LaTanya McQueen

Winner of the 2016 Disquiet International Literary Program Prize in Nonfiction

We here at Ninth Letter feel privileged to be able to publish LaTanya McQueen’s winning essay, “Before You Throw Her Body

Down,” which combines brutal history with a certain bruised tenderness in the present. Describing her blind date in a bar

where she and her companion are the only African-Americans, McQueen moves back and forth between the tentative

conversational steps she and her date make, and her thoughts about the long history of racial stereotypes of and brutality

towards African-American women—a history that casts invisible barriers over these quiet, sensitive moments. When she and

the man she is with discover an unlikely connection in the past between his father and her grandfather, some unexpected

emotional comfort breaks through—despite history’s weight—enabling readers to experience recognition and revelation: “As I

glance around the room, I try to remind myself that we are just a couple in a bar having a drink, and that if one were to turn

and look they would only see two people, each of them cautious and fumbling, who are continuously learning how to be.”

The delicacy of technique in this ambitious essay packs a large emotional wallop.

— Philip Graham

In the bar’s bathroom I stand in front of
the mirror and rub my lips together,
pressing hard, smearing the color I’ve just
applied. The color is a blueish red, a date-
night color, from a tube of lipstick I’ve bought but never worn.

Tonight, I am here to meet a man. Some of his friends and some of my friends who know each other have suggested we meet. Partly, I suspect, because we are both black, and we are both single, and for them that is enough of a reason for why we should be together.

He is out there somewhere now, possibly already at the bar, possibly already searching among the other patrons for who I might be. Or he is standing outside waiting in the cold, the puffs of his breath dissipating as he looks up and down the
streets watching to see who else comes to
the door. He is out there and I am in this

bathroom fooling with a color, and as I
look at my reflection it is the only color I
see.

Another woman comes inside and the disruption makes me blush. Quickly, I take a tissue from my bag, wet it, and wipe the lipstick off, the smear on the tissue a reminder. I wipe until there is nothing but the blank canvas of my mouth and then I leave to find the man I’m supposed to
meet.

♦

There is a story I must tell you and it begins like this—once, a woman had a relationship with a man. Her name was Leanna Brown and she was a slave to Bedford Brown and his family. Bedford Brown was a Senator of North Carolina during the 1830s. Next to Brown’s plantation lived a man by the name of William Siddle. The two of them, Leanna and William, sometimes called Willie, had a relationship that resulted in at least two, possibly three children, and one of those children was my great-grandfather.

When I look at history, at the ways in which black women’s bodies have been treated and are continually treated, it is easy for me to look on this past and believe she was raped—that her children and their children and ultimately my own reason for existence, is because of this. It is easier to simplify their history, to make black and white a situation I don’t understand, but there is a fact that keeps me questioning, one I come back to time and time again. At least two of the children, born during Reconstruction, took his surname.

This fact leads me to believe that there is perhaps a different story than the one I’ve originally believed.

“Even still,” my godmother Vanessa says on the phone. I have called her again, as I periodically do when I need to ask another question about our past, or when in my scattered research I stumble across another detail, another piece. She is a history professor and in my family is the only one I know left who can offer any clues or advice. “Even still, she was a woman and she was black. How much power could she have had, really?”

♦

We are the only two black people in this bar. Typically, this is something I try not to pay attention to. In college I was the only black female in all of my classes and during my Masters I was the only black person until the last class before I graduated. In my doctoral program, I am one of five other black students—two I rarely ever see on campus, me, and two new students, one of which is the man I am now meeting. With him though I am made aware. Experience has taught me that when you are the anomaly in your life’s surroundings you teach yourself to ignore it. With him though, I begin questioning the side glances of the others around us as we settle into our seats. The smirk of the bartender after I try to get his attention—or was it just my imagination? There is a heightened awareness to every interaction, and yet still I fear misjudging the situation. When the bartender fails to bring back my tequila, when after taking my card he goes to make several other drinks from the people sitting near me, I remind myself that my annoyance is an overreaction, and even if it was justified, I should hold my tongue. Every action, every moment is an opportunity to prove that I am something more than the possible assumptions and beliefs of my race, and so I am patient and I smile and eventually my drink does come.

