND COOPER COLE, TORONTO.



DANCING INSIDE THE BOX

Dawn Lundy Martin

ON A CLEAR, traffic-free day, it takes seven and a half hours to drive from Pittsburgh to midtown Manhattan, and that's if you only stop once for gas. But there's always traffic. And somewhere between Scranton and Elk County, down below the Allegheny National Forest or thereabouts, clouds will often roll in no matter how fine the weather when the drive began, and rain will come, moody and gloomy. Giant trucks zoom by, blinding the windshield with wake water. I know all this because in 2007 I was offered and accepted my first academic job, in Pittsburgh, a city I'd never thought about.

Since then I have driven from Pittsburgh to New York and back more times than I can count. I drove in all types of weather, from blizzarding snow that sent my VW Beetle skidding off the highway to smoldering heat with broken air-conditioning and the windows down. I drove in the endless dead of night, downing 5-hour Energy shots, my brain vibrating. I drove throughout the first year of Trump's presidency, when the last face a middle Pennsylvania white man wanted to see was a black one. I did so with fortitude, my body tense with focus, my hands and legs numb and tight, just trying to reach my destination. I did so out of love, devotion, and a sacred respect for the artmaking we call poetry, and because I needed a job. For reasons that would become clear to me many years later, I could never get settled in Pittsburgh, could not let go of the coast, even though I'd dreamed for so long of a university position just like this one.

The university on my mind, I realize now, was a fantasy. It was born of a grand idea of academia and freedom that I first encountered

in college, after taking Regina Barreca's class *Sex, Politics, and the British Novel*. I found myself in a select group of Gina's friends—young professors in English, art, and French, and a couple of graduate students, including my housemate Kryz, who was a poet like me. I was a senior and the only undergraduate invited to their Wednesday pizza nights in Willimantic, Connecticut, where we sat around drinking red wine, smoking cigarettes, and talking late into the night about ideas, film, painting, and who had modeled for which artist. I was mostly silent, soaking in the vibe, feeling like this could be a life. I remember one professor there told me that the way I held my cigarette made me look like someone who didn't smoke. This confounded me—I'd been smoking since high school—but I still made a mental note to hold my cigarettes better, more naturally.

The whole scene made me feel like a character in a James Baldwin novel. The pizzeria transformed into "open French doors and a balcony, more than a hundred people mill[ing] about, some in evening dress . . . High above [our] heads an enormous silver ball . . . so bright with jewelry and glasses and cigarettes, that the heavy ball seemed almost to be alive." I felt so grateful to be there that it never registered that I was the only black person at the gala.

Gina, with her short skirts and big hair, reciting from memory whole passages of texts and telling bawdy jokes in class, was the primary siren. A *this is what a feminist looks like* type of feminist, she introduced me and the other students to the trope of the madwoman in the attic. With Gina and the rest of the Wednesday pizza crew, the highest form of education came on the tightrope between studious discipline in the classroom and laxness outside it, breaching (but not in the vulgar sense) the border between professor and student. It was while walking that titillating tightrope that I fell in love with the idea of being a professor. The romance of it all flowed inside me like a beautiful venom for decades.

MICHAEL CHABON'S novel *Wonder Boys* is about an aging novelist, Grady Tripp, who teaches at an unnamed Pittsburgh university. Tripp won a PEN award for his most recent book, years prior, but is now floundering, smoking lots of weed, and trying to finish a new novel long past its deadline. I have read the book twice and watched the movie at least ten times. One thing I loved about its story as a young writer and teacher was that it centers on the failure of completion. Failure was at

the heart of how I thought about making art: one must risk enough in writing for the actuality of it not to work out. Risk, as Carl Phillips writes, is a “willing[ness] to enter uncertainty . . . in order to get to something presumably superior and/or preferable to ‘the old life.’” The writer must gather herself after a long labor, if it doesn’t work out, and begin again. Tripp’s novel in progress is already more than two thousand pages long, yet he keeps writing and writing in a brutal relation of eros, the ultimate unforeclosure, just sitting wet and helpless in the seat of desire.

