

The A-Lift¹

by RJ Eldridge

*“What if the thing whose meaning or value has never been found finds things, founds things?
What if the thing will have founded something against the very possibility of foundation and against
all anti- or post-foundational impossibilities?”*

-Fred Moten, from “The Case For Blackness”



I met Job Wilson at Tell Yo Truth, a storytelling event on the Southside, one Thursday evening last February. He walked up to me after the show was over and thanked me for my story about the time in college I thought I’d gotten my girlfriend pregnant (it turned out to be a false alarm; her period came a week later. We went to get checkups and at mine I found out I was impotent).

“That made me feel something,” he said.

It was one of those brutal winter nights where wind cuts through every layer you got on and snow sits hard on the sidewalk. There were only like twelve people there. Job had been sitting with his partner, Vera James, who’d invited him on a date night. Vera and Marisol Oliva, the host, were old high school friends.

Marisol started Tell Yo Truth a few years back, in the wake of an ill-advised relationship with a man who’d once kicked in her door and threatened to kidnap her family. Of course, she didn’t know he was crazy when she met him. But then nobody listened to her when it was happening, and folks acted all surprised when he got arrested for tearing up a corner store. In her monologues, she says she started Tell Yo Truth because she wanted “a place to air all our grievances, strangenesses and struggles without fear or worry.” No censors, no judgment, just real folks telling the real facts of their lives to other real folks. *Exorcizing their demons*, as she sometimes puts it, and though she probably means it as a joke, she often refers to the days before she founded the show as *possessed*.

“Welcome to Tell Yo Truth,” her spiel begins, “where we tell—” and the audience is supposed to respond: “The truth! The whole truth! And nothing but the truth!”

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She holds it in the back of this boutique called The Crawl Space, which happens to be three blocks from where I stay. The first time I went was pure serendipity. I was on my way home from work when I saw that the lights in the boutique were still on, even though it closes at seven. When I peeked in, I saw people gathered in the back and heard a dude's voice booming through the PA system. As I approached, I saw that they were gathered in a semicircle around a short man who paced back and forth, gripping a corded mic like a standup comedian. He had long hair, a sparse beard and sad, goat eyes. I'll never forget it. He was talking about growing up in Logan Square, getting chased by some gang members. Just when they were about to get him, some cops showed up. It was strangely loose and sincere, his story, and that's probably why it hooked me.

"That made me feel something," Job Wilson said to me at the end of the night. Dark skinned, bald with a few grays in his beard, a little taller than I am, Job looked at me with the bloodshot eyes of a man who'd worked a couple double shifts in a row. When he smiled, the corners of his eyes and mouth wrinkled. Still, I couldn't tell how old he was. His skin was otherwise clear and smooth, like it had just been ironed. I was swimming in relief to have let something go; but I'd had half a fifth of Jameson earlier that night so I couldn't be sure of exactly what that something was.

"Thanks a lot," I told him. "What's your name?"

He extended his hand. "I'm Job."

"Like in the bible?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Yeah, man, like in the bible. I sure hope you plan to come back next month. Would love to hear another one of your stories."

I told him I'd think about it, that I mainly go to listen and that I only tell stories if I really feel like it. I'm not one of those folks who frequently attend these kinds of things; Marisol's is the only one I've ever been to twice, and that's mainly because we have history. I never plan to go there. It just seems to happen that every few months I end up there, in the back of The Crawl Space, listening with the others.

Walking home that night, I was glad to have met Job, whose enthusiasm stuck with me for reasons I couldn't at the time isolate. Thinking back on it now, it probably had something to do with how he looked at me when he said *that made me feel something*. Longing and kinship in his eyes reminded me of this time when as a favor to an old girlfriend I chaperoned her little cousin's prom party. It was exactly what it sounds like: a bunch of overdressed, over-fragrant teenagers giggling and dancing to catchy, incoherent music. I was standing on the wall by the DJ booth, counting down the hours till it was over, feeling old as hell, when I noticed two boys slick studying me from across the room. I couldn't get a read on

what they were looking at. I figured I'd go over and strike up a conversation. When I introduced myself, to my surprise, they lit up. We must have talked for ten or fifteen minutes before one of the boys (his name was Rodney or Robert or something) asked me out of nowhere how I dealt with "the pressures of being a teen." I told him the thing I remember most about being a teenager is how fast it was over and how much life came after it. I said something like, "Don't sweat it. Be present." You would've thought *I* was a standup comedian the way both of these boys started cracking up. Goofy laughter. When they finally calmed down, we kept talking. I noticed as we did that something different showed up in their eyes. It's hard to explain. It was like they were leaving the doors unlocked.

