SEARCHING FOR A BLACK WRITER

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Searching For a Black Writer

For privacy reasons, some names, locations, and dates may have been changed.

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For my grandmother.

"I was alone in the world. It was not a small accomplishment. I thought I would die doing it. I was not happy, but that seemed too much to ask for."

-Jamaica Kincaid, Lucy

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Preface

At the beginning of my senior year at UC Santa Barbara, I proposed this book as a research project to the Diana Raab Writing Fellow Program–a mentor-based fellowship that supported and funded me in the endeavor of writing *Searching For a Black Writer*. My proposal read as follows:

"*Searching For a Black Writer* will be a primarily nonfiction anthology exploring how trauma impacts our ability to accurately remember our experiences. This hybrid collection will be primarily nonfiction, but use the practices of fiction to fill in gaps between memories. This memoir-adjacent work will paint the landscape of my social and political identities through separately intense and minor traumas surrounding race, religion, class, and sexuality."

I defined this book first through therapeutic writing and fiction writing, and it was only later that I fully committed to the idea of a memoir. As a result, I've only now realized that nonfiction does not quite encapsulate what this project is.

This book is certainly not fiction either, but in my writing I have shaped my experiences into a narrative of emotional truth; *my* emotional truth.

I began with a collection of unpublished pieces–some fiction, some nonfiction–that I had written over my three years of university about my family and about my relationships. As someone who has always been a fiction writer, I found it difficult, confusing even, to be honest through nonfiction. Not only because it was so vulnerable, but because my memories were so hazy.

And, the more I wrote and delved into my past experiences, the more I realized just how much I had been hiding from myself.

It is natural for our bodies to hide painful memories from us. But it did not, and still does not, feel right to claim anything written in this book as the full truth. I don't believe myself in any way to be righteous, I am just the only one in the relationships I've written about who has taken the time to sit down and write about them.

When I was in my freshman year of college, I was tasked

in a writing course to read a chapter from Friedman and Silver's *Handbook of Health Psychology* called "Expressive Writing, Emotional Upheavals, and Health." James Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm seeks to explain how or why only certain people who've experienced trauma end up with adverse mental and physical health effects. The initial studies done by the authors of that chapter produced evidence supporting the theory that writing about trauma, or of "major conflicts or stressors" in one's life, produces beneficial effects to mental and bodily health. Particularly they found the key to creating such change to be in "confronting the emotions and thoughts surrounding deeply personal issues."

The effectiveness of therapeutic writing, while scarce in the academic sense, has been abundant in my life. I've often written in diaries and journals, created fiction to work through an emotional event, or crafted letters when words did not come out easily. I believe writing comes instinctively to humans in stress.

Not long before I had taken that class, I'd gotten my heart broken. It was a familiar feeling as I fell in love so often; the same helplessly naive, all-consuming experience that I'd felt a million times over. I remember the morning that I knew it was over: I'd spent the night choking back tears at a party and pretending to be alright. I had no will left to cry. Leading with a primal instinct within me I knew–before eating, showering, or attending to any

other needs–that I needed to write, and couldn't stop until *it* and *she* had all bled out of me.

I picked up an old piece that I'd been struggling with since my first month of moving to Isla Vista, and with a sudden ray of clarity I knew exactly where the story needed to go. As I wrote, the pattern of my past relationships unfolded before me like a map. I saw the choices I'd made over and over again reflected back through my words; different iterations of self reflected like a mirror. It was the same relationship over and over again.

Finally, as I wrote, I was able to cry.

Once, after a breakup, I wrote that I felt "I have this need to love wholly and deeply, to get my heart shattered like glass," because "deep down I love how poetic the pain is." Not my most original musing as a writer, in fact it makes me cringe to read it. But, the last line runs through my mind often these days, as I poke and prod at my own suffering with a spile trying to broach from it some beautiful work of art. It seems that's all we artists ever do.

I wanted to see if this messy process itself could be therapy; picking at the scab of old wounds, digging into the torn, bloody flesh to find some shrapnel of metal never originally recovered. If I removed it, could I fully heal?

This project was the result of years of emotional and mental repression; little issues that repeated and repeated and

slowly ate away at my sense of self. It is why I feel the need to express, again, how subjective all of my written experiences are.