I also loved how Chabon’s protagonist crosses all sorts of imagined boundaries between professor and student, like when he offers a painkiller chased by a nip of Jack Daniel’s to one of his undergraduate writing students, James. Tripp does it so casually, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. “Have one,” he says. “Give me,” says James, accepting. All this reminded me of my own college days: not only Wednesday night pizza, but the time the teaching assistant from my women’s studies class braided my hair, me sitting between her knees on my living room floor, playing a sultry Billie Holiday album and thinking we would fuck. And the time I took Kathryn, an art professor in our group, to a New York-style dance club in Hartford, where she met my high school boyfriend, Eric (“*Who* is that man?” she cooed), and asked both of us to model for her. (We did, and that painting is now in the permanent collection of the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut. Of the work, titled *Superstition*, Kathryn says, “The models were friends of mine, people I was hanging around with that summer.”) My poetry teacher sometimes came over to my apartment for an invitation-only workshop, saying with a smile as she entered, “It smells like the Sixties in here,” meaning she smelled weed and wanted some. All this boundary crossing made college life better and more exciting than the alternative of simply attending classes and sitting in professors’ offices. My education spilled out of the classroom into an intellectual life. It was the first context in which I felt I belonged.

I had known since the *Wonder Boys* film premiered in 2000 that Michael Chabon attended the University of Pittsburgh as an undergraduate, and that Tripp’s character was loosely based on a novelist who taught there. By 2007, this very same novelist was the director of the writing program where I had just been hired to teach. Early that first fall, he threw a massive party at his home for all the English department faculty and graduate students, present and past. The house teemed. The dining table

overflowed with bottles of booze and wine and platters of food; outside, people smoked weed. In a little alcove off the kitchen, the department chair—a friendly, burly guy with an air of having never been challenged by anyone in his life—held court. These were the days when the chair kissed all the women on the cheek in greeting, even me, the gender-weirdo newbie. Things seemed oddly as they had been, as they should be.

MY PLAN HAD always been to get a PhD in literature and then find a job in a creative writing program, so that my work would be writing poetry. As an experimental poet, I'm engaged in an obscurity comparable to the work of a scholar of Middle English: the few who try to understand what I do are doing something similar themselves. We're in the same "field." Our special brand of freedom in the humanities allows us a belief that by thinking out loud in class with students and writing about dominant power structures, we unearth and enact something necessary. It doesn't matter that the "real world" won't read what we write—we're in the service of the real world anyway.

I love poetry that doesn't look at all like what people think poetry is or should be, poetry that makes me think in the moment. My Pittsburgh classes were filled with opportunities both for thinking in the moment and for the close attention needed to read difficult works like Myung Mi Kim's *Penury* or Anne Carson's *Nox* or Dionne Brand's *The Blue Clerk* or John Cage's *Silence*. As a teacher I enjoy the labor of reading seemingly impenetrable texts, and I expect the same of others. I prefer to teach at a rectangular table instead of round, because I enjoy sitting at the head. I rarely move from my seat except sometimes to squat in my chair. I hate writing on any kind of board—chalk, white, or other. I rarely give written feedback on poems, because I say everything out loud; I expect students to take thorough notes, and when they don't I get irritated. I approach every class meeting as if all the students have spent substantial time with the required texts—and have valued this time, because it is such a rare privilege to be asked to read poetry with your entire self.

It is from these places that my students in Pittsburgh got to practice writing poems themselves. There is something sacred to this work in part because no one is demanding that anyone do it. There's no money in it; the university itself hardly values the capaciousness of the creative mind. But here we are, knuckle to bone, trying, failing, and trying to let that failure create a beautiful space for starting over.

I also move with the moment, which is a kind of thinking in the moment. When the poet Ariana Reines visited my graduate class one day in my fourth year, she surveyed the classroom and asked, “How is it possible to study literature in this place?” So we all picked up and walked together down the street to a pool hall that had a beat-up private room on the second floor. We ordered some beers and arranged ourselves in a lopsided circle. Someone lit a cigarette. Reines talked about writing her startling book-length poem, *Coeur de Lion*, in two weeks while holed up in a Bushwick apartment, high on speed. She lectured us at length about Haiti and its colonial history, about how this related to the country’s post-earthquake catastrophe. Of course, I had no idea she would say any of this, but I loved the unpredictability, honesty, and passion. Our conversation refined my belief that a great art education must be responsive to conditions that restrict, which makes it unpristine and a little messy; it doesn’t always fit within institutional walls.