♦

The prevalent “darky” icon, popular in nineteenth-century post-Civil War comic strips, ads, cartoons, books and toys, was depicted with skin the color of ink, had bright white teeth, wide open eyes, and deep red lips. The darky was nostalgic for the old South, before war had destroyed his plantation home.

Blackface minstrelsy used the image of the “happy-go-lucky darky” in their caricatured portrayals of African-Americans. Blackface helped propagate other stereotypes that have been long lasting in our culture—the buck, the Uncle Tom, the Zip Coon, the pickaninny, and for women, the tragic mulatta, the mammy, and the wench/jezebel.

In blackface minstrelsy, the jezebel was promiscuous and immoral. She was a temptress, a counter depiction to the pure, modest, and self-controlled white woman. “Black women are jezebels,” was the excuse slave owners gave when they raped them.

The jezebel archetype far precedes its nineteenth-century application to black women. In the Bible, Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab of Israel. She was a Phoenician who worshipped different gods other than Yahweh. She used her influence on her husband to spread idol worship of her gods Baal and Asherah in Israel. Jezebel was murdered by the general Jehu,who, after overtaking their land and the annointed king, ordered her eunuchs to thrown her out the palace window. Because she was an idolater and a temptress, she was killed, her body consumed by dogs. Of course, there is another way of looking at her story. Jezebel was a foreigner in a new land, a woman ethnically different, an Other. While standing at her watchtower in Jezreel, she witnessed the murder of her son Joram from Jehu’s planned coup against Ahab’s dynasty. She knew that for Jehu to succeed, he would have to murder every member of Ahab’s family, and as Jehu made his way to Jezreel, Jezebel dressed herself in the makeup and headdress of her gods. Her makeup and adornments were not last ditch efforts of seduction but an attempt to meet her death with dignity, to die being seen as what she rightfully was—a queen.

♦

The man I have come here to meet is gregarious and warm. At one point during the evening he offers to stand, giving up his seat so another couple can sit together, but when one of them looks and sees me she declines. “You were here already,” she says, despite his protests.

“I’m pretty docile in my personality,” he tells me afterward as a sort of explanation. “You know, black man in a white college town and all. I guess you have to be.”

“I understand,” I say.

He asks me what it’s like living in this town, and I struggle to find an answer. I don’t know him well enough to tell him the truth. I don’t explain about the program, about the casual racism present despite my false assumption our peers should behave better. I also don’t mention the overt racism prevalent not just in the town but in the surrounding areas.

“Where’d you live before here?” I ask instead, changing the subject.

“California,” he says.

“You should have stayed in California.”

“Racism exists there too.”

“Yeah, I know, but better weather.”

“True,” he says, nodding. “You know what? It doesn’t seem that bad here. I mean, I could be wrong, but it seems mostly okay?”

Because I can’t take it anymore, I tell him about the cotton balls. Two students who were arrested for putting cotton balls in front of the Black Culture Center on campus. I tell him about the slurs spray-painted to mock Black History Month. I tell him about the swastika drawn on the wall in one of the dorms. There is a tension on the campus, I say, and it has existed for quite a while, even before I came here, and it is building.

It has not happened yet, but in a few weeks that tension will reach a breaking point with protests that will make national news, the results of which heighten the ways in which I perceive myself to be seen.

“It’s not that bad though, or maybe I’ve just gotten used to it all,” I finally answer, and he laughs, seeing immediately through my lie.

♦

For black women, if you’re not the jezebel then you are the mammy, desexualized but still an object. Always, you are the object, maybe not of sexual desire, but still a reduction of who you are. Never mind that the idea of the mammy—dark-skinned, overweight and middle-aged—is a construction having no real basis in history. Female house slaves during slavery were light-skinned, of mixed-race, and thin. They weren’t old considering that fewer than ten percent of black women lived beyond fifty years of age. The caricature that’s been so culturally ingrained— from the image of Aunt Jemima popular on pancake mixes for decades, to Hattie McDaniel’s portrayal in Gone With the Wind—were, and have always been, fictions created to soothe.

We are jezebels or we are mammies, or we are Sapphires or tragic mulattas. We are the gold-digger, the angry black woman, or the welfare queen. Object or abject, we always one or the other, but always considered an Other.