I wanted to write this book so that I could redefine myself and choose, carefully, where I would to move in the next phase of my life, instead of letting my trauma decide for me. I wrote it as a form of therapy. For so long, my psyche was a pot of stew left to simmer, bubbling over and splashing the kitchen.

As writers, we daily unearth our own darkness and put it on display, even if no one comes to look; even if we're the only one looking. That in and of itself is a beautifully transformative thing.

Part I
Self

Searching For a Black Writer

Carelessly scribbled onto a piece of loose-leaf paper, the note read:

I am in search of a Black writer for a project. If you are interested, please give me a call at this number. This is a landline—no text pls. Thanks :)

An older woman tapped me on the shoulder and slipped the note into my hand. I watched her crouched, spindly figure slip away between the rows of foldaway chairs; behind the balding man taking notes on a Santa Barbara Writers Conference pamphlet and in front of the legs of the hopeful blonde clutching a pink notebook to her thighs.

"What was that?" Sarah asked, leaning over my lap. Despite being in a room of fully grown adults, I felt like a teenager whispering in the back of a class, fearful the panel of speakers would snap their

heads toward us and tell us to put our phones away. Sarah, Saraphina, and I–the three girls attending on a university grant–were the only people under thirty in the room. I was one of only two black people there.

I shook my head, unable to shake the cat-like paranoia of a woman being watched.

"I'll tell you later."

On the second floor of the Mar Monte Hotel, overlooking downtown Santa Barbara, a panel of published authors and agents introduced the conference. They went on and on about how much we were going to learn in the next few days of publishing panels and writing workshops. Through the window behind the panelists' heads, I watched crowds of boats bob on the ocean's surface.

The day before, a group of billionaires had made news when their submarine went missing somewhere above the wreck of the Titanic. At that point, everyone assumed that the ship had imploded. I imagined it somewhere outside the window, below the gray-blue waves on the Santa Barbara sea floor, sucking into itself like a vortex and taking everything with it.

My dad was the first person outside of the conference that I told about the note. When I phoned him a week later, he laughed. Then, he asked if I had called her back yet.

"Why would I do that?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't you?"

When I got the note, I felt shock, slight disgust, and the strangest sense of flattery. I laughed imagining someone writing this note in a fervor, pen pressed to thigh, ink staining her designer skirt at the sight of brown skin from the corner of her eye. She must have been so proud of her find; what a rare find.

But, to my dad, the goal of me going to school in Santa Barbara was to have opportunities like this. I was about to enter my third and final year in my university's writing program with little to show for it besides a few small publications and three years of work experience in fast-food restaurants. I was one year away from becoming a failed writer.

So, part of me really did want it to be real–that feeling like I'd been discovered, found. That I could be something special.

At five years old, I was an artist, an escapist. I scribbled in the gaps of my reality with stubby colored pencils, scattered paper, and Legos and Polly Pockets in the playroom of my family's old house in North Long Beach, the first place we ever actually owned, my parents and I.

It was where my mom taught me to read my first chapter book and where I wrote my first stories.

As years passed that glorious play space–the big room with

the sliding glass door where we sang to Far Far Away Idol and sipped apple juice from a plastic kitchen set–wore away. The creamy ceiling tiles browned and rotted and broke away at their corners, allowing in all kinds of buzzing wasps and spiders, and the door to the backyard would not close properly. I didn't think about that stuff until it became broken enough for us to leave; back then, it was just my castle.

I remember drawing myself. I was beautiful, all grown up and tall, dressed in a pretty red dress, a pair of pretty red shoes and a pretty red handbag. And I remember wanting to show my mom because Mommy liked it when I drew her things. I wanted her to be happy and proud, to scrunch her nose and tell me, "You did so good, lovie," as I presented it to her.

She looked at me in confusion. "What's this, lovie?"

"It's me!" I smiled so big.

I watched her excited smile fall and a now-familiar grimace replaced it. She began to yell:

"What is this? This isn't you. Do you look like this? Does your sister look like this? Your Daddy?"

Mommy didn't like that beautiful me had hay yellow hair down to her waist or that her skin was the same color I used to draw in the sand on the beach. Beautiful me was supposed to be brown; Brown like my family, and like my neighbors, and like my reflection.

But not like my mother. She is not blonde and White, but she is not quite Brown either.

I didn't know a beautiful brown version of me, but wanting to be something else was just shameful.