A THING CAN HURT YOU and you might not know exactly why. It’s not pain, but an inner mechanism alerting you that something is deeply wrong. You’re doing everything right, everything your graduate school mentors taught you: keep your mouth shut and your head down until you get tenure. But this wave comes over you, like you’re inside the antithesis of the freedom you’ve been seeking. You wonder if it’s just you, if you’re just too sensitive, or if you’re making things up, or if this is just the way academia is. It’s not only the colored other who has to prove themselves again and again as worthy, it’s everyone—right?

You look at yourself in the mirror. You give talks and readings all over the country and the world. You make art you never expected to make, and people say it’s quite compelling. You stretch yourself further than you thought possible, looking over your shoulder as you do. *I’m OK*, you say, looking in the mirror. You gather yourself. You move inside of whitedom as you’ve always done, noticing, not complaining, playing the game. When an older white male colleague invites you out for drinks, you go. When he says he can’t drive, you drive, Hoke. When he asks you where you’re from, you say Connecticut, and he says, *No, where are you really from, in Africa?* You don’t know what to say.

AFTER I RECEIVED tenure and was promoted to full professor, my position at the university morphed. I had more research funds than

I could use. I taught one graduate class a year, which allowed me to split my time more reasonably between Pittsburgh and New York. I could fly instead of driving up and down the dreaded turnpike.

My colleague Terrance and I cofounded a center for black poetry and poetics, which the university not only funded but later partially endowed, thanks to the dean at the time, a brilliant, chill older white chemist dude who made his decisions thoughtfully but kind of on the fly, with a handshake. Terrance soon left for another university, so for six years I directed the Center alone, working with Lauren, the assistant director, to turn it into an internationally respected place for creative collaboration and cross-disciplinary conversation. It was also a black space, which the university desperately needed: a place where the joyful living and depleted suffering of black people came together in what we called “thinking in creative practice.”

Together with Angie, the Center’s lead faculty affiliate, I spun wild ideas into reality. In 2017 we collaborated with our friends Rich and Erica, who worked at other schools, to bring together ten black artists, poets, scholars, and filmmakers for a three-day conversation inspired by Hortense Spillers’s essay “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date.” We called upon “the marked, subaltern poet and thinker to be the inheritors of a radical tradition of enduring bodily and discursive violence, while being compelled to overhaul the world as we have always found it.” It was an extraordinary gathering. It was the last time I saw the writer and musician Greg Tate alive. The Center was where I felt, to borrow from Saidiya Hartman, as if I had been acted upon, called. If there was ever a time when I could almost fathom what people mean when they say God spoke to them, it was when I was running the Center.

TIME PASSES.

At first I refused to watch the video of George Floyd’s murder, knowing I wouldn’t be able to unsee it. When I finally watched it, alone in my home office, I hung my head and sobbed. That pandemic summer, many of us risked contagion and took to the streets. In Pittsburgh, as in many other places, the city issued an 8:30 PM curfew. At the time I had an elderly dog, Lorca, whose pee schedule was predictable. I snuck out into the dark, empty streets at 11 PM or midnight, always afraid that a cop would approach us. (Police love to shoot pet dogs, tons every year. It’s a way to hurt someone deeply while leaving them little legal

recourse.) Fireworks went off intermittently in the distance. I was almost constantly anxious. I heard Floyd's last cries echoing in my head, and saw Derek Chauvin's face, placid as a country lake.

The university issued a flaccid public statement. "This is a time for demonstrating solidarity with our African American community. . . . We stand with you in demanding better and are committed to working with you to make meaningful changes." There was a lot of talk of "change." "Real change," "powerful change." "Eliminating racism near and far," for "a more equitable future for all." The chancellor paused the university's strategic planning process to allow, he said, for "time to incorporate specific strategies to strengthen our commitments to racial equity and justice."

