

THREE MEDITATIONS

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1.

I remember going to school in Lexington Kentucky, the long bus trip in the gray rain, past the green fields, and the bus shuddering to a halt and starting back up as we stopped in front of some farmhouse or another and some other kid got on. That first year of school, and it was first grade, for then kindergarten was not yet a ubiquitous requirement, I was only four. Kentucky then had some draconian state law that any child who turned five in that year had to start the first grade, and I would turn five in December.

What I remember most is the playground, the awkwardness of recess, drifting about alone, and then suddenly one day being ringed by a group of boys—how many? too many—six or seven of them? and wasn't I walking around at recess, memorizing counting from 1-100, which we all had to do in front of the class. Older boys, a couple of years older; I didn't know any of them, but then one of them snarled, "Who was the Injun in the woodpile with your mother? What are you anyway?"

I didn't know what that meant, what any of it meant, but I recognized the hostility in their faces, the hatred in their voices, their bodies primed to pummel me. I don't remember what I said, or how the situation ended; maybe the bell rang, maybe my four-year-old confusion wasn't enough of a target, but I went on through the day, shaken, marked by something I could not understand.

Why did they ask *what* I was? I'd thought I was a *who*, as much as a four-year-old can feel the sense of being a *who*, but now I was a *what*. It wasn't a question hanging over me; it was a certainty surrounding me with shoulders tightened, ready to leap.

From the beginning, nothing that I could say. . . . The encounter kept happening randomly, unpredictably through the years. *What—what are you?* A question that sprung out of its own answer—the certainty of hate.

Whiteness is a false construct, so false that even those who hold to it most strongly know on some level that it doesn't exist, that they're living in a house whose foundation is made of sand, shifting, uncertain, in constant need of defense.

As far as I know there were no native children in that Kentucky school, no African-American children, it was all white children from farmhouse to farmhouse, from

classroom to classroom. Yet within that world where there were no people of color, people of color were so necessary in order that whiteness could exist, that someone in that world of white kids had to be “other,” had to be seen as an “it.”

Dark, darker, darkest hair, skin, and eyes.

In the construct of whiteness
who appears darker is.

2.

Not too far from Lexington, Kentucky, decades later, I’m living, queer, dark among the ruddy rural voters of Ohio.

And all I can think of are the bees,
oh sodden mass upon the grass
that we can glimpse through the kitchen window,
though hoping that you do not see them, I go out
and sweep them out of the grass into a plastic bag.

If bees are a symbol of community, if the beehive
is the symbol of the state of Utah,
if the singing hive is depicted on the Druidic
oracle cards, then this could be an allegory:

that America is a beehive of poisoned and toxic bees,
that at first it clumped around one central flagpole,
then spread out, an infuriated mass, spinning
around in the air, scouring the doors and the porch lights,
finding their way into the crevices of our house, enraged
at what we somehow have done to them.

But it’s not a fable.

The fact is that we live in a bucolic bubble where mostly white people have gone to their professorial jobs for four or five decades, where civility and being nice is most often the disguise for intrusion, where the skins of some are saturated with privilege.

The fact is the bees swarmed on our roof for four days, and, unlike healthy bees, they did not conserve their energy by staying together in some sustaining hum made by the vibration of their tiny wings, but scattered like debris on the roofs, buzzed in widening

swirls around the backyard and into the porch, so we could neither go in or out but watched them through the windows and felt vaguely under siege.

The fact is that though they are dead now, some other buzzing has taken up residence in our minds, you think you hear them in the bedroom wall, and I hear them sometimes in the wall above the stove, and perhaps the original hive is still there.

For the fact is that we learned from the maintenance man in his white stained muscle shirt and jeans who comes by every week in the same shirt and jeans to mow the lawn that that white box attached to the wall of the house on the second story floor doesn't only look like a beehive, but *is* a beehive.

The fact is when I complain to the landlady, her response is to rescind the lease renewal that she was so anxious for us to sign months ago. Though she agreed then, now she claims she did not sign it. So the bees are replaced by the buzzing of the internal anxieties of finding another place to live.

Like the swarm we are looking for somewhere else to go.

But the fact is that we have not been evicted from paradise, but from the bucolic bubble of privilege.

The fact is property,

the fact is what the village lets her get away with,

the fact is we do not know where we will live next, any more than the bees lost in the circumference of our roof did.

The fact is the beehive is still up there, the bees zinging in and out two feet from our bedroom window,

and the fact is I am allergic to wasps and do not know if that carries over to the sting of a bee.

The fact is it is probably no more than a zoning violation,

that a white person who taught here buys a house at a rate reduced and financed by the college that owns it and then turns it into a rental, making sure that the part she rents out is hooked up to the washer and dryer and the electrical box,

so the tenant could pay for her power as well,

and a beehive on the roof of her rental house is no more than a zoning violation.

The fact is regardless of whether some tenant dies of a bee sting. She's only engaging in an agricultural activity on a residential property,

and the fact is transgression of property is all that matters to the law,

until there are no bees left,

until the earth itself has vanished.

3.

*Oh, you can just go somewhere, walk out into the space,
stroll into some vantage of vision and of breath, she's intoning
at this reading in Washington, DC, billed
as a response to our political climate,
but you're angry, for you know
that being able to walk away is a privilege
she takes for granted,
for it's impossible to stroll out of one's skin,
for it is strolling in one's skin
that makes this intersection dangerous,
for it is this expensive hotel lobby
for we have to stay,
for the organization
says we have to stay
for a private club,
for all waiters and desk clerks
have dark, darker, darkest, hair, eyes, and skin,
for it's meant to work like the contrast
in a modern work of art
to make white
whiter, whitest,
against its black supporting frame.*

All I want is to go home,
so we can search in the dictionary of dreams
for all that might dwell, with teeth, with ragged
intent or arcane flowers, there—inside
the word, for every word is an intersection
of history—oh,

listen to the language America is speaking,
how in every word
the silent unnamed world
suffers, unspeakably, within it.

Gambier, Ohio. May 31, 2017.