♦

“So have you dated anyone here?”

“No,” I say, already feeling defensive.

“No one?”

“No.”

He pushes for an answer as to why, an answer I’m unwilling to give. It’s too early in the evening for such a conversation. A few weeks earlier I was at a bar and a man, in his mid-forties, came up to order a drink. He smiled and said hello in my direction and out of politeness I nodded back. This provoked him to conversation and then to offer to buy me another, unasked-for drink.

“You know,” he said, leaning closer, “I’ve always liked the coloreds. I’ve always wanted to date one.”

These men aren’t unusual. They aren’t specific to Missouri where I am now, but have been in Massachusetts and North Carolina and Kentucky, all the places I’ve lived. They are sometimes older, men who want to reenact some racial fantasy of their dreams, but sometimes they are younger, curious about what it’s like.

It is tiring, I want to say, all the ways in which you’re seen.

“I guess there aren’t many black people here to date,” he says.

“No, there aren’t.”

Perhaps this is why I have dolled myself up for this. Because for the first time in a long while I’d be on a date where I knew I wouldn’t be made to feel like an object. For an evening I would be with someone who understands our history, who understands what it’s like to navigate this world. Perhaps this is why I had stayed so long in front of the bathroom mirror, and why I had taken out that tube of lipstick, putting it on carefully, wanting for the first time in a long while for my intention to be known.

But in the end I had smeared my lips clean. Too afraid in the end, even to someone who might understand, of how it might appear.

♦

Saturday mornings I get in my car and drive. There’s an antique store just on the outskirts of the Missouri town in which I live, and to kill some of the hours of my day I decide to go. There in the middle of the store is a doll. Black onyx skin. Wide red lips. Knotted black hair. A pickaninny doll. I’m so taken aback that I stop and stare at it. The doll is predominantly displayed on top of a chest of drawers for sale.

The male clerk at the front of the store catches me staring. “You thinking about buying it?” he asks. “I don’t know.”

“It looks pretty taken care of. Good condition.”

This exchange is too much. He is unaware of the symbolism of the doll, of what it signifies, or maybe he is perhaps pretending in an attempt to make a sale.

“I think I’m going to pass,” I tell him.

“You sure? You seem like you want it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I say, and then head for the door.

The next day I go back and thankfully someone else is working. I pay for the doll quickly, saying as little as possible to the clerk as she places it in a plastic bag.

I bought the doll for the sole purpose of trashing it. I wanted to feel some sort of vindication as I took it apart, disassembled its limbs, cut to shreds the fabric of its clothes, but when I got it home I couldn’t do it. How often our history has been erased, sanitized, perverted and disguised. The ugliness forgotten and what’s left is its echo reverberating in all the ways we are forced to understand ourselves.

I don’t get rid of the doll. Instead, I put it in a box in my closet where it sits now.

I’m not sure I’ll ever have children, but if I do one day when they’re older I’ll take the doll out and say, “Look. This is how they used to see you. This was what they thought of us. Do you understand? So you must always be careful, always be aware of how the world sees you, will continue to see you. It’s not right, but like anything, it is what is.”

♦

Leanna Brown’s death certificate says she died of “tragic burns to the neck and shoulders.” This detail has kept me awake at night—the grotesque images it conjures because of the description’s simplicity. I’ve spent far too long considering the different possibilities in an attempt to understand, but there is no understanding such a horror, no matter the answer. “You might never know, and you’re going to have to be okay with that,” my godmother says when I call her to tell her about this new piece of information.

I’m not ready for such a resolution, not of her death, nor of the mysteries surrounding her life. I’m not ready for her to be forgotten like so many have been and are continuing to be.

I can’t imagine what it must have been like to have spent a month living in a body that didn’t feel like her own, but how much of her body was ever her own? Considering the time, and the place, her life, how much agency could she have ever had?

This, I wonder.

Leanna lived for a month suffering from her burns before dying. She is buried in Rose Hill off of Highway 58. She has no tombstone.

♦

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I ignore it the first time and the second, but the third time I know it’ll continue unless I answer.

“I’m sorry,” I say, quickly taking my phone out to check the messages.

“You’re popular.”