This is what the scholar Sara Ahmed calls nonperformative language. Performative language, she says, following J. L. Austin, does what it says; it is speech that acts. As nonperformative language, university statements about equality and equity "'work' precisely by not bringing about the effects they name." Strangely, the chancellor's statement also referred to unspecified people whose "grief and anger" could be "too easily exploited." "Some are happy to create confusion, sow conflict and incite violence." I know he wasn't talking about the police, though he should have been. He was talking about legitimate expressions of moral outrage by the protesters, the people. Perhaps deep in the recesses of his mind the chancellor was aware that, as Vicky Osterweil writes, "Looting is direct action par excellence. . . . It is also a nearly irrecoverable gesture against the police, whiteness, and the regime of property that gives those forces power and purpose."

George Floyd's murder made being black at the university significantly worse. When I try to understand how, I can't help but look back on the chancellor's words, ostensibly full of hope that the "national crisis" could "catalyze powerful change"—and how those words did nothing. After all, the scholars and writers I'm drawn to are in the business of shedding light on linguistic and other structures that pretend to be something that they are not.

The English department meetings on Zoom that fall were deeply uncomfortable. Black professors and allies expressed anger at the overwhelming whiteness of the faculty and at the school's inability to retain the few black instructors who did work there. The department's proposed solutions drew from an old, dead script: more meetings. A diversity

subcommittee. A review of the most recent survey on diversity, conducted among faculty and graduate students, with which nothing had been done. A new survey on diversity, with which nothing would be done. An outside consultant hired to help us talk about our race problems.

I suggested that we start from the premise that the department and the university are racist, and work from there. This, I know, made the meeting uneasy for a bunch of white faculty, including the department chair, who kept saying robotically, “I’m listening.” Like the chancellor’s statement, *I’m listening* was language that did not do what it claimed to do, that even did the opposite: *I am not listening. I cannot hear you.* There is action in nonperformative language, after all. As Ahmed puts it, “Being committed to antiracism can function as a perverse performance of racism.”

Many of my colleagues and I left those meetings feeling deflated and defeated. It was like screaming over and over into a long, dark tunnel and hearing only a distorted echo of your own voice.

THIS IS WHERE I should tell you everything, but can tell you almost nothing. Nearly all the important things that happened at the university happened behind closed doors, with anonymous ballots and scant documentation. This is where I fail the reader and myself, forced to maintain the very opaque functioning that has kept white supremacy operating at full steam for so long.

I will say this. While the university publicized their renewed commitment to “diversity,” I was on committees—ones I’m not allowed to talk about—where I saw how pro forma processes became instruments of antiblackness. What had always been there, but hard to pin down, happened before my eyes. During my many years as a professor, I watched every motherfucking white candidate sail through pretenure promotion—until the candidate was a young black professor, and suddenly the case was “troubling,” full of things that needed to be “flagged.” On another secret committee, I saw how competitive senior promotion processes were designed so that, a priori, the only white candidate would win. When the question of bias was raised, the designers of the process voiced incredulity or pled ignorance. *Are you calling me biased?* they might say, echoing that old dog whistle, *Are you calling me racist?*

The year after the George Floyd uprisings, I was one of six tenured black faculty in the humanities (five of them women) who made plans to

leave. The university failed to retain a single one of us. But if you value someone and their work, then at the very least you *try* to keep them. Especially when you've claimed to want to "turn the lens inward and consider our institution's own role in perpetuating unfair structures and systems." In my resignation letter to the dean, I was pointed about my decision to leave: "The truth is that my energy (emotional and other), my time, and my attention have been constantly sapped by what we in the English department call 'the racial climate.' Frankly, I'm exhausted by the constant mentoring of teary faculty, stressful conversations, personal slights, and mountains of sideline race work." Admittedly, when I told the department chair and the dean about an offer I had received from another institution, I said I was not alerting them so early as a strategic move to elicit a retention offer, but so that I might help with the search for my replacement. After I informed them of my decision in April 2022, I never heard another word from the department chair, and the dean did not meet with me until the end of August, after I had finished negotiations with my new institution.