Though in him it seemed warmer, sadder and older, warped, maybe, by that low-lit, sparse room, Job's eyes displayed a similar penetrability that night. *That made me feel something*, he'd said—significant words. By the time I arrived at my front door, though, their spell was all but broken. What remained was a vague impression which the cold rendered untrustworthy and on which my exhaustion wouldn't let me focus.

That's kinda how it went with Marisol and me. We'd met at a bar, messed around that night, dallied for a few weeks. Then one day, for no reason clear to me, we just stopped. I guess the flame just burned out. There were no hard feelings. We hadn't talked in months when I discovered the show that first time. I was shocked to see her take the mic after that goat-eyed man. But if she was surprised to see me, she sure didn't let on. She smiled in my general direction as she took the stage. Her hair had grown—she wore it in deep brown, cascading waves. Her skin glowed and her eyes were framed in bluebird-blue eyeshadow. She stood self-assured in a green dress with a dark, shiny trim and guided us through the night. After the show ended, I approached her. As she would any newcomer, she asked me what I thought of it. I told her I loved it, that I wished I'd known it was something she was putting together. She told me Tell Yo Truth was a project she held close to her heart, that she wanted to keep a separation between men she hooked up with and this, which she truly loved. So we moved on, transposing ourselves in the matrix of relationships that structure our community. Black and brown *creative professionals*: we who once dreamed vaguely of art careers but because we were too early, too mentally dispersed, too unmotivated or better consumers than producers—and weren't born rich and white—we stumbled slow-motion into adulthood, found tolerable salaries and called ourselves *settling down*.

I, for instance, am a junior claims adjuster at a middle-grade health insurance agency. My job, basically, is to find ways for my corporate employer not to pay sick and injured people (or more accurately, their representatives) the money they erroneously believed they'd have access to when they signed a contract with us. I

work long, tedious hours, in return for which I get to eat, pay rent in a nice neighborhood and spin my wheels a little bit longer. I'm not bad at it; my ratings currently stand at a strong three point eight out of five. My manager gives good feedback, and I'm on track for a raise by next summer. It's not possible that this is anyone's dream, but it is still somehow *responsible*, and that's a fair enough compromise between some vague dream I misplaced years ago and the very real world, which, after all, is always threatening to misplace me.

So when I got home that night, I left Job's words in the ether where I'd found them. I prepped for bills and the responsible workdays that would get me through the winter.



On the Thursday before Memorial Day, I took a crazy call with an old man who got mad at me because the plan he'd signed up for didn't cover the medicine he wanted to change over to. His cancer had progressed and his doctor wanted to try something new. He was coughing the whole time. I kept having to ask him to repeat himself, which of course only made him madder. He escalated the call to my manager, who talked him down for a few minutes before de-escalating the call back to me. I tried everything I could think of at the time to relieve him, but the rules were clear. *Can't you break the rules for a person?* That's what he said. Clearly, I couldn't. We talked another hour—three hours in total—and nothing came of it except I ended up staying an extra two hours at work because I'd gotten so backed up. Then, because I was so flustered, I missed the 7:16 bus back south. The next bus was delayed. I stood in that suffocating humidity another thirty minutes before it came. I didn't get back to the Southside till after 8:30. I felt alone and anonymous. The density of the street sealed around me like superheated plastic. I saw, as I approached it, that the lights were on in The Crawl Space, so I stopped in.

It was hot and humid inside, the room already filling up with lovers, storytellers, and others loneliness had sent out into the street. I squeezed near the wall in the back. Marisol was on the mic, her voice like fine suede. She raised her eyebrows when she saw me, gesturing the sign-up list in my direction. I smiled but shook my head. She said, "I see Gary in here acting brand new!" People laughed, which was embarrassing. I just pretended there was something on the wall I wanted to see. Marisol let me be, if only to keep the show going. She called everybody to their seats, then went into her spiel. When it was our time to say, "The whole Truth! Nothing but the Truth!" we said it with such force and union my breath shortened.