Not really.” As I thought, it’s my best friend messaging me about tonight. He wants to know how it’s going, if it will continue. If I don’t respond he’ll assume this has led to sex, and later, tomorrow morning, he’ll message asking me to talk about it.

“You’re such a prude,” he will say when I don’t answer, and when I chastise him for it he’ll stop, but hanging in the air of our conversations will be this absence of the things I won’t say and the misunderstanding as to why.

There is a saying that a woman decides within the first few minutes of meeting a man if she wants to sleep with him, and even though I have decided there is a difference between desire and action, between what one wants and what one is willing to do, I know that no matter how the night swings I will go home alone.

As I sit across from this man though I wonder if maybe it is really the expectation of desire, that because we are here and we are the same race, these factors alone should be enough to warrant it, and just as quickly as I had made my decision I am now beginning to question the motivation behind my want.

♦

When I look at my skin and remember the history, it goes down easier to believe that maybe Leanna’s relationship with this man was consensual because otherwise how do you make peace with such a past? How does one move on when the legacy is evident from a simple glance in the mirror?

I’m afraid that if the relationship was not consensual that her life becomes reduced to an archetype, but I must remember she was more than just an archetype. She was a woman who lived her life the best she could. She was a woman who managed to provide her children with the name of their father, so they would always know some semblance of their history. She was a woman who died a tragic death but not before fighting for her life all the way until the end.

♦

Consider the woman known as Saartjie Baartman, or “little Sara” in Dutch. Saartjie Baartman’s birth name is unknown. The world knows her as Saartjie, or “little Sara,” the dimunitive name establishing her status and her difference. Born on the southernmost tip of South Africa, known in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as the Cape of Good Hope. She belonged to the heterogeneous indigenous group, the Khoikoi. Dubbed the Hottentot Venus, her body put on exhibition in London, displayed as a sexual curiosity, a freak of nature due to the size of her body.

At No. 225 Piccadilly, members of the public could pay two shillings to view the “Hottentot Venus.” Up on a stage Baartman was made to walk, stand, or sit as she was led around by her keeper. She wore a skintight “dress resembling her complexion” to give the appearance of being undressed.

Four years after arriving in London, she was indentured to the animal trainer S. Réaux. S. Réaux displayed Baartman in Paris, drawing the attention of Parisian scientists, most specifically that of Georges Cuvier, who requested S. Réaux give a private showing. For three days Cuvier, along with an assortment of anatomists, zoologists, and physiologists examined Baartman’s anatomy.

After she died, an artist was commissioned to make a plaster molding of her body. Considered to be of “special scientific interest” to science, Baartman was dissected at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle in front of an audience of scientists. Her skeleton was removed. Her brain and genitals extracted and pickled in jars. Her organs were submitted to the French Academy of Sciences. She was put on display at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle up until 1937 when Paris’s Musée de l’Homme was founded. Her remains and the plaster molding were displayed there up until the late 1970s.

Gold inscriptions of the French poet, Paul Valery, adorn the upper facade of the Musée de l’Homme. “Rare or beautiful things are wisely gathered here,” the English translation of one of the inscriptions begins, “teach the eye to see all things in the world as if never seen before.”

♦

“I’m going to go back there,” I tell my godmother one night. “I’m going to go back and see if I can find the records, but also to see the land—the plantation Leanna lived on. I need to see it.”

“I don’t know why I’ve never tried. I’ve thought about doing it, not just trying to figure that out but really sitting down and outlining the whole line but—“

“But what?” “Life, I think,” she says. “Plus there’s just too much trauma in that story I couldn’t bring myself to deal with it. Who knows anyway, maybe this task was always meant for you.”

If I’m honest with myself, this is not a task I want. I am not a historian. I know very little about archival research, and the idea of driving back to that area worries me, especially going alone. I also do not want to dwell in this past. It is too much to think about the injustices of my ancestors, but I find that despite my protests certain questions continue to infiltrate my life. I find myself circling back, and I know that the only way to get some sense of peace is to go.

“If you do end up going there you should also look into what your Uncle Pete said happened with the land. I’ve always wondered if what he said was true, even though now I’m starting to believe that he was right.”