I HAD RUN AWAY from home long ago. Ever since high school, I had been widening the distance between where I came from and where I wanted to go, who I was and who I wanted to be. As a teenager I would sneak off to New York on the Amtrak train, buy Girbaud jeans with allowance money that I had saved up for months, and otherwise cultivate habits from the books I read and the foreign films I watched at Trinity College's Cinestudio. Maybe the cigarette smoking in college had been a performance after all.

I had also been studying white people. In the nearly all-white schools that I attended throughout my childhood, the whites revealed themselves readily, unfiltered—the kids, their parents, even the teachers. They all understood that they were worthy of everything but that we, the various shades of Negroes, were worthy of nothing. Project Concern, the unfortunately named program through which I was bused to Glastonbury, Connecticut, had been contested. "Thousands of suburbanites crowded meetings in West Hartford, Manchester, Farmington, Simsbury, and Glastonbury to argue against accepting Blacks and Puerto Ricans from Hartford. Glastonbury's school board rejected Project Concern," notes a retrospective article in the *Hartford Courant*. "Vernon is a nice, wonderful, middle-class town, and I do not wish to

share this with anyone from Hartford,” declared one woman from another busing destination. “What we have, we have earned and want to keep. What is mine, is mine.” The crowd applauded.

One afternoon in high school I was sitting under a tree on the campus green, smoking a joint with a couple of white classmates. (It’s like kissing sometimes—that intimacy of the rolled object touching everyone’s lips; the erotic of the “shotgun,” where you hold the lit end of the joint inside your mouth so that you can blow smoke into someone else’s slightly parted mouth.) The subject of our typing teacher, the only black teacher in our high school of about 1,700 students, came up. “Mrs. Ritter,” a boy named Scott said casually, “she’s just a nigger.” To this day I have no idea what Scott meant to say, except maybe that black people are niggers, and Mrs. Ritter is black, and therefore—as the logic goes. In his stoned haze, he suddenly remembered that I was also black. “But not you,” he added. “You’re not a nigger.” *Ain’t I a nigger? Look at me!* Where I wanted to run when I left home, when I entered the university, was outside of niggerdom. But you and I know there ain’t no outside.

THE DISTINGUISHED nigger professor is called a name that is not her name but the name of some other nigger professor, who looks nothing like her.

The distinguished nigger professor is called Dawn Black in a seemingly random misstatement by a distinguished non-nigger professor.

When the distinguished nigger professor tries to speak in a small meeting of other distinguished faculty, she is repeatedly called by her first name, interrupted, and talked over.

All the nigger faculty are called upon at some point to serve on the diversity committee.

The distinguished nigger professor is asked to recruit new nigger faculty because the existing nigger faculty keep slipping from the university’s grasp.

They tell the distinguished nigger professor that she is *very articulate* at a conference where they are interviewing other potential nigger faculty.

The dean asks the distinguished nigger professor if she felt more powerful once she became a distinguished nigger professor.

Brown-skinned faculty call the distinguished nigger professor on the phone and tell her of sorrows and sabotage.

The distinguished nigger professor has witnessed these attempts at sabotage and wondered why they go out of their way to recruit nigger faculty in the first place, unless to prove that nigger faculty can't cut it.

The distinguished nigger professor is forced to resign.

The distinguished nigger professor is not forced to resign, but does so anyway because the institution is making her ill.

Why can't we keep these niggers happy, the administration wonders.

WHAT I HAD MISSED in *Wonder Boys* was its salivating obsession with white male genius, which in the story is a phenomenon as natural as air. This obsession goes unnamed in the novel, or rather, is transformed into a kind of otherness. Grady Tripp observes this himself when he sees a writer colleague he envies, Q., give a speech. "It seemed to me that Q. was talking about the nature of the midnight disease, which started as a simple feeling of disconnection from other people, an inability to fit in . . . a sense of envy and of unbridgeable distance like that felt by someone tossing on a restless pillow in a world full of sleepers." Eventually, apparently, a "black day" comes, and you wake "to discover that you yourself had become the chief object of your own hostile gaze." Reading Chabon's novel these many years later, I realize that one of its groundbreaking elements is how it represents the white male psyche as at once bound up in its own centrality and in its imagined loss of a power that is rightfully, naturally his.