I don't remember all the storytellers that night. I do recall a scruffy girl who'd lost her passport while touring Italy—that was a funny one—and a couple of teachers whose stories focused on their black students: one kid got shot a week before his college orientation; another had “family issues” so she spent the holiday with the teacher's family. And then there was a story from this artsy-looking dude with gray locs and a five o'clock shadow, about the time he'd met Drake. It was while people were still laughing at the artsy dude's story that Marisol called up Job Wilson.

“Thank y'all for having me,” Job boomed when he got on the mic. “This my first time doing something like this.”

“Take your time!” Somebody shouted.

“Not too much time!” Marisol quipped, pointing to the clock on the wall.

“I wanted to tell a story about something I found at my house when I first moved into it...”

Job proceeded to recount how, upon Vera's urging, he'd recently attended an estate sale, where he'd acquired a foreclosed house on the West Side that was last owned by a deceased jazz musician. Upon moving in, he'd found in his attic a box which contained a bunch of clippings of that jazz artists' performances, a couple of bent trumpet mouthpieces, some sheet music for a song called “A-Lift,” and a notebook. In the notebook he'd found some intricate, beautiful pen-and-ink drawings and notes the man had taken for a performance. Near the end of the notebook was a hand-drawn map that appeared to center on a spot in the house. The spot was labeled *The A-Lift*, and it was accompanied by a drawing of a circular maze.² Fascinated, he'd followed that map to the spot in his house where this maze should have been located, but when he'd reached the spot, nothing was there but a wall. He'd knocked on the wall and it sounded empty. He'd figured, because nothing was there, that the drawing had something to do with the song, that the song was supposed to be played in a cycle, or a spiral. He then started talking about how he worked in a candy factory, and how it reminded him of this candy they'd made a couple years back to promote *American Aliens II*. A spiraling disc of a lollipop with no stick. Watching the candies come up the conveyor belt was *almost hypnotic* and for a moment he'd forgotten where he was. (Here Marisol interrupted to let him know he didn't have much more time. He said he'd try to wrap it up.) He had this wary look in his eyes but he was smiling. He said he didn't think nothing of the hollow wall but that night he'd dreamed he was at this jazz club. It was smoky and dusty and on stage that old trumpeter, whose name was Jimmy Blue, was playing a song in circles. His eyes were bright and between

² I understood this, later, to be the description for a spiral labyrinth.

blows he was laughing and saying “The A-Lift’s got you! A-Lift’s got you!” and behind him there were *these wild sweet spirals*.

His time was up. The crowd (which had grown even more by now) was quiet. For one whole breath, nobody seemed to know how to respond. It took Marisol getting back on the mic before people started clapping. “Give it up one more time for Job!” she said, tender suede in the shower of applause. I couldn’t focus on the stories that followed Job’s, I was so curious about how his was supposed to finish. I went over to him after the show (he was standing alone by the cash register; Vera stood on the other side of the store talking to her friends) to tell him that I appreciated what he’d said. To my surprise, he was stuck on the story I’d told that winter. He said he’d always wanted to be a father, too. I guess he was on a high from telling his own story because then he confessed to me that his number was low, and on account of that, he had little to no biological chance of ever fathering any children.

“But it’s different, I guess, since Vera has the girls,” he said, referring to Vera’s daughters. “She’s been a godsend, you know, supporting me like she does. She’s the one who got me to come up here in the first place.”

Vera, who’d been conversing in a cluster of her storytelling friends, including Marisol, at just that moment, looked over from across the room and smiled warmly. Job smiled back, then, as though something had just occurred to him, as though her look confirmed it, he said to me, “Hey, you free Monday?”

I said I was.

“We’re having a cookout over at the place. If you’re not busy, you’re welcome to come through. Feel free to bring a lady friend.”

I thanked him and said I would try to make it out.

I was, of course, free that day. Job was the only person who’d invited me to anything, which I took as a sign that I should go. Besides, I wanted to talk to him more about his story, which was weirder than I had words to frame.