Vanessa has brought this up a few times before. Her father, my great-uncle, had always argued that some of their land was stolen. After the death of his father, a couple of men came to the house asking his mother to see the deed. At the time she was a woman living alone with eight children in an area heavily dominated by the Klan, and out of fear she relented and gave them the deed. The men took it and when it was given back it was altered, changed to reflect less than half their number of acres.

I tell her about Ta-Nehisi Coates and his essay “The Case for Reparations.” “Yes, I want reparations,” she says, lightheartedly, although deep down I know she’s serious. “Yes, reparations for everything. All we lost. Someone should give him my number because I even know how it could be done.”

♦

I do not need to tell you of all the ways in which black women’s bodies have been violated. From the auction block as women were stripped down, their bodies laid bare for the world to see and consume. The skin oiled so that it gleamed underneath the sun. The body was poked and prodded under the guise of an examination. Slave owners would knead women’s stomachs in an attempt to determine how many children they’d have. Some were subjected to experimental gynecological exams. They were sold and bought for breeding purposes, and those who couldn’t were beaten. The body classified and categorized.

Or the decades of rape. We remember Betty Jean Owens, Recy Taylor, and we say never again. I do not need to explain about the more than 64,000 missing black women and children that have disappeared and the lack of investigations and the lack of outrage.

Or the decades of state-sponsored sterilizations of black and other women of color. A woman named Elaine Riddick was raped when she was thirteen. She was sterilized without her consent after the child was born. In the state eugenics board’s records she is described as “promiscuous,” using that as the basis for why she should be sterilized.

Perhaps you too are tired of seeing the images, of listening to these stories, and don’t need to hear me tell you about Daniel Holtzclaw, about his serial raping of at least thirteen black women. He preyed on them because they were poor and because they were black, because he had power and they had none, and because he knew, and what he convinced them to also believe, was that the world would not care.

I do not need to explain about the ways in which our bodies have been taken, have been handled without our consent, have been objectified, appropriated, or stolen. I do not need to tell you—but I will.

♦

“So where are you from?” the man I’m with asks, trying again to change the subject. “What about your family? Where are they?”

“My mother grew up in a small unincorporated community near the Virginia border.”

“Oh really? Where?”

To make things easier, I tell him one of the nearby towns. Yanceyville. Even those I’ve met from North Carolina often don’t know of where I mean, and so I say it expecting him to nod and then move on as so many others in the past have done, but instead he holds my gaze. “I know Yanceyville,” he says. “I know it well. My father preached there when I was a child.”

“So did my grandfather,” I say. “When was this?”

“During the 70’s.”

“So around the same time. Do you think they knew each other? I mean, they would have had to, right? They must have. We’re not talking about a big city here. They were both preachers to the same community.”

“Yes,” he says. “They probably did.”

The coincidence of this, of two strangers coming together in such a way, will keep me wondering, and also the meaning, if there is one, behind the odds of such a thing happening.

“I’ll ask him when I can.”

‘Your father’s still alive?”

“Yes.”

I know now this will bond us in a way nothing else ever would. We are two black people in academia, that alone would have been enough, but now there is the possibility of the connection between our ancestors. He says we are kindred, and the antiquatedness of the word makes me want to laugh, but I know he’s right.

The bar is crowded now, forcing us to sit even closer together, the act forming an intimacy among strangers.

He waves for the bartender and asks for Hennessey but the bartender shrugs and says they don’t have it. This doesn’t surprise me. We are in a college town, after all, a world of watered-down whiskey and cokes and vodka tonics. He pauses, then tells the bartender he’ll have to think a moment longer before deciding what else to order.

“I know it’s a stereotype to drink it,” he tells me later, “but whatever. I like the taste. I am who I am.”

He gives a self-conscious laugh after this that lets me know despite what he says he too deep down is battling the same insecurities.

We never escape it, I think, this fear we are conceding to our depictions, to the world’s assumptions and misconceptions. Our past is always there, coming to define and redefine who we are to each other.

“You want to go to another bar?”

“No, we can stay here awhile longer,” he says, and watches as I slowly sip my tequila.

We’re both quiet now, and in the silence he shifts his weight on the barstool. His hand touches my knee in the process, an accidental transgression, and even though it