

*She is in the dark,
sewing, stringing notes together with invisible thread.
That's a feminine accomplishment:
a feat of memory, a managed
repletion or resplendence.*

Rae Armantrout

*So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.*

Langston Hughes

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Dark White

We have one mother and some fathers, we come from clan. O the poverty of our identity, to be so proud of what we guess we are. I am a church of that. Of such weightless stone I build my plinth, with color alone.

Robert Kelly, from "Berlin Sonnets"

1

Flying out of Boston after a literature conference in Cambridge. Theory, theory, theory, and a professor rhapsodizing about spanking. And there was a talk about the amygdala. ("The amygdala receives inputs from all senses as well as visceral inputs.")

The plane leaving Logan swooped low over the South Shore; when I looked out the window I did a double take—we were passing over the house I grew up in. Ma's laundry was there on the line—her polyester pants, her dish towels. Across the inlet from the back of our house, the shipyard and the Proctor and Gamble stacks. Sometimes, when I was a teenager, the air was so thick with the smell of Ivory Soap, I'd gag. "That's not pollution," Ma would say. "That's *clean*."

In the ship's manifest for the *Giuseppe Verdi* on which my mother's parents traveled from Palermo to Ellis Island in 1924, there is a column where they note the complexion of each Sicilian immigrant—dark, fair, swarthy, yellow, whatever. This category doesn't appear on the manifests of ships that came from Ireland, like the *Scythia* on which my father's mother arrived from Cobh that same year. There's also a place to note identifying marks on the faces of the Italians from the South; lots of men had scars on their faces.

Anarchists had bombed Salutation Street in the North End and many other targets. Sacco and Vanzetti had been unjustly prosecuted. All Italians were suspect. Most of the Sicilians on the ship *Giuseppe Verdi* were labeled "dark white," but there must have been some question on board about my mother's mother; "fair" is noted, then crossed out.

There's a drawbridge between our house and the shipyard and soap factory. Ma says her father, a cement mason from Salemi, worked on it for the WPA in 1936. He was a tyrant, they say; volcanic.

In Sicily, he and my grandmother grew up near Erice. A volcano and goddesses and work, that's the heritage. When my mother's father was a baby in the province of Trapani, Emily Dickinson was still alive in Amherst ("Vesuvius at home," she called her father), writing New Englandly of Sicily:

*Partake as doth the Bee,
Abstemiously.
The Rose is an Estate –
In Sicily*

In my parents' kitchen at sunset, washing the dishes and looking north, I thought the black Ivory smokestacks against the sky were beautiful.

2

When I told my grand-mother I was going to visit Chicago, she crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. "Chicago—lotta blacka people!"

My sister laughed and said, "Yeah, Nonie, that's why she wants to go there."

"Oh, stop it, Caroline," I said. But I laughed too.

"*Che cosa? Che fai?*" Nonie was confused. No *capisce*.

"Never mind, Nonie."

—
Nonie wanted to tell me something; my mother translated.

She says that when she came to this country she didn't understand no English and she didn't know no one and my father locked her up in that place in East Boston on the top floor—

She says she heard kids playing in the street and wondered why they weren't working—

She says when she was a girl in Salemi all the kids worked. They did piece work—made doll dresses like the ones she crochets for you girls—

She says the boys worked in the salt pans or watched sheep or picked grapes—

She says when her baby brother Nicolo died of cholera she helped her mother dress him in a little suit—

She says it was hard to get his arms into the sleeves—

—
Last year I told my mother the story about Nonie saying, "Lotta blacka people!"

My mother said defensively, "Oh, but Nonie liked some black people."

"What are you talking about? Nonie didn't know any black people."

"Oh, she really liked Tina Turner."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm serious. Nonie pretended she didn't know no English, but she liked TV. Remember when Tina wrote her book and went on all the shows? Well, all that stuff that she talked about—the things Ike did to her, the beatings—that's what Pa did to Nonie."

3

On my volcano grows the Grass, A meditative spot –

Emily Dickinson, #1677

My daughter at six dreamed she was an "international playboy," though she had no idea what that was. She curled up beside me; I gave her a sip of my juice. I told her what I'd been reading for my reading group: *The Life of Samuel Johnson*.

I didn't tell her about the really white woman in the group who often mentioned her fair skin and famous husband. Reading, I was deciding, was something to do alone or with one other: this little one, my girl.

In bed I told my daughter about Boswell, who listened to everything Samuel Johnson said and wrote it down. She kissed her own hand, thinking it was mine, and wondered aloud, "Who was Boswell's Boswell?"

Fair-minded little Portia, my Isabel with her crooked bangs (I cut them wrong).

She seems so mellow now, but is she? Did she stir inside me as I watched a tantrum on the subway, that boy in fatigues shooting a toy gun at his pregnant mother? "Please take his gun away," I did not say. This was on the F train. I gave up my seat for her though I was also pregnant. But I wasn't visibly anything.

Our women were clean, especially the Italians. The Irish said Italians were dirty. In the South End, when my mother was six, my grandmother went to work in a factory, sewing men's uniforms alongside Sicilian, Syrian, and Lebanese immigrants.

We were dark white, but in New England we were immaculate.

Snow made me, I said to summer when I missed the winter.
When it was winter, I burned.

*Lizzie Borden took her axe
Gave her mother forty whacks
When she saw what she had done
Gave her father forty-one*

Bunch of little Catholics in the schoolyard, jumping rope to Yankee gore. "La la la" is one thing sung, another thing in chalk or cursive. In cold type, it has no tongue.

