

On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic

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My Beloved died in January. He was a foot taller than me and had large, beautiful dark eyes and dexterous, kind hands. He fixed me breakfast and pots of loose-leaf tea every morning. He cried at both of our children's births, silently, tears glazing his face. Before I drove our children to school in the pale dawn light, he would put both hands on the top of his head and dance in the driveway to make the kids laugh. He was funny, quick-witted, and could inspire the kind of laughter that cramped my whole torso. Last fall, he decided it would be best for him and our family if he went back to school. His primary job in our household was to shore us up, to take care of the children, to be a househusband. He traveled with me often on business trips, carried our children in the back of lecture halls, watchful and quietly proud as I spoke to audiences, as I met readers and shook hands and signed books. He indulged my penchant for Christmas movies, for meandering trips through museums, even though he would have much preferred to be in a stadium somewhere, watching football. One of my favorite places in the world was beside him, under his warm arm, the color of deep, dark river water.

In early January, we became ill with what we thought was flu. Five days into our illness, we went to a local urgent care center, where the doctor swabbed us and listened to our chests. The kids and I were diagnosed with flu; my Beloved's test was inconclusive. At home, I doled out medicine to all of us: Tamiflu and Promethazine. My children and I immediately began to feel better, but my Beloved did not. He burned with fever. He slept and woke to complain that he thought the medicine wasn't working, that he was in pain. And then he took more medicine and slept again.

Two days after our family doctor visit, I walked into my son's room where my Beloved lay, and he panted: *Can't. Breathe.* I brought him to the emergency room, where after an hour in the waiting room, he was sedated and put on a ventilator. His organs failed: first his kidneys, then his liver. He had a massive infection in his lungs, developed sepsis, and in the end, his great strong heart could no longer support a body that had turned on him. He coded eight times. I witnessed the doctors perform CPR and bring him back four. Within 15 hours of walking into the emergency room of that hospital, he was dead. The official reason: acute respiratory distress syndrome. He was 33 years old.

Without his hold to drape around my shoulders, to shore me up, I sank into hot, wordless grief.

Two months later, I squinted at a video of a gleeful Cardi B chanting in a singsong voice: *Coronavirus*, she cackled. *Coronavirus.* I stayed silent while people around me made jokes about COVID, rolled their eyes at the threat of pandemic. Weeks later, my kids' school was closed. Universities were telling students to vacate the dorms while professors were scrambling to move classes online. There was no bleach, no toilet paper, no paper towels for purchase anywhere. I snagged the last of the disinfectant spray off a pharmacy shelf; the clerk ringing up my purchases asking me wistfully: *Where did you find that at*, and for one moment, I thought she would challenge me for it, tell me there was some policy in place to prevent my buying it.

Days became weeks, and the weather was strange for south Mississippi, for the swampy, water-ridden part of the state I call home: low humidity, cool temperatures, clear, sun-lanced skies. My children and I awoke at noon to complete homeschooling lessons. As the spring days lengthened into summer, my children ran wild, exploring the forest around my house, picking blackberries, riding bikes and four-wheelers in their underwear. They clung to me, rubbed their faces into my stomach, and cried hysterically: *I miss Daddy*, they said. Their hair grew tangled and dense. I didn't eat, except when I did, and then it was tortillas, queso, and tequila.

The absence of my Beloved echoed in every room of our house. Him folding me and the children in his arms on our monstrous fake-suede sofa. Him shredding chicken for enchiladas in the kitchen. Him holding our daughter by the hands and pulling her upwards, higher and higher, so she floated at the top of her leap in a long bed-jumping marathon. Him shaving the walls of the children's playroom with a sander after an internet recipe for homemade chalkboard paint went wrong: green dust everywhere.

During the pandemic, I couldn't bring myself to leave the house, terrified I would find myself standing in the doorway of an ICU room, watching the doctors press their whole weight on the chest of my mother, my sisters, my children, terrified of the lurch of their feet, the lurch that accompanies each press that restarts the heart, the jerk of their pale, tender soles, terrified of the frantic prayer without intention that keens through the mind, the prayer for life that one says in the doorway, the prayer I never want to say again, the prayer that

dissolves midair when the hush-click-hush-click of the ventilator drowns it, terrified of the terrible commitment at the heart of me that reasons that if the person I love has to endure this, then the least I can do is stand there, the least I can do is witness, the least I can do is tell them over and over again, aloud, *I love you. We love you. We ain't going nowhere.*

As the pandemic settled in and stretched, I set my alarms to wake early, and on mornings after nights where I actually slept, I woke and worked on my novel in progress. The novel is about a woman who is even more intimately acquainted with grief than I am, an enslaved woman whose mother is stolen from her and sold south to New Orleans, whose lover is stolen from her and sold south, who herself is sold south and descends into the hell of chattel slavery in the mid-1800s. My loss was a tender second skin. I shrugged against it as I wrote, haltingly, about this woman who speaks to spirits and fights her way across rivers.

