

Voyeur

written by Guest Contributor | April 11, 2016



I am in a cold creek bending over to cover my naked beautiful body with water in speckled light filtered through millions of birds, insects, invisible air pollution and summer sprouted leaves. The globes of water glitter and shine like my skin and its total smallness in the strange pulsation of life that makes no sense like that time I saw a man holding an axe over another man's head in the subway station, the children murdered by police, the time I saw a dead animal being devoured by thick green flies, and then saw it breathe. Its furry sides expanded and contracted sharply and I could see where its tail had left a trail in the lawn on its way to die in the tall field grasses but hadn't quite made it. I felt sad but walked away and left it there to breathe its final painful breaths.

I am in bed with the orange eyepillow over my eyes. I am pretending I am someone having sex with me. I am going through a list of possible suitors to see how my body reacts. I am holding myself. I am caressing the softness of my belly. I feel a magical underpinning to everything except for nights squared off with cops who aim their rifles and shout their commands. I feel myself floating in an umbilical looseness. I am far from my family who give me their love with free abandon. I try to feel them nestling their noses into my neck when I was young, telling me they loved me and I try to remember what there is to love about this world and why anyone would want to keep breathing their labored breaths.

I watched a very small cute fly trapped in a bowl of water I keep like a shrine on my windowsill. The bowl is seafoam green, with a small mermaid hand-etched into the clay. My mother met the artist at a craft fair, bought it, wrapped it in paper and mailed it to me. I know I am fortunate. The fly was frantically moving its thin black legs in the water. I towered over, and in the time it took me to consider rescuing it, reaching in my thick finger and nudging it to safety, it had its last breath and went still.

What finally made me cry might not have been the dead animals, not the facedown body of an eighteen-year-old in the street with a long line of blood out of his head, or even hearing that a friend of mine was shot and nearly died at the protests. It was when I saw my ex in the café getting felt up under the table by someone I'd never heard about. It is then that my skin

went hot, spiders crawling underneath, the cavity around my heart got fierce and glowed with a flash of warning, my hair went on fire and I burned through every night we'd ever had, what our lips felt like together and how I still wanted them, the times he turned me over or told me, Turn over, and I didn't want to but reluctantly did and tried to make the most of it, the times I was yelling with pleasure, the times he would do that tickly thing with his fingers near my crotch while we were having sex and it felt impossibly giantly good.

I watch the livestream. A voyeur of all this brokenness, of poverty on screen—tax dollars to tactical team each house, burst in hunting for “criminals,” to ravage the sky, the throats, the eyes, with teargas. I have so little power, and so much rage. My mom says, *Remember that your anger is really just sadness covered up.* And I don't want to, I don't want the sadness, this umbilical looseness, nothing tethers me to the ground, I can't do anything, I'm worse than witness, I can't feel my feet, I wanted him to love me, maybe he did or does in his own strange way, but so rarely did his touch seem like affection, moreso of hands trained in the awkward and late-learned skill of satiation. Why must we live in so much need?

Blood pouring down faces at protests. People handing daisies to the riot cops: *We love you!* they'd say to the cops, Join us! For years the sound of helicopters overhead made me crazy, or car doors slamming. Sometimes I still smell tear gas, pepperspray drifting through the air. After the first time, I turned to my wrist and skull with a blade and carved designs. I turned to the scale and limited intake. I turned to my loved ones. Nothing can fully soothe this brutality. We do not arc towards justice, it is not some inevitable thing we're heading towards.

In this particular place, this particular time period's idea of whiteness, of the dominant group, my pale skin, my features protect me, in a lonely and tangible way. I was raised to be anti-racist, through the colorblind concept. I was raised to think the fact that my family celebrated Passover, that our heritage was the Holocaust, or just simply that we had these values of shared liberation, meant I should stand up for anyone under attack. Today, if there is anyone whose needs are not met in this world, I am not fully at peace. I go to protests, I organize, I read and talk and listen about being a white ally, about middle-class hetero white privilege; I try, but it's never enough. I have access to healing, to shelter, to food, to jobs, to outside air, that others don't.

