

**dreaming
of
ramadi
in
detroit**

ESSAYS

Black People Are the Window
and the Breaking of the
Window

—William Pope.L

not the songs / of light said to
wave / through the bright hair
of angels, / but a blacker /
rasping flowering on that
tongue.

—Galway Kinnell

CONTENTS

A Clear Presence	I
Ocean Park No. 6	19
Playlist for a Road Trip with Your Father	38
How to Teach a Nightmare	49
<i>D Is for the Dance of the Hours</i>	62
One American Goes to See <i>30 Americans</i>	94
Dreaming of Ramadi in Detroit	101
Between Grief and Nothing	107
Other Fictions	118
How to Prepare to See the Royall Family Portrait	123
Gray's Anatomy	130
Caldera	139
Works Cited	146
Acknowledgments	151

For Argusta.

A CLEAR PRESENCE

WHEN I WAS IN junior high school, my mother and I heard the sound of helicopters while house-sitting for friends in the Hancock Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. We had just come in from using the swimming pool when someone on a megaphone instructed us to come outside with our hands up. When we did, policemen were facing the house with guns pointing toward the door, neighbors were standing on their porches in alarm, and a helicopter was hovering overhead. Our dog ran outside, and we squealed with terror that they shouldn't shoot her. It turned out that we had accidentally triggered the security system's distress signal, and it took a while for them to determine that we were not being taken hostage. But the incident was, in some ways, an elaborate confirmation of a feeling that I held already, about that house and the city in general: that even though we had permission to be there, we had somehow managed to trespass.

When he was a young man, the Olympic diver Sammy Lee was allowed to use the public pool only on a certain day in the week reserved for people of color. After that day, the pool was drained and refilled for the comfort of the white patrons. My father remembers hearing, during an interview with Lee, that the diver returned years later, after his win, and confronted the people who maintained the pool to ask why they felt the need to drain it—as if his Korean background and the black skin of his friend had somehow infected the water. They told him that, to the contrary, they always considered the order ludicrous.

Rather than draining the pool as they'd been told, they would lock the doors for a couple of hours and add a little extra chlorine to satiate the people in charge. But the fact of Lee's exclusion, the lie of his body being a contaminant, had already influenced his understanding of the world.

In a recurring dream, I am swimming in somebody else's pool. The city is always Los Angeles, the grounds are always well maintained, there is often a flourishing garden filled with climbing vines of jasmine, bougainvillea, and bird-of-paradise. The house to which the pool belongs is empty. I might get out of the water to wander around, always with the sense that, while I've been invited, I am not supposed to be there.



In his book on lucid dreaming, B. Alan Wallace writes that the dreamer can prepare to “awaken” in his sleep by following the Buddhist practice of Shamatha before bedtime: “The mind's distractions are stilled so that one's attention can eventually rest comfortably and effortlessly on a chosen object for hours on end.” In the attempt to cultivate this ability, I stare at a coffee cup on the table in front of me. I feel flickers of that sensation I used to know well as a child—when I could look at a truck parked on the street outside of our apartment and feel that the world radiated out in all directions, that infinity existed inside of each scene and every second, like the sound of wind or falling water.

Once, at a museum in London, I saw a set of portraits by

the painter David Hockney. Everyone portrayed in that particular series worked as a docent in a museum. Hockney sometimes uses a roller in his paintings, so that the shape and shadow that realistically depict a nose or chin float inside a stilled space that has been divorced from the rippling pulse of passing time.

If, as curators have demonstrated, you look at the Polaroid image that was used as a reference for the portrait that Hockney would later create, you can see the way that he brings the friends he paints into a new realm by stripping away the subtlest of layers, creating a dimension that is at once matte and luminous, breathing and flat. And, though I've only had a handful of lucid dreams myself, I wonder if Hockney's realm isn't just the quiet landscape of a lucid dream. A distillation and capture of that intangible state of being that we have talked to death, can't possibly bear to utter again, but still seem desperate to enter. Through his brush, the present moment becomes a kind of shoebox diorama inside which the viewer can wander, take refuge and maybe a nap.

Though he made much of his work in a studio just large enough to fit his giant canvases, Hockney helped to establish what Christopher Simon Sykes describes as an "image of California as a carefree land of sunshine, affluence and leisure" by painting its wealthiest citizens and their swimming pools. But while presenting California as an idle playground for the rich, Hockney also engaged with a meditation not unlike Shamatha, devoting himself to the task of rendering water with a diligence of spirit that he himself compared to Leonardo

Di Vinci's. This meditation involved grappling with the essence of movement and time. He studied the way that sunlight manifested itself through dancing lines of light, explaining: "Water in a swimming pool is different from, say, water in the river, which is mostly a reflection because the water isn't clear. A swimming pool has clarity. The water is transparent and drawing transparency is an interesting graphic problem."



Rodney King was swimming on the first day he ever heard the word "nigger." His small self popped out of the water only to dodge a fast-passing stone: "Run, nigger!" It was the first time he realized that he wasn't just a kid; he was a black kid. Despite the life he would live thereafter, King writes that it was "the saddest day in creation for me." He wishes he could "find a way of forever removing that day from every black child's life."

As I was growing up, African names were pronounced to elicit humor. People liked to exaggerate the *y* sound, the *e* sounds, the funky *q* pronounced with a flip of the head and a series of snaps. As one of the only people of color in my school, I hated to have my difference pointed out to me, and got famously angry any time someone pronounced my name with three syllables (ay-ee-sha) instead of the two (ee-sha) that my parents had used since I was born. The former pronunciation of my name was featured in "Iesha" by Another Bad Creation, and my classmates were not about to let me forget it. Whenever somebody wanted to laugh, they could sing the chorus, and I would explode into what I did not realize at the

time was a vaguely self-hating rage.

During a game of “ga-ga” one afternoon, I responded to the taunting by slapping the singer, a girl with whom I was both friends and bitter enemies, on the back. She responded in kind, until we were engaged in a full-out brawl, to the entertainment of everyone in the auditorium. We began to giggle soon after the after-school director pulled us apart, but the incident cemented my reputation as an easily coaxed spitfire, ready to face off with anyone who dared call attention to my membership to *that blackness*, the one that was in the process of being celebrated or objectified, depending on the viewer, through shows like *Martin* and *In Living Color*.

I grew up in an apartment building two blocks away from where Nicole Brown Simpson was nearly decapitated alongside Ron Goldman, who worked in a restaurant up the hill from our home. My mother and her friend passed by Simpson’s condominium on an evening stroll about an hour before the murders were committed. Perhaps because the only known black male resident of this neighborhood was O. J. Simpson, the community has for as long as I can remember acted toward my father and me as though we wandered into the place by accident. If I was wearing a thick coat or heavy sweatshirt, grown adults would cross the street to avoid me while I was walking my dog at night. Women held their purses tighter when my father stood behind them at the bank, and he was frequently approached by patrolmen, accused of “looking like he didn’t belong” while walking in a sweat suit through his own garage.