It was hot that day, over ninety degrees. By the time I’d walked to the drugstore to buy some plastic cups and ruffles chips, sweat had loosened my t-shirt. I felt suddenly that in my current condition that cups and chips wouldn’t be enough, so I walked to the grocery store in that same plaza and got a chocolate cake. I carried all this to the bus stop, where I took a crowded bus north to the Loop, then another from the Loop out west. I stood the whole way, in the cool AC with my bags, trying not to nudge anybody’s ribs or to let them nudge mine.

Job stays several blocks from the bus stop. Walking over, I let my eye linger on the sidewalk, on its cracks, resilient weeds, on shadows the trees, my body and bags cast against it. When the breeze blew, the branches bent and the leaf-shadows shimmered like water. Speakered bass, melody and voice emanated from

all directions—hip-hop, soul and house—and braided with the scents of charcoal, gas, and grilled meat, all this accented by the fading drone of cars through the grid. I remember, as I walked, thinking *what a stately neighborhood*. A lot of folks act like you can't walk up a street in that hood without somebody trying to rob you, or finding yourself in some perpetual crossfire. Obviously that's racist bullshit, but it bothered me to think of how many folks miss out on loving a place just because people talk shit about it. But when I thought about it some more I concluded that maybe somehow it's for the best. Because as soon as certain folks start to like a black neighborhood, they go to work throwing away everything and everyone that made it so worthy of love in the first place.

There was some trash in the street, but not much more than anywhere else in the city. I saw some kids running after each other, shooting water guns, laughing and carrying on, and I passed some houses where old folks who sat on porches said nothing when our eyes met. As I turned onto Job's block, I narrowly missed bumping into two little girls in braids. They were taking turns blowing bubbles from a yellow bottle. The bubbles floated over the block, reflecting sunlight back to their skin and forming little spheres in the shadows on the pavement. Their laughter echoed. My heart smiled at that.

In white and blue chalk, a series of squares on the sidewalk led me right up to the brick porch steps of 1436 Mayfield³, a two-story house with a clean yard that was otherwise nondescript. On those steps, another little free-haired girl in a purple onesie was drawing bright flowers. I was looking at the flowers when I heard, in an airy voice with a Mississippi accent, someone say, "You Gary?"

I looked up toward the sound. Just over the top of the steps, in the high, shadowed porch, a woman in a white t-shirt and jeans rocked in her chair. She had long, ringed fingers, which she used deftly to peel an orange into a styrofoam plate on her lap. She looked to be about sixty-five, but her manner carried a seriousness only the very advanced in age can manage. She felt about ninety.

"That's me," I said.

"They out back." She waved a finger toward the wood fence on the side of the house, behind which I heard Chaka Khan's ecstatic, joyful voice through speakers. I saw smoke and smelled chicken on the grill.

"Go on, they expecting you."

Wishing I had a hat to tip in her direction, I thanked her with a smile and a nod, then headed around to the fence. As I shouldered through it, I saw Vera, in her Black Real Estate Association t-shirt, walking toward me.

"Hey Gary!" she said, "Let me get those for you."

³ Address changed to protect the innocent.

She took my bags and walked over to a table where some salad, macaroni and baked beans sat in casserole dishes. She took the slightly melted cake from of the bag and put it aside with an impressed look in her eyes that made me feel like I'd done something right. Just then, Job walked over from the grill, wiping his hands on the pale apron taut on his belly.

"Gary!" He said. He dapped me up and embraced me. He smelled minty. "So glad you could make it. No lady friend?"

I shrugged. His eyes still looked tired. Vera was looking at me, too.

"Ha-haa, all good, brother. I'm just glad you could make it out. Let me show you around."

"Now hold on, Job," Vera said. "Do you need anything, Gary? Something to drink? You look hot."

I told her I was alright.

"You know you can tell him to leave you alone," she said. "He's just trying to get out of grill duty."

"Aw, let the man live!" Job said, patting me on the back.

"You're *our* guest, not just *his*," Vera said.

"We'll be right out," Job said, and planted his lips on her cheek with a smack. "I promise."

Job led me to the back of the house. We took the stairs up the porch to a side door, which he opened, telling me to go ahead.