I sleep in because I can't sleep at night. I call the place to try to get counseling. I have been calling for months. I tell the receptionist I am really desperate and for the first time I actually feel heard. She tells me to call back if I can't find anyone.

Are you ok, she asks.

I am, I guess, I say.

I drag my hand along the echinacea's spiky flowers, across the petunia faces, the russian sage sticks to my fingers. I search for berries in the woods. I check for ticks. I feel my life has been one big mistake. There's never

enough I can do to forgive myself for not doing enough. I don't understand why I am so small, so big. Don't understand why I was told the world would be mine one day, to explore, to make a mark, to leave better than I found it. And when we do speak up, we're met with hatred, tear gas, smear campaigns, jailings, beatings, and unequally.

How is it possible to watch and not act? I drove past a possum on the road, ripped in half, its intestines pink in the sun. Further on, several raccoons curled up on the shoulder, and dead squirrels I swerved to avoid. No one stopped to nudge their dead thicknesses into the woods. If they were human? I wondered. Is this why sometimes it is easy to torture, kill even our own species, systematically, without guilt, when we say that person is less-than, whether in genocides, as in slavery, or the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, Armenian genocide, the Second Sino-Japanese war, the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, capital punishment, or in the epidemic of rape, racism, dehumanization of those with mental "illness," disability, murder of people who are trans*, of boyfriends killing girlfriends? Why this hierarchy of sorrows? Why didn't I cry for that dead raccoon, but might if it was a cat, especially if it had been "my" cat?

A white woman says she is up all night, she can't turn the news off, she is hugging her dog, she's watching from a thousand miles away. The cops are like cops always are, except more like paramilitaries when called into large groups of protestors, who, in truth, are mourners. As much as they might claim otherwise, I want to think the cops are haunted by every bashed head. As much as they troll the Ferguson demonstration livestream web comments with, "Kill all the niggers then we'll have peace," "rape her no 1 will know," "RACISTS ARE WHINY LITTLE BITCHES," some secret part of them is in pain. But who cares about hidden pain if they just continue with their beatings, their "rough rides," their framing, their rapes, their murders? Trauma is not a good enough excuse.

A child dead left in the street for four and a half hours. Four hours dead in the street surrounded by yellow caution tape warning: Don't be black, don't be young, don't be male. Cops waltzing around like, *Oh shit, what do we do? How do I cover this up?*

The circumstances of the murder of Michael Brown, tragically, aren't unusual. What's unusual and hopeful is the protests, the sustained public outrage against centuries of intentional dominant rhetoric and policies of "us" and "them," of "superior" and "inferior."

What does it mean to have recordings of these public lynchings so easily available? Some want to think it will wake people up to the current reality of racism and police brutality. And in some ways it has. The growing #Blacklivesmatter movement is making interpersonal connections and intersectional political analyses that could make this one of the most effective movements in decades. But people, especially some friends of color, point out the inherent problems with the availability and dissemination of videos and photos of the murders of people of Black, Native, Latino descent. Not only can it be traumatizing to watch them, but studies show that these videos don't lead those who view them to become better allies, or even to be

more compassionate. And the availability of these modern lynching videos and photos might be said to perpetuate the idea of the person of color as perpetual victim, and their death as commodity, traded over the internet.

I don't know. I only know that in some ways the related articles being posted daily on social media has made it that much harder for me, within my (although activist) white middle-class insulation, to ignore, and has made it easier and that much more urgent for me to join in solidarity with those fighting against police brutality, imposed poverty, structural racism, mental 'illness' criminalization, and all methods of oppression. All I can say is that my heart is perpetually broken.

A friend, who is white, read an early draft of this piece, and said she thought there was too much material about me. She suggested I make two separate pieces—one about Ferguson, and one about myself and my personal heartache. She wrote, "To do Ferguson justice as a white woman I would think that there would be less about one's self and more about Ferguson. Do we, as white women, really have a right to put ourselves in the middle of what's happening in Ferguson in any other way than just listening and educating? That's my question for us."