These days, as a middle-aged professor of the second highest rank, I have ironically become a version of Grady Tripp: the writer with a fancy award and a big project on the horizon, one that I am both writing and not writing. Tripp, malnourished and gray-faced, gets "spells" and passes out spontaneously. I too have become stricken, in my case by a sudden lightheadedness accompanied by a racing heart. I panic, my head throbbing, as I try to find my footing. Often I feel like I'm having a heart attack, so a few times a week I look up "heart attack signs for women" online. For almost two years, I have the strange sensation that I'm dying, that something is deeply wrong in my body.

One day in Pittsburgh, the feeling comes upon me so strongly that I ask my partner, Stephanie, to take me to the emergency room. "Something is wrong," I say. "I think I'm having an aneurysm or a stroke." My balance is off, so she has to guide me to the car. At Shadyside Hospital,

I'm rushed in and put on "stroke alert." They monitor me for a few hours, give me IV fluids and vitamin B, and send me home. Over the next few months, I see specialist after specialist: CT scans, blood draws and workups, MRIs, consultations. I wear a heart monitor for a month. I get screened for different kinds of cancer.

There are and have been thousands of Grady Tripps, but there's only one of me. I believe—and I would be glad to be corrected—that between 2020 and 2023, I was the only gender nonconforming queer black "woman" holding an endowed chair in an English department in the United States. This word *hold* is from the Middle English: "the space in a ship below the lower deck, in which cargo is stored." Back when I was a graduate student chasing a fantasy, it had not occurred to me that I was seeking freedom inside the hold. Surrounding the hold were the thousands upon thousands. "And so it is we remain in the hold," write Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world."

In Chabon's description, the writer with the midnight disease comes to recognize that his problems of alienation are of his own imagining. Nobody's looking at him funny; he's looking at himself funny. Within the insidious white supremacy that American universities continue to uphold, I understand the "disconnection from other people" and "inability to fit in" as a condition and pain stolen from black people. Because the alienated one realizes that he's hostile to himself, that recognition provides a strange invalidation of racist pain. *You're just looking at yourself*, they tell us. *Ain't nobody looking at you.*

All the black faculty I talked to were suffering. Some were dancing. We knew that the dancing ones were suffering the most. The fantasy had become the hold, the hold had become the fantasy. The ballroom revealed itself to be a mediocre pizzeria with bad wine. A layer of dust covered the bookshelves in my office. My stapler was broken. My physician told me that my blood pressure was high, and wrote me a prescription. I wasn't sleeping through most nights.

The doctors also discovered a benign tumor in my brain. There were times when I became so lightheaded that I had to lie on the sofa in a colleague's office. I was taking too much Klonopin and drinking too much wine. I was crying in public, which I'd never done before. Every time I opened my mouth I talked about work—not "teaching" but "work," not "the university" but "my job."

The cardiologist wants to see if I have a broken heart. The body is lying on its side. Its tits are hanging out of the gown and covered by a white towel. Electrodes are stuck to its chest. The man takes some pictures of the heart's workings, its valves and arteries. You place your mind in a container as the gelatinous scope presses above and below the breast.

IN THE FIRST episode of the HBO series *The White Lotus*, a boat full of tourists pulls up to a Hawaii resort. The general manager stands on the shore, smiling too broadly and wearing an enviable pink suit. "I don't know how it worked at your other properties, but here self-disclosure is discouraged," he tells a new employee. "You don't want to be too specific—as a presence, as an identity. You want to be more generic. . . . We are asked to disappear behind our masks as pleasant interchangeable helpers . . . and the goal is to create for the guest an overall impression of vagueness that can be very satisfying."

The university wants black faculty to be pleasant, interchangeable helpers, anonymous and vague, devoid of history or culture. If a person is too representative of their race (the kind of black they don't like), they present as an identity, and a problem. No one wants to have to grapple with someone else's identity, or problem. Identity must be an abstraction, legible on the surface of the skin or in some claim, but never a thing to deal with, and certainly never a thing to undermine the Western canon, no matter how many times university officials say *diversity*. The black must be countable far beyond their actual presence, featured in the university magazine and website, made to represent the blacks who are not worthy, which is most of us. Yet all the while, the institution can't stop reminding you of the centrality of whiteness and the otherness of blackness. How was I supposed to be a black they like—a role I played for a long time—and still live into my work, which at its core critiques a system that loves itself but not us?

