

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Two Poems by MEH

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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—
($\text{effort}^2 * \text{time}$)/ x = 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.



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