"This is the kitchen," he said, as I looked up at a domed ceiling at least twenty feet high. From its center hung a chandelier of apparently real crystals. Sunlight cascaded through the windows, reflecting off the crystals, so that the whole kitchen, which was huge, gleamed. It felt like how the high keys on a piano sound. He saw me gawking. My awe seemed to verify him.

"Wow," I finally said.

"Man, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Touching my shoulder again, Job guided me through the kitchen. The tiled floor squeaked under my sneakers, which suddenly felt inappropriate. I asked him if I should take them off.

"Oh, naw man, don't worry about that."

We passed through the kitchen to a den that felt at least twice as large as it should have been, furnished with things similar to what my aunties used to look at in catalogs. White upholstery with cabriole legs that flowed like water and terminated in the carved, clawed feet of wild animals. A huge fireplace over which

hung the heads of enormous savannah beasts (an elephant, a lion, an ibex) adorned the room's northern wall, a soft fur rug in its wake. By now I was crowded with questions, but Job hurried me to the hallway with a nudge, saying "We don't have a lot of time, Vera's not gonna want us to hold up the cookout."

The hallway was wide, well-lit and well-populated, and as we passed through it, he directed me to the photos along the wall. "These are originals," he said. "Parks. De Carava. Piper. That sculpture there"—he pointed to a banister on top of which a small sculpture, about thirteen inches high, depicting a composite figure of wood and screws, stood in its own reflection in an ornate oval mirror—"that's a Whitten." He looked at me expectantly. "You know who that is?"

"Yeah," I lied.

"The mirror is fourteenth century Tehran. If you look closely—go on and look—the script on it quotes the Surah of the Bee from the Glorious Quran."

I walked up to it, close enough to see my own sweaty reflection. At the base of the gold frame, I saw what must have been Arabic calligraphy. Job recited, without pause or hesitation, "And Allah revealed to the bee, saying, *Make hives in the mountains and in the trees and in what they build, then eat of all the fruits and walk in the way of your Lord submissively.* There comes from within it a beverage of many colors, in which there is healing for men; most surely there is in this a sign for a people who reflect."

I looked at him with awe. He raised his eyebrow but his gaze stayed low. "That's a loose translation."

"How did you say you got this house again?" I asked him.

"Estate sale," he said.

"Was...was all this here when you got it?"

He laughed. Clearly Job Wilson was not who I thought he was. I don't know who I'd thought he was, but I didn't think he was *this*.

"What did you say you do for a living?" I asked him, trying not to sound like the feds.

"I work at Brach's."

"The candy store?"

"The *factory*. You see that one over there?" He pointed to a small drawing in crayon that hung unframed on the wall. "Original Basquiat."

"But how... did you get all this?"

He smiled a glittery, red-eyed smile. Then he put his fist on my chest and said, "I've been blessed, brotha."

A lot of folks are blessed, I thought. This looks like something else.

His eyes spun a weary joy.

I said, "You're a very cultured man." I couldn't figure out why a man of such means would choose to live here, instead of out by the lake; would choose to work at a factory instead of a foundation or a museum. Then I thought maybe it wasn't a choice. *Maybe*, I speculated, *he's hiding in plain sight*. Then I started thinking about how I was going to tell this story.

"I know how it looks," he said to me abruptly, but not without patience. "Trust me, everything we got came on the up and up, bro. Authentic."

I stared at the Basquiat's erratic, almost electric lines.

He pierced the silence with a question: "Do you remember the story I told that night at Tell Yo Truth?"

I told him I did.

"Well, you'll have to forgive me. It wasn't the whole truth." He searched my eyes for a response but I gave him none. "Not only was there not enough time," he continued, "There aren't enough words. Also," he said almost wistfully, "Nobody would believe me." He ran his tongue around the inside of his cheek. "But you know something, Gary? When I saw you I said *that man looks like a believer*. I told Vera that. And she agreed with me. For some reason, I couldn't get your story out of my mind."

I was flattered.

"I felt, *kin*, you know what I mean?"

I thought I knew exactly what he meant.

He started walking again, and I followed him, down another, thinner hallway. "Aw, man, you probably think I'm crazy. But that's why I wanted to show you these things. Everything I got I got because I used this." He pressed a finger to his bald head. A vein popped in his temple, the brown mirror of the veins in his eyes. I waited for him to continue.