I was unhappy with my reflection for so many years after that: unhappy with my big round nose, puffy cheeks, and short frizzy hair. I always assumed that things would just get better as I got older: my hair would be different, and my nose would fit my face better, and I would be happier.

I wonder if I understood then that my skin wouldn't fade until I was just as light as the drawing. I don't know why I felt like we should all be so unhappy with who and where we were.

I never had any reason to want to leave my home in that neighborhood. My favorite home videos were in that house, eating mud from the front lawn, bathing in a chalk-filled kiddy pool. I loved the neighbors who had watched me grow up. But in 2008, my parents lost the house.

That neighborhood wasn't safe enough for us to grow up in anyway, my dad told me later.

They always wanted more; my parents did. They wanted my sister and I to have more opportunities growing up and they did. They wanted a nice house in the suburbs and for my sister and I to go to prestigious universities. To go further, somewhere foreign,

somewhere we could brag about.

But how could I want them both, the house and its memories, and that beautiful rich, white version of me? The comfort and the absolute foreignness.

Back then, my Blackness was something of a harmony, a warmth surrounding me in what I knew, giving me a sense of self. As I left that house, it became stilt, thin and tall, lifted up from the surrounding land, fragile. But wasn't that what I wanted?

The opening night banquet of the Santa Barbara Writers Conference–the night I was passed the note—is one I remember through a drunk haze. I had never drank wine that expensive or strong before. A very kind woman I met at the bar felt endeared to me and offered to buy me a glass for 20 dollars.

I was standing in line, trying to discern the likelihood of getting carded (as I was only 20 years old at the time), when the woman introduced herself to me. She complimented my hair, the bright orange I'd dyed it after high school to distract from how much I disliked its appearance. My mother said that dying my hair so unnatural was something only white girls could do. I thought that if I was always going to be the only Black girl in a room, I might as well stick out for something other than my skin.

I think the other writers, always searching for their next

story, looked at me–my brown skin, bright orange hair, and hot pink lipstick–and wanted to collect me. I was something peculiar to them. And I was more than happy to let them–as long as I got something in return.

"I think you guys may be the youngest group here," the woman said gesturing, to my classmates across the room, her scarlet-red bob grazing my shoulder. She looked like someone who liked to stand out in a crowd, and put effort into doing so. I didn't like how close she was to me, but I smiled and laughed.

"Well, we're the only ones here on a grant from the University. It's a little intimidating, everyone here is so experienced."

"Don't let them scare you off. They all want what you have."

As I wondered what she meant by that, I eyed the man in the tweed suit approaching the bar in front of us. He didn't once look up from his conversation as he ordered a glass of wine and pressed a 20 dollar bill to the countertop. The bartender gave him no change.

"I'll try not to," I said.

I did the math in my head. A 20 dollar glass of wine, plus the 40 dollars or so I was spending on Ubers to and from the conference, plus the 700 dollars in attendance, which I was paying out of pocket until my grant check cleared. 760 dollars. My bank account would be drained. But I couldn't sit in this fancy hotel with all these seemingly fancy people and not have a glass of wine.

I was next in line. I hesitated and smiled at the woman.

"What kind of wine do you have?" I asked the bartender. He was tanned and beautiful.

"Just red or white," he said.

"Like Moscato?" I shrugged to the woman, and she laughed, approaching the bar next to me.

"We only have a Chardonnay. Try this," the beautiful bartender responded as he poured a splash into a clear plastic cup. It tasted nothing like the Chardonnay I'd had at my grandmother's last Christmas, which was bitter and vinegary. It was not sugary and peach-flavored like the five dollar wine my roommate and I liked to share either. It was perfectly in between.

"I'll take a glass of that," I said.

The beautiful bartender filled a beautifully angular wine glass right to the top and slid it towards me.

"I'll take the same," said the woman, pulling out her card.

"Oh, you don't have to," I blushed, unsure if I should be embarrassed or flattered.

"It's my treat."

I decided to be flattered as she swiped her shiny silver credit card and grabbed her glass by the stem.

"Don't let them get to you," she winked as she walked back to her table. "Remember, they're just jealous."

The drink and the comment went straight to my head. I desperately wanted to take the glass home–this beautiful, angular piece of glass–like it was a treasure. But I did not; I did not want to be *that* Black person. Not when I had woken up that morning fully determined to finally be a real writer and adult.