We were happy when jumping, didn't mind the drizzle, were too young to bleed or even know about it. The boys played far away, another species. They ran around with sharpened sticks; we chanted murder.

Now I know that it was very hot when (they say) Lizzie Borden slaughtered her parents. And she had her period when she did it (did she do it?). And her father had killed her pigeons.

—

My father's people were Irish, and instead of sewing and eating and fighting, they drank and sang and fought.

Packed into the back seat of the car, we belted out:

*She had a baby six months old,
Weela weela wallia
She had a baby six months old
Down by the river Salia.*

*She had a big knife three feet long,
Weela weela wallia
She had a big knife three feet long,
Down by the River Salia.*

*She stuck the knife in the baby's head,
Weela weela wallia
The more she stabbed it the more it bled
Down by the River Salia.*

In our car, even the baby tried to sing it, though he didn't know the words.

—

Driving to the factory outlet in Fall River to get our winter coats, my parents hissing at each other in the front seat, I thought of Lizzie Borden. Maybe her mother told her she smelled. I don't know what her father said. Probably nothing. But she knew he thought she was disgusting. Her parents agreed on this at least.

She was often alone with them. She gorged on biscuits upstairs in a closet, if there were any biscuits. If there was nothing to eat, she sucked a wooden dowel dusted with sugar. She had a thirst for justice, a kind of lust.

Who lives in that house now? Is it covered in aluminum siding like those around it? Oh, no—now I see—it's a B & B.

—

I'd never heard of Emily Dickinson. Jump-rope rhymes were all I knew of poetry. The subject of the poem, the author of the murder. Lizzie Borden had no privacy, no rag or paper of her own. She bled and it was a mess. She heard voices and couldn't get them down.

—

My sister got the blue coat, I got the red: wide-wale corduroy. For a while I was confused about the wale and the whales, Fall River and New Bedford, the garment factories and Melville's ship, and corduroy itself, but now I know: corduroy is, in essence, a ridged form of velvet. You could see the trimmings on the factory floor. I took a scrap of my sister's blue.

4

My international playboy, my daughter, reminds me that she needs some Tampax. In my notebooks from her fourth year, I find a receipt from Bill's Drugs in Berkeley. I bought night diapers for her, Tampax for me, condoms for me, extra strength Tylenol for me, and bobby pins for her, since she was getting too big to swallow and choke on them. I'd never bought condoms before.

—

When Isabel was small she sat in my lap and we looked at a book of paintings from the Met. I told her about the Holy Family, the Trinity, all that. I told her about Christ, but I didn't say he was her savior.

We turned to other nativities. She was fascinated by the baby in every picture.

"Look, Mama, now she's in her crib." "And now she's having milk." "Now the angels see her." My daughter thought the main character was a girl. I didn't correct her.

—

Then it was Holy Week. On the way home from Our Lady of Lourdes I saw that someone had discarded sheaves of palms on the side of the road. Fr. Seamus Genovese had blessed the palms.

"Oh, what a shame," I said, picking them up.

Isabel asked, "Mom, what is 'shame'?"

Had I somehow raised a child who didn't know what shame was?

—

One Sunday a few years later, we watched a documentary about Pearl Harbor. Isabel started to ask me a question and I knew intuitively what it would be.

"Mom, are there rules in war?"

My heart broke. Someday she'd have to learn about war, rape, death. But this was not that day.

"It's Sunday night," I said, turning the VCR off. "Time to get ready for bed."

"But it's not night yet," she said, and she was right. So we discussed all the words for what it really was: dusk, twilight, sunset, evening.

At fifteen she was five inches taller than me. One night she helped clean up after dinner, handing me the plates and looking down at me in our tiny kitchen. Then she sat on the couch and we talked about whether or not she could get her nose pierced.

She asked if she could do this for her sixteenth birthday; I told her to research it and make a case for it and let me think about it for a few days.

The next day I stopped at Hee Sook's restaurant. The hostess had a nose piercing. "It's hard to keep clean," she told me. Isabel was disappointed when I told her that I wanted her to wait three months to see if she still wanted the piercing; she wished she had talked to me earlier about this—so the three-month waiting period would have been over by her birthday, October 5th. I started washing dishes. She picked up her homework.

Five minutes later, as I turned to wipe the counter, she looked up at me, stricken.

"What's wrong?" I said.

Tears were running down her face. "It's so sad," she said.

"What? That I won't let you get your nose pierced right away?"

I went over to sit with her on the couch and gave her a hug.

"No," she said, and held up her book. She was reading Plato's apology for Socrates. I asked her to read some of it aloud to me. She wiped her tears and read the part about Socrates, wisdom, god and the gods, and then she lost it.

"They killed him anyway," she sobbed, shaking her head.

Last week we were rolling around, wrestling and laughing. When we finished wrestling, we sprawled on the rug, and I felt something in my hair—her bobby pin had migrated.

I want to write a book for her about a woman wearing rags between her legs while stitching haberdashery. Soaked through while sewing lapels and buttonholes. A faint fingerprint of blood on the peach-colored lining of a suit. No poems sewn into that lining. No English. But we were there.

And Here We Are in Oakland: Journals

*like bitter Henry, full of the death of love,
Cawdor-uneasy, disambitious, mourning
the whole implausible necessary thing.*

John Berryman

*Having identified the shit
the shit you can't say shit about
that's all I can say about that*

Fred Moten