"The map in the story," he said, his hand finally dropping from his head. "At *first* it led to a dead end. But then it didn't. I mean, I found something I can't really describe. But Jimmy Blue wrote about it in that notebook."

I couldn't make any sense of what he was telling me. "Are you saying—"

"The A-Lift is *real*, Gary," he interrupted. "As real as you or me. Wasn't no dream that happened afterward, neither. Not unless we still in it." He smiled at the thought.

"How much time until the cookout?"

It was like I'd said nothing at all. A conspiratorial look leapt into his red eye. "Do you wanna see it, Gary? I can show it to you."

How could I know if I wanted to see it? All I knew was that I wanted to tell about it. And I couldn't tell about it unless I saw it.

We went further down the hallway. He led me around a turn and directed my gaze to a strange, bare extension of the hall where the ceiling angled downward like the decline of a prism. The light there was dimmer and yellower, the walls just planks of unfinished wood, which was more jarring than I would've expected. Things were starting to feel *sketchy*, in what I imagine must have been the original sense of the word: ornament dropping away. Job had to crouch (and I almost had to crouch) just to go down into this unfinished hallway. We walked almost to the end before we came to a door that looked like a slightly-larger version of a trash chute, if such doors were allowed to sit against the ground. It was metal and it had a handle in the center.

"Okay," Job said. "It's in there."

He pulled it open. A rush of cool air, fresher than the air in the hallway had been, hit my face. I looked down into the opening and saw wooden stairs descending steeply into a humid dark.

"As you can see, it's not that big, so only one person can fit at a time." His tone was matter-of-fact now, almost commandeering: "When you get to the bottom, you'll need to open a trapdoor. It'll seem like it's bolted in, but you just gotta pull on it hard and it'll open up. Then you'll see what I'm talking about."

When I hesitated, he said, "Scared money don't make money, *potna*. Go on." For reasons I still can't fathom (curiosity's a bastard) I stepped foot-first into the opening, feeling for the stair. When I got a foothold, I slid through the portal till my hands found the railing.

"Remember, let me know when you make it to the bottom," he said. "I'll come down right after."

I did as I was ordered, never letting go of the railing as I went down the creaking steps into liquid dark. I took at least fifteen steps before I lost count, and kept descending, holding onto the rails. Light from the doorway faded. I couldn't see my hands when I looked, which uneased me, but I kept going, thinking it couldn't be much longer before I saw what Job was so excited and secret about. Then maybe I'd understand who this man really was and why I'd felt what I'd felt when we first crossed one another's orbit. I was thinking that when a step gave out from under my foot.

I fell, for a long, long time, into the hole. When I hit the concrete bottom, my landing felt softer than it should've, as though gravity had suddenly slackened. But I yelped like a dog anyway, and as soon as I heard my voice, I heard, above me, the door slam shut. I lay alone in the black hole black.

"Hey!" I yelled out. "Hey!" The air was thin. It seemed my words were absorbed by the walls, that whatever echo they made was silenced. Impending death showered over me. I couldn't believe this motherfucker got me like that. It

didn't make sense. For a moment I lay there trying to come to terms with my predicament. My heart boomed in my chest; I said a prayer: "Lord, if you let me out of here, I promise I'll be thankful to you forever." Nothing happened.

I grew cold all over, so cold the only heat left was defiance. I decided then I didn't have to accept death, that I could at least *try* to climb my way out. Though it felt like I'd fallen at least seven stories, it was all I could think of. So, gingerly, I stood—my legs were sore—and found there was a wall against my back. I started feeling around in the dark and almost immediately in front of me felt a curved concrete wall there, too. I concluded that I was submerged in a cylinder whose diameter was a little less than my outstretched arms. I turned around, feeling for a hold of some kind. I felt in front of me, to my sides, and behind me. It was when I was feeling behind that my hand brushed against a knob in the concrete. Keeping my hand on the knob, I turned toward it.

