

‘I Forget to Look’ and ‘The History of Intimacy’

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I FORGET TO LOOK

The photograph of my mother at her desk in the fifties
has been in my purse for twenty years,
its paper faded, browning,
the scalloped edge bent then straightened.

The collar of her dress folds discreetly.
The angle of her neck looks as though
someone has called her from far away.

She was the first in her family to take
the bus from Claremont
up the hill to the university.

At one point during the lectures at medical school,
black students had to pack their notes, get up and walk
past the ascending rows of desks out of the theatre.

Behind the closed door, in an autopsy
black students were not meant to see,
the uncovering and cutting of white skin.

Under the knife, the skin,
the mystery of sameness.

In a world that defined how black and white
could look at each other, touch each other,
my mother looks back, her poise unmarred.

Every time I open my purse,
she is there, so familiar I forget
to look at her.

(From Gabeba Baderoon, *A hundred silences*, Kwela/Snailpress, 2006)

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THE HISTORY OF INTIMACY

I.

You remember it because it's a wound.
A cut, twenty cuts, the name
for the canings on the palm,
on the knuckles, on the buttocks,
a finely graded order of pain
that we who should not exist
were assigned for our failures.

II.

You keep you white, nuh,
Mike shouts in 1987 across the heads
of the students on Jameson Steps
and the sudden pale silence shows
we are no longer in uniform in the quad
at Livingstone High, teasing hey,
why did you look through me
as though I don't exist. And this
withdrawal from being
we called keeping you white,
but saying it out loud reveals
how we have learned
to measure our existence.

III.

In the video store after I've ordered a film,
my cousin elbows me, Why you putting on?
Putting on. Transitive verb. Putting on what?
Putting on skin, putting on not nothingness.

IV.

When the Group Areas Act is abolished,
my mother aches to go back
to the street she was removed from
and it is we, grown attached
to the scar we call home, who say,
No, we don't want to live in a white area,
this time ceding it ourselves.

V.

Mother, how do I write about you?
As a medical student on duty at night
she learned to sleep so lightly she could wake
in an instant in an emergency, and for the rest of her life,
her body became a body that never again
could sleep through the night.
She told of one evening when, for some reason
a little irked with my father, she left
the table early, returning
to the bedroom by herself, and found
my sister blue for lack of breath.
To this day, she recalls what anger gave her,
how it saved my sister's life. Anger. Breath.
Since the beginning, you have been breath,
and poetry.

You told me how black students were asked
to leave the room during the autopsy of white bodies.
And of my writing about this, you said,
That is my story. That is not your story.
And now, with the illness you could not speak of for years,
Mother, am I again turning your words
and your silence into a poem?

VI.

In 1988 at Crawford train station, my brother and I find
a blue plank hand-painted in yellow letters:
Non-Whites Only on one side
Whites Only on the other
thrown away by the fence next to the tracks.
Picking it up, we see the two sides
of the sign lie back to back,
each half resting against its opposite,
intimate and inverse
but unknown to each other.
We knew this was history
someone had made by hand, then hidden
and tried to forget. We bring it home
and come across it sometimes in a corner
when we're looking for something else.

(From Gabebe Baderoon, *The History of Intimacy*, Kwela, 2018)

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