If I were on the job market today, with diversity initiatives being outlawed and DEI programs under right-wing attack, I might not be hired at all. After I received tenure, I accidentally found out that I myself was what the university called an "opportunity hire." If I had known this when I was being offered the assistant professor job seventeen years ago, I would surely still have accepted; I've experienced this type of black exceptionalization in academia most of my life. In the heart of the exceptionalized, however,

grows a deep anxiety—especially when the knowledge is revealed long after the fact. Did I get the job because I was the top candidate, or because of my so-called minority status? I thought I was among the best at what I do. I had no doubts about my creative and intellectual capacity. But this belated knowledge planted a feeling of being let into the master’s house through the alley and then the back door. I was the nigger who’d suddenly popped up in the bushes of my own mind.

At the time, the department hired a white male poet—whom, incidentally, I quite liked—along with me. Looking back at my correspondence with the then-chair, I realized that the department, which was about 95 percent white, must have felt a pressure to diversify, but because their world would cave in if they couldn’t hire the next white wonder boy, they hired me so that they could hire him.

Having been on many academic hiring committees, I now know that universities are inclined to diversify their faculty chiefly by creating black jobs for black people. The job titles say as much: Assistant Professor in African American Poetry, Assistant Professor in Black Film, Professor of Black Rhetorics—as if we cannot compete in the field unless targeted. Sometimes they even call these processes “targeted hires,” tone-deaf to the ways that black people already have targets on our backs.

Black jobs for black academics have a further effect beyond pigeonholing. When I was appointed to hold an endowed chair, it was at first named the Endowed Chair in African American Poetry; after some complaint on my part, it was changed to the Endowed Chair in English. Black professors could have expertise only in black things, while white ones could be experts in any field, including those that focused on black culture and literature. In the department in Pittsburgh, we had no Indigenous professors in our fifty-five-person tenure stream, and for a long while, no Asian Americans and only one Latinx.

Lately *belonging* has been added to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion framework, producing the awkward acronym DEIB, which no one really uses. (*Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity* has always sounded better to my ear, but they couldn’t, you know, call it DIE—or DIEB, for that matter, which sounds like *died*.) But if there’s one thing you eventually learn as a person of color in academia, it’s your unbelonging, your imminent death, that you are in fact the background, the black day, Gertrude Stein’s rays of “Negro sunshine,” pouring down atmospherically. You

create the environment from which the Grady Tripps emerge, standing where they always stand, so casually, as if nothing is happening.

I am not saying that programs like DEI shouldn't exist. I'm saying that the institution's impulse to protect itself, to maintain its identity, requires that these programs be in some sense nonperformative languages that don't do what they say. Diversity initiatives could be doing transformative work if they weren't so entangled in a broken system, a broken world. As is, they don't really make most universities more diverse; they are instead a kind of churning, an agitation that, contrary to their stated purpose, convinces the professors, graduate students, donors, and who all else that it's impossible for a white man to get a job as a professor. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2022, 72 percent of full-time college and university faculty were white; 13 percent were Asian; 7 percent were Black; 6 percent were Hispanic; and fewer than one-half of 1 percent were Native American. At the university where I taught, "the proportional representation of Black faculty was better 35 years ago than [it was in 2020]," according to Yolanda Covington-Ward, then the chair of Africana Studies, in her open letter to the university community, sent two weeks after the chancellor's.

When the black faculty left, the administration looked away with such intention, it was as if none of it was happening. I almost believed this unhappening myself.