And that's when I saw it. Or felt it, because there was no light, just an expanse of space, slowly coming into focus before my eyes. At first I thought I was hallucinating. But it persisted, this expanse, suspended in the center of which, like a hologram in a black box, I now saw clearly, was what appeared to be a glowing sphere about the size of a marble. Looking long at it, I suddenly realized that there was nothing but that marble, and in it, I saw—I don't know how else to explain it—at first just the outlines, then in full plentiful attributes, then all at once, from every angle, *all things*. Galaxies, stars, planets, oceans, trees, buildings, birds, beasts. I saw the girls blowing bubbles outside Job's house and countless more like them, in countless different places, at innumerable different times of day; without confusion, and in myriad angles, I saw waterfalls and monuments and cracked iPhone screens in thin hands. I saw guns on a conveyor belt, workers who tested them on the assembly line, bullets vacated of their shells in smoky rapid fire. I saw a spear sink into the neck of an antelope; I heard it sigh and in the bowels of a city a flowing congregation of rats. I saw horseflies making love over a mass grave and colonies of roaches hissing in the walls of countless houses. I saw a long-bearded old man on a pallet bed drinking honeyed tea, and soft fingers typing words into an interface to publish to the world; I saw the salacious joy of innumerable tired eyes witnessing those words on their feed. I saw a volleyball singing patriotic songs on a mega bus and a bacterium devoutly scaling the surface of a grain of sand. I saw prisoners shivering in icy rain, cell after cell of weeping, and well-attired families languid on divans and in immaculate courtyards. I saw the woman from the porch—her name was Letha—laughing a toothless laugh and a young man who looked like Job, running from a fire, tears in his eyes. I saw a face that looked just like mine reflected in a mirror. I saw you reading these words. I saw countless mouths from countless angles, contorted in

every possible emotion, and my head started to hurt. I saw every hair poking through skin dry or wet, fresh or funky or rotting. I saw every writer who'd ever handwritten a book of poems, all in one numinous place, their instruments flowing one into the other and the tone of them altogether was like the frequency of all the swallows in all the worlds, and I felt dizzy. I saw a serpent sleeping in an aquarium and infinite childbirths by sunlight, fluorescent light, by candlelight and in the dark. I saw Vera's steady hand reaching for a hot dog bun and an ashy fist on the gearshift of a tractor. I saw Marisol DM *of course* to a dude named Isaiah and a black congregation recite from the Second Book of Isaiah, verse eighteen through twenty-two. I saw a game show host wipe away a tear under studio lamps and a naked boy leap, flipping, into a murky lake. I saw all this and so much more than I can say, all at once, all in the same place, which was all places, which was no place...

...and then I saw a bright, bright light, brighter than anything I'd ever seen. It seemed to come from everywhere. I heard, as though from blocks away, Job and Vera and what sounded like a child yelling my name, saying "Wake up Gary! Wake up!"

I felt concrete against my back. I opened my eyes and saw the bright sun. My face and shirt were wet.

I heard Job laughing at me. "Damn, bro I thought you was gone!" His eyes betrayed apologetic amusement, like he was ashamed he couldn't help it.

I saw Vera look at him with anger. Then she struck him on the shoulder.

"What?" Job said. "I was just playing with him!" Then to me: "Wasn't it amazing?"

Vera scowled at him, shook her head and said, "You okay Gary?"

I tried to stand up on my wobbly legs. Vera told me to be careful, take my time. Job hooked his hands under my armpits to help me stand. Blinking, I felt sunshine on my neck. I told Vera I was fine, but at that point I wasn't really sure where—or even *what*—I was. Some other folks had arrived by then, but I was too overwhelmed to want to see them. I told them I needed to go. They said they understood. They got me a ride share back home.

I rode backseat in a kind of buzz. Everything felt rearranged. The way the sun shone on the surface of the lake seemed in conversation with the ways windshields glowed, orbs in which inhabitants rode, alien to the white pavement and the syntax of the wind. Back at my apartment, I was comforted by the familiarity of my own front door, my doormat, my careful photographs, my cool bed, my quiet, clean neighborhood. I took a shower, got my clothes together, pan-seared some chicken and microwaved some rice.

The next day at work I had a headache, but it wasn't too bad, nothing worse than a tequila hangover. I felt a lot calmer talking to the clients and providers. But that wore off by the end of the day. After that, everything more or less went back to normal.