I knew there was a high likelihood I would be one out of three Black people in the room; I often was. I knew there was a likelihood I'd be one of the youngest people there. What that had made me a target of what I couldn't quite figure out. Was it amusement? Disdain? Envy?

At dinner, the other grant girls and I struggled to keep our heads above water with the adult writers. As we sat down for dinner, a group of them split us up and made pets of us, having each of us sit at a different one's side for amusement. To get to know us better.

"They offered him 20k for the first 20 words, and he just never did it! Can you imagine?"

No, I couldn't imagine, I told the woman sitting to my left as she laughed on a mouthful of steak and potatoes. I couldn't imagine ever turning down that much money–I didn't even know what that much money looked like.

"How old are you, again?" she cooed. I was 20 at the time.

"Just twenty? Oh, you're a baby. And what do you write, fiction? Oh, how cute. So, so cute."

A girl in her 20s never wants to be cute. She wants to be impressive. Hot. Professional. Taken seriously. Never cute.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder from behind.

"Hey! Uh, my memory's not too good, but did you say you had a spare lodging earlier?"

I turned around in my seat and met the blushed face of my fiction professor, Harvey Sullivan. He was the first faculty member I met at UC Santa Barbara, and one of the two Black professors in my writing program.

At first, he had reminded me of my grandfather, my mother's father. He had a kind of Blackness that was only recognizable to other Black people or someone who was from the South–as he himself described it. He had pale, nearly white skin and short, curly hair like ramen noodles. In every room he entered he inhabited some indescribable otherness I could only think to call Mariah Carey Black. He told me I reminded him of his daughter, a half-Black, half-Chinese girl. This was all we had in common.

For my first year of university, I was convinced that this man was the most well-connected person I would ever meet in the publishing industry and that he was destined to push me toward my goal of becoming a published author. My reasoning was that he had once been a New York Times bestseller (a title more impressive than the reality of his career) and of course, this meant I had to impress

him.

With time, I found the truth. He wasn't good for much besides a few old stories retold, and retold, and retold.

Yet, it was through him that I got my first publishing opportunity, 150 dollars for a piece of flash fiction I wrote as a class exercise. It was a scathing evaluation of my family, a half-baked think-piece on Blackness and religion and my own shame. It was something I had never planned to publish; it felt more like a chunk of my soul than something anyone else needed to read, and it was not a chunk I liked. It was the part of me that was ashamed of where I came from. The naive, blameless version of me I was pretending to be.

"This is what you need to be writing," was what Harvey had told me.

At the conference, I looked back at the man, short, despite me being seated and him standing, glassy eyes and slightly red in the face.

"Did you say you had a spare lodging?" he repeated.

There was something unsettling about the way he said it as an awkward sort of joke–was he asking to sleep in my hotel room? Or was he just asking to sleep with me?

I laughed back, as I had all night, but told him I did not have a hotel room and that I lived near the school.

"Ah," was all he said as I waited for him to recognize me and ask how I was doing. He did not and instead he walked off with a

nod.

The woman to my left strained her neck watching him go. "So, you know Harvey?"

"Yeah, he's one of my professors." I said, trying to shake the strange feeling he'd left me with.

"Oh, he's great! You're so lucky."

So everyone kept saying.

I set down my glass and looked around the room. It wasn't just him; all of the writers' faces had gone rosy, all laughing and chewing belligerently. Was everyone here plastered? The woman next to me was talking herself red in the face as she picked at her plate. Mine had already been picked clear, and I wondered if it was gauche to go back for seconds.

I hadn't eaten very much the last week, mostly living off stolen food from work: tater tots and chicken wings and bites of old pizza in between shifts. The night before, I'd stayed up until 1 am feeding loud, drunk college students and working my muscles to a tight ache. I was constantly broke those days as I wasted any money left over after paying my bills on expensive clothes and hair to support this ever-beautiful, perfect version of myself I decided I had to be to fit in in Santa Barbara. I had to be better than. I'd always had to be better.

Yet in that moment, it didn't matter how much better I tried

to be. I wasn't going to be taken seriously; I wasn't even considered. I was a grant attendee, gifted a chance to walk among writing gods, except the gods were more akin to the Wizard of Oz; big, loud talk of a silly man behind a glittery sheet. And I was a thing of amusement, a pop of color. I should have felt a feature of the room as much as the decorative wallpaper or a gilded lamp.

I was lured with a grant check that would not clear for three more months into being a diversity rep in every room I walked into. To be a Black writer there was to be used. Fodder for someone else's self-enlightenment. A blaxploitation admission essay.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Sarah hissed across the table once our sitters had left us alone.

As we were splitting an Uber, I couldn't leave without them. Saraphina nodded enthusiastically.

"Give me one second," I said.

I picked up my empty plate and walked past the buffet to the bar. The beautiful bartender smiled at me, and I bit my cheek, slightly embarrassed. I had never left a restaurant without asking for a box to go. I could tell he hadn't been asked that in a while, and though he raised his eyebrows, he did not laugh at me.

"Follow me," he said before leading me into the kitchen. It felt strangely normal that I should have been in there at all. But that night, I wasn't a staff member; I was a guest.

Outside of the Mar Monte hotel, Sarah, Saraphina, and I stood in the cold ocean air by the hotel's double doors. The moon hung low in a swath of gray clouds as I contemplated if the woman who passed me the note earlier that day wanted to pay me, and for how much? How much would it take for me to say yes?

The Uber drove us out of downtown Santa Barbara, up the 101 South, back through Goleta, and finally into Isla Vista. My apartment was empty now, only because it was summer. I lived with five roommates, three of us in each bedroom, and the apartment was usually so crowded that it was hard to breathe. Stacks of Caitlin's furniture and belongings crowded the living room as she prepared to move out. Someone was always moving out or in it felt; things were always changing.

I fell backwards onto the edge of my bed; grateful my bedroom was empty for once; that the frat house below my window didn't party as often in the summertime; that it was truly silent. Already, I was anticipating the sweaty kitchen of the restaurant I worked at, stretching hours long into the night again as soon as I finished the conference and my time-off ran up.

I pushed myself onto my stomach, hanging over the edge of my bed, and reread the now-crumpled note in the slip of moonlight that came in through the window. I laughed to myself. It was funny, wasn't it? How desperate I was for success?

So many people in my family had sacrificed so much for the idea of their posterity. I couldn't waste getting to go to school here. I needed to be better, do something great.

I called the number.

"I'm working on a docuseries about Zora Thurston," said the faceless woman. "It's going to be on Netflix, so you'd have to sign an NDA before I can tell you much about it. You do know who that is, don't you?"

Her small voice was clipped, and quick.

"You mean Zora Neale Hurston?" I asked. With my phone pressed to my ear I closed the Google Document I was typing notes into and searched the name she'd written. The first result: Zora Neale Hurston.

"Yeah, Zora *Thurston*, really important Harlem Renaissance writer. Netflix says we need to have someone Black writing on the team to get it greenlit, which I think is kind of–well there's a big push to have a Black perspective on these kinds of things now. You know, I'm South African myself, but that doesn't exactly count for much," She huffed with annoyance after this, as if it should have made all the difference.

"So, they need someone Black on the team, and I had someone–my partner, a biracial woman–but she got sick with Covid."

It sounded unreal, that this woman wanted me to work on

her Netflix show simply because I was Black. *The woman is an absolute joke*, I thought. Did she, did any of *them*, hear just how ridiculous they sounded?

But she had connections, didn't she? Netflix was a big name to drop on a dime. Was this the type of person who I had to impress?

"What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to make a pitch deck. Do you know what that is?"

I didn't and I told her so.

"Well, research pitch decks and look into making one. They want to present what the show is about, give an idea for it so people will wanna make it, you know?"

"How will I do that if I don't know what the show is about?"

"Just research Zora Thurston," she huffed. "You know who that is, right? Very famous Black author. My research is on a time in her life that's not very well known, but I can't tell you about it unless you sign an NDA. Oh, and I'll need some writing samples."

I took down the information she wanted me to, and I did the research on Zora Neale Hurtson. I prepared a portfolio and emailed her back and forth for days arranging for it to be faxed to her office and printed. I called. I called again. I waited days and days for her to get back to me to discuss rates or what she thought of my writing. I never heard back.

If Black writers were rare in Santa Barbara–so rare that she slipped through a crowd to find me–I assumed I had to have done something wrong. Maybe my emails weren't professional enough, or my samples must not have been good enough. But there was no way of knowing, so I had to let it go. If that wasn't enough for me to make it, I didn't know what would be.