Sometimes when I'm reading an article and notice that the author is yet another white person writing about white supremacy, white fragility or being an ally, I'm like, *Oh god, not another one*. White people are great at dominating everything, right? Including the cultural conversation about race and racism. I partly wanted to write this piece to discuss the very real possibility of actually being more like voyeur than ally in solidarity. What, for instance, might be wrong with shaking in bed watching people other than myself deal with cops in Ferguson, in Baltimore? I know this piece is self-indulgent, and perhaps it's really not ok for me to write it, but in part I'm trying to show the failings of trying to be an ally, because in the end it is my own life I am most concerned with. I could separate out the parts about my personal heartache from the parts on racism into two different essays, but that's part of what I'm trying to call out—how I am ashamed that my personal, small suffering often feels more emotionally overwhelming than that which seems to be outside of me. Also, I'm the kind of person who has always experienced my personal life and the world around me as viscerally interwoven, interconnected. Still, this may very well be a case of just another white person taking up too much space.

Because I am not vomiting, I am not cutting my wrist, I am just watching, I am just calling the white house, I am just tweeting, I am just sobbing, instead I am digging into my own flesh like the flies hungry for intestine and brain, the body still alive. I do not know how to take care of myself, though somehow I am doing it. It means sometimes I eat Ramen, and other times I eat zucchini and eggs. It means sometimes I picture myself as a second eternally compassionate self who can hold me all night for the fragile, scared person I am, a snail without its shell, wet and soft and easily pierced.

At the end he says, "I just want you to be kind to yourself" and it is something I need to hear because sometimes I forget that I am not, I am not

being kind to myself. I am blaming myself for every inequity, I am blaming myself for the tanks rolling in Ferguson, for the bullet that shot my friend at the protests, for the trail of limping romances, for staying with men who were deeply difficult, for being too difficult, too needy, too naïve, too hopeful, too angry, too jealous, too activist, too wanting him to set down whatever he is doing even though we're broken up and even though the second to last time he was inside of me I thought to myself, "Oh, I don't want to have sex with him again," I want him to come over and hold me and touch me and tell me it will all be ok even though he knows that's not something anyone can promise because there is never a moment when everything is ok, if ok means nothing and no one dies, nothing and no one is hurting or in pain somewhere, the throat choking on tear gas, the fly, the dying animal, the boy shot at least six times.

I want to be held, if not by the pink scarlet peach or deep blue of a lover, a healing energy that goes deep into my bones, then I want to be held by the water, by the bees busy doing their thing, gathering orange pollen on their legs, by the humans rushing to get somewhere to make something better, by the family who are still alive and still love me in a very particular and very unconditional way. I don't care if familial love is just as culturally-prescribed as everything else, it is mine, and I am glad to have its background holding me when so much else in the world is shifting and disastrous.

I get attached as if the new person is family, and most of the world doesn't work that way. Sex to them is like finishing a meal, a family restaurant gritty pudding mix dessert, something that feels good momentarily, then they float off into some other world they live in mostly by themselves.

I watched a great blue heron lope through the air and land on a branch so disguised in the trees I wouldn't have seen it standing there. Then a blue jay flew across the pond, then a nuthatch. Healing isn't a privilege. It's a right. This must include reparations in many forms, and a full reordering of society to place its priority first and foremost on lessening the suffering of humans, animals and the earth.

The doctors said my friend should have died on the way to the hospital. They've taken out his spleen and his kidney. They've pulled the bullet out of his heart. They don't understand the trajectory of the bullet in his body, how it could have hit so many places. He is going to live.



Becca Shaw Glaser is co-editor and author of the activist manual, "[Mindful Occupation: Rising Up Without Burning Out](#)." Other nonfiction work appears in *The Icarus Project*, [Mad in America](#), *Off Our Backs*, *The Maine Commons*, and *Luna Luna*. Her fiction and poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Black Clock*, [Lemon Hound](#), *H.O.W.*, *Two Serious Ladies*, *Birdfeast*, *Vinyl*, *The Laurel Review*, [Quaint](#), and *New South*, among other publications. A graduate of Syracuse University's MFA Program, currently she is co-editor of the Syracuse Peace Council's newspaper, and a teacher (and very much a student) with the Cornell Prison Education Program.