I wasn't mad at Job for laughing at me. I figured it served me right for being nosy. And the experience of being there, in that A-Lift, if that's what it was, was worth the trouble. It did strike me as odd that I was able to re-integrate so easily. You'd think after being in a place like that you couldn't just go back to your normal life, but that's not the case. I'm living proof. This world, deviously resilient, carries on. We agreed not to talk about it, and so far we haven't.



A couple of weeks later, I was up late and antsy on Tumblr, just scrolling around this woke blog I follow called "THE MYSTIC FILES," when I came across a picture. A golden rectangle embedded in which was other golden rectangles, through the angles of which ran a spiral. The caption in the image read: "the mystic fibonnaci spiral." When I clicked the For More Information link, it took me to a website whose name I forgot but whose tagline was *home of conspiracies and hidden truths*. Punctuated with rotating GIFs of pharaoh busts and shadow faces on the moon, every post I found employed copious bolded words and a liberal use of all caps. I didn't know what I was looking for, so I grazed, hopping in and out of entries on everything from the Akashic records to radical zen meditation. At some point in all that scrolling I came across an entry that caught my eye. It was a reflection on what the author, one NeferHotep1369, called "the MYSTIKAL TRANCENDENT concept of the ALEPH." It read in part as follows:

"Aleph, or Alif, is the first letter of the Semitic abjads. Denoting primacy, beginnings and height, The Hebrew character has been used since the 18th century to notate levels of infinity. Throughout the ages, MYSTIKS have used the term to refer to a physical point in the universe from which all other points can be perceived. As time and space are interconnected, and as there are at least eleven dimensions, an ALEPH is an omnipresent, omniscient, and omnitemporal singularity. The purpose of an ALEPH is unclear, but MYSTIKS have frequently sought them out as sites of prophecy..."

Of course, reading this made me think of what I'd gone through at Job's place. Excited, I called him. No answer. I shot him a text telling him I wanted to talk to

him and it said “Delivered,” so unless he changed his number or the line was acting up he definitely got that text. But that was at least two weeks ago and I haven’t heard back from him.

I’ve been thinking maybe Vera got protective after what happened and now she’s keeping him from talking to me, or maybe he thinks I’m gonna come at him or something. I wouldn’t do anything like that. I really just wanted to talk. I thought maybe he could benefit from knowing he’s not alone, that what he’d discovered in his house had a whole precedent, documents and research and all that, and that if he knew this then maybe we could talk about not just what it *is* but what it *means*. But what can you do.

After a few minutes of waiting, I shut my laptop, sat in the dark, and started to think about what Job had said to me that night I met him, and how significant it is to feel anything at all. Back in high school, I was always in my feelings. Sometimes, in my father’s house, I’d spend a whole afternoon staring at my bedroom ceiling, a CD at max volume in my boombox. I remember my senior year I played the hell out of that Roots album, *Pbrenology*. For weeks I vibed out to it, picking out obscure references, feeling like the lyrics were winking at *me specifically*, inviting me to consider that they might be maps to something. It started to skip after a little while from scratches and overuse, but I kept it in rotation, listening around the gaps, feeling that if I could somehow really *get* what was being said, everything would somehow change, and I’d become—I don’t know—somehow more complete.

That night, I must’ve gotten caught up in that high school memory because the next thing I knew my headphones were in and I was streaming that album, getting free in my head in my bedroom. I got all the way to the track with that poem by Baraka where he says *I know everything you know and nothing you don’t—cept I saw something in the way of things...* and as soon as I heard those words, it was like I was baptized in chills. I paused the track to let it resonate.

“What?!”

I pushed PLAY again. Baraka’s voice, like fingers of tactile light, gripped the receptors in me, drawing me to attention. I told myself I just wanted to receive it. I reversed back to the start. This time, I got stuck on *a smile that ain’t a smile, teeth flying against our necks*. I stopped it again, feeling weightless, as though the very air was embracing me, lifting me. I floated all the way to the conclusion: *You just can’t call it’s name, name, name...*

“That’s it,” I said to myself. “That’s it.” I put the track on repeat, and pressed PLAY again. Then, closing my eyes, I lay back and listened.



—After/for Borges