SOMETHING ELSE I can't say. I can't tell you the exact moment I knew that I would leave, that I had to leave. I submitted my resignation over a year before the departure date, out of care and a crippling devotion to the Center. I have been told that my clinging to the Center is called "founder's syndrome." I don't think the term begins to approach the grief I felt leaving behind what my collaborators and I had made. "Look," says Saidiya Hartman in response to JJJJerome Ellis's video installation for an online event the Center hosted during the first year of the pandemic, "what can happen in this amazingly restricted space. Something is made there too. A box is uninhabitable. How do you make it beautiful? Dance inside of it." I believe her. And that's what we do. We dance until our old Bojangles bodies crack. You can only dance for so long inside a box, until your body deteriorates from being overbent.

I cannot tell you the exact moment I knew I would leave Pittsburgh, but I can tell you when I knew I'd made the right decision. After I gave

notice, the university had lawyers contact my new institution to accuse me of breach of contract—an implicit threat to sue me, or just to fuck with me, who knows? This accusation was based on a one-paragraph announcement on the new college’s website, which seemed to indicate that my new appointment as a “tenured” professor overlapped with my tenure in Pittsburgh. They had to really dig for that. The university tried to refuse my travel expenses from my research funds and said I owed them money. They chipped away at the resources allotted the Center, then pretended the resources were never there in the first place. It felt like the university had called the police on me.

Yet I still felt a deep sense of loss—so much so that I almost wanted to stay. In fact, the week before my last day at the university, in a delirium of nonproductive uncertainty, I worried to friends that I’d made the wrong choice. Maybe I would call human resources and retract my resignation. “But it was making you sick, remember?” said the friends.

The fantasy of the university still consumed me. I tried so hard not to care, but I did. I no longer had the capacity to pretend to be a pleasant, interchangeable helper. Ever since working as an environmental door-to-door canvasser in college, I have never taken a job where I was not drawn by care, commitment, and love. But the university is not the place for this attitude to work. My body knew this, in its signs of collapse and revolt, even as my cardiologist assured me that my heart was working fine. I was searching for a way to begin again within the existing structures, a loophole of retreat. I couldn’t find one. *The money and other resources were never there. You and your kind were never here. Nothing of significance is happening. Unhappening.*

POETS HAVE a creative practice called “erasure,” where one engages a so-called original text to reveal new meanings. The poet erases words, phrases, whole sentences or paragraphs to unearth a potential or hidden force in the original text. This can happen through redaction, crossing out, whiteout, or other means. Whatever the method, erasure always leaves traces of what was present before. Regarding the trap of remembering, Claudia Rankine writes in *Citizen*, “You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard.” “Who did what to whom on which day?”

We know the answer. America’s past harms are always with us in the speech and actions of its present institutions. That the police in

this country can be traced back to slave patrols, which monitored and punished the movement and behaviors of enslaved Africans, says much about modern-day police and their suspicion of the black body for simply being black. Analogously, the contemporary university is both haunted and bolstered by the persistent question of who fits into the category of *human*, developed by the white men who created the Western university system and its canons in the first place. One gets the sense that its increasingly stringent notions of a concept like, say, rigor—of who has purportedly earned their place—are a way of protecting the freedom of the forever job for a select few, those who've always been uniquely privy. They didn't create such freedoms for us; they made them for themselves. It is no coincidence, then, that as the university supposedly becomes more diverse, the administrative structure upon which promotion (and almost everything) depends becomes increasingly policed. However, if you can understand structural violence enough to cause harm, then you can certainly understand it enough to do good.

At the end of *Wonder Boys*, Grady Tripp finishes the novel that we're reading and marries the university chancellor with whom he had an affair, and who has given birth to their child. He no longer types on an ancient typewriter but a gleaming laptop, with a scenic view from the window of his home office. *Wonder Boys* is set at a fictional university; it does not ask whether there is anything redeemable in the institution, or whether the armies it produces will come for it, alongside the extreme right-wing armies openly vying to rid the university of undeserving cheaters and diversity hires. Chabon's story embraces the fantasy as a given, as reality. Grady Tripp's trip is his own imagined unbelonging, not from the university, but from cultural relevancy. *Wonder Boys* is fiction, so we have a happy ending. In the actual university, this kind of imagined white alienation is the key ingredient in a venomous brew of envy. There is no ending. There is only the next thing. We begin again. So here I am, gazing at the Catskill Mountains, a magnificent sunset of purple and orange waves floating across the entire sky. +