

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

3 Poems by MEH

by MEH



MATTHEW E HENRY

## blackface party

circa 2015. Oil on canvas.  
anonymous. Weston, Ma

at her classroom desk  
her eyes and mouth became  
mirrors of widening horror.  
a flashback to her mother  
and step-father laughing  
out the door with black sheep  
wigs, oversized jerseys,  
gaudy jewelry, and bronzer  
liberally applied,  
one Halloween night.

## when asked why “all lives” don’t matter

...after a deep breath,  
i attempted to explain. my aunt had breast cancer.  
despite a healthy dose of science and Scripture,  
prayer and prescriptions, the shadows never dimmed.  
we celebrated her life, mourned the hole her grave  
dug in ours. we lauded her lovingkindness, questioned  
the natural shocks flesh is heir to— why this disease  
would claim a wife, a co-worker, a friend, an aunt.  
at the repast heads turned to the future: saving  
other sons and daughters, ourselves. a collection was taken  
to fund breast cancer research. a medical scholarship  
for oncology study discussed. a proposal for new  
from the back of the church hall, a woman no one recognized  
screamed, “what about ovarian cancer?! and prostate cancer?!”  
why aren’t you all talking about those? all cancers matter!”

most of my students nodded into the ensuing silence. but some  
blank stares and my job description doomed me  
to be more didactic: to explain appropriate time, place, and manner,  
intent versus impact, the guilt and shame required  
to derail communal grief and hijack a narrative  
to make oneself more comfortable.

i explained the human duty to choose:  
enter the room willing to bear bodies on our shoulders,  
or, arms empty, leave and silently stand outside.

i said, “replace ‘cancer’ with ‘lives’” and waited.

## muscle memory

when asked about the rampant sexism in our school, my students calmly explained the science of perpetual motion machines, how easily some things are swept under the social rug— arms finely attuned to the associative task. lift, sweep. lift, sweep. lift. spilt milk and skinned knees, they said. like pipe-bombs in the Belfast of my youth, suicide vests in Gaza, school shootings in EveryWhiteTown, USA: an average tuesday. eyes ahead, they file past the covered bodies, and head to A.P. stats.



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