Two Poems by MEH

by MEH
when asked what i learned in elementary school being bussed from Mattapan to Wellesley

what they think is appropriate: to treat Black hair like a pregnant woman’s belly, question if larger nostrils enhance breathing, probe my legs for extra calf muscles under skin our teacher said doesn’t bruise because she can’t see the blood-screams beneath. i learned to tolerate

the frumpy lies of well-intentioned white women—bosoms heaving, eyes liquid with Reaganomics, Willie Horton and how they imagined my parents (a crack whore mother, an imprisoned father)—and their messianic attempts to save me from my stable home. i learned to master

Simon-says skills; to be a chameleon; to code-switch; to bite my tongue instead of theirs; to make excuses for them, yet allow awkwardness to pant circles around heads asking what i prefer to be called (Colored? Negro? African American? Black?) never landing on my name. i learned to execute

the affirmative action of elementary arithmetic—\( \frac{\text{effort}^2 \times \text{time}}{x} = \text{equity} \); that history is an art painted in primary colors: white supremacy, white privilege, white fragility; that darker shades are plucked out, passed over: crayons reserved for trees, rocks, dirt; that other tales struggle to sing through the cacophony of the single story (slavery, civil rights, poverty) muting a talented tenth; that i should be grateful. i learned to accept

that “Cohen” and “Karelitz” were nigger-names before my orange bus replaced their yellow stars; that kids say the darndest things when grandparents remember the Shoah, unlike others whose ancestors held whips or felt pilgrim pride in the face of fallen feathers; i learned to endure the cultural appropriation of slang, when every bobby and becky becomes “my brothah,” “my sistah,” with teeth clenched, lips parted, hoping for the day they can reclaim “my nig...”. i learned to drink

the cafeteria’s chocolate milk, my back wall-braced; to never trust sudden movements; to fight for every inch of slide and swing, each papier-mâché turtle i “couldn’t have created on my own”; to recite “today’s a good day to die”— every day— down checkered halls to my seat beside the office secretary, she who understood the intersection of round pegs and square holes; to enjoy solitary confinement recess; to admire the ants who rebuild their lives after every collapsing storm or malicious white sneaker. i learned

that they think i can’t swim.
the surprising thing

“...we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.”
~ The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin

i’ve only been called “nigger” once by a student— at least in my presence— and that under his breath. i wonder if i’m doing something wrong, if it’s my fault it happened only that one time. i may need to make them more uncomfortable with my skin or centeredness, my uppity angry Black man way of calling spades, pots and kettles exactly what they are. racists, red-lining, mass incarceration, stop and frisk: all discussed with the mandatory minimum expectation that they consider their complicity through complacency. yet they remain unmoved in all the worst ways. the subtle things give me pause: their academic ease with Shakespeare, O’Brien, and O’Connor, how Scottish ghosts, draft-dodging Vietnam, and mass-murderers roaming the Georgian countryside feel familiar, yet Okonkwo, Janie, and Pecola are wholly “other”— their stories inscrutable, lives they “can’t relate to”— their humanity opaque as the sharpie swastikas ill-fading in our bathroom stalls, the Snapchats of Black necks in nooses casually shared, the bombs threatening to shrapnel the mosques of classmates they never seem to see. hidden behind expensive laptops held together by MAGA bumper stickers, they demand to know why a student bussed from Boston would scream “FUCK WHITE AMERICA” and think it’s appropriate (he was suspended. he’s still screaming: quietly, more dangerously). and here i stand: still employed— picking cotton from fresh aspirin bottles after every utterance which slices a peace from my soul— and asking questions that make them cringe. light is unsettling. like when they tell me how their heads snapped right hearing a grandparent—or uncle, or mother, or best friend— topple the house of bullshit cards they built on the “post-racial Obama-era,” with a sharp exhale of breath which revealed the truth bubbling in their heart. i ask them about their silent response. so it was surprising, struck me as odd, that it only happened when i told a white boy to put his phone away— the straw that broke his fragile back. deferred his dreams.