My commitment surprised me. Even in a pandemic, even in grief, I found myself commanded to amplify the voices of the dead that sing to me, from their boat to my boat, on the sea of time. On most days, I wrote one sentence. On some days, I wrote 1,000 words. Many days, it and I seemed useless. All of it, misguided endeavor. My grief bloomed as depression, just as it had after my brother died at 19, and I saw little sense, little purpose in this work, this solitary vocation. Me, sightless, wandering the wild, head thrown back, mouth wide open, singing to a star-drenched sky. Like all the speaking, singing women of old, a maligned figure in the wilderness. Few listened in the night.

What resonated back to me: the emptiness between the stars. Dark matter. Cold.

Did you see it? My cousin asked me.

No. I couldn't bring myself to watch it, I said. Her words began to flicker, to fade in and out. Grief sometimes makes it hard for me to hear. Sound came in snatches.

His knee, she said.

On his neck, she said.

Couldn't breathe, she said.

He cried for his mama, she said.

I read about Ahmaud, I said. *I read about Breonna.*

I don't say, but I thought it: *I know their beloveds' wail. I know their beloveds' wail. I know their beloveds wander their pandemic rooms, pass through their sudden ghosts. I know their loss burns their beloveds' throats like acid. Their families will speak*, I thought. *Ask for justice. And no one will answer*, I thought. *I know this story: Trayvon, Tamir, Sandra.*

Cuz, I said, *I think you told me this story before.*

I think I wrote it.

I swallowed sour.

In the days after my conversation with my cousin, I woke to people in the streets. I woke to Minneapolis burning. I woke to protests in America's heartland, Black people blocking the highways. I woke to people doing the haka in New Zealand. I woke to hoodie-wearing teens, to John Boyega raising a fist in the air in London, even as he was afraid he would sink his career, but still, he raised his fist. I woke to droves of people, masses of people in Paris, sidewalk to sidewalk, moving like a river down the boulevards. I knew the Mississippi. I knew the plantations on its shores, the movement of enslaved and cotton up and down its eddies. The people marched, and I had never known that there could be rivers such as this, and as protesters chanted and stomped, as they grimaced and shouted and groaned, tears burned my eyes. They glazed my face.

I sat in my stuffy pandemic bedroom and thought I might never stop crying. The revelation that Black Americans were not alone in this, that others around the world believed that Black Lives Matter broke something in me, some immutable belief I'd carried with me my whole life. This belief beat like another heart—*thump*—in my chest from the moment I took my first breath as an underweight, two-pound infant after my mother, ravaged by stress, delivered me at 24 weeks. It beat from the moment the doctor told my Black mother her Black baby would die. *Thump*.

That belief was infused with fresh blood during the girlhood I'd spent in underfunded public school classrooms, cavities eating away at my teeth from government-issued block cheese, powdered milk, and corn flakes. *Thump*. Fresh blood in the moment I heard the story of how a group of white men, revenue agents, had shot and killed my great-great-grandfather, left him to bleed to death in the woods like an animal, from the second I learned no one was ever held accountable for his death. *Thump*. Fresh blood in the moment I found out the white drunk driver who killed my brother wouldn't be charged for my brother's death, only for leaving the scene of the car accident, the scene of the crime. *Thump*.

This is the belief that America fed fresh blood into for centuries, this belief that Black lives have the same value as a plow horse or a grizzled donkey. I knew this. My family knew this. My people knew this, and we fought it, but we were convinced we would fight this reality alone, fight until we could no more, until we were in the ground, bones moldering, headstones overgrown above in the world where our children and children's children still fought, still yanked against the noose, the forearm, the starvation and redlining and rape and enslavement and murder and choked out: *I can't breathe*. They would say: *I can't breathe*. *I can't breathe*.

I cried in wonder each time I saw protest around the world because I recognized the people. I recognized the way they zip their hoodies, the way they raised their fists, the way they walked, the way they shouted. I recognized their action for what it was: witness. Even now,

each day, they witness.

They witness injustice.

They witness this America, this country that gaslit us for 400 fucking years.

Witness that my state, Mississippi, waited until 2013 to ratify the 13th Amendment.

Witness that Mississippi didn't remove the Confederate battle emblem from its state flag until 2020.

Witness Black people, Indigenous people, so many poor brown people, lying on beds in frigid hospitals, gasping our last breaths with COVID-riddled lungs, rendered flat by undiagnosed underlying conditions, triggered by years of food deserts, stress, and poverty, lives spent snatching sweets so we could eat one delicious morsel, savor some sugar on the tongue, oh Lord, because the flavor of our lives is so often bitter.

They witness our fight too, the quick jerk of our feet, see our hearts lurch to beat again in our art and music and work and joy. How revelatory that others witness our battles and stand up. They go out in the middle of a pandemic, and they march.

I sob, and the rivers of people run in the streets.

When my Beloved died, a doctor told me: *The last sense to go is hearing. When someone is dying, they lose sight and smell and taste and touch. They even forget who they are. But in the end, they hear you.*

I hear you.

I hear you.

You say:

I love you.

We love you.

We ain't going nowhere.

I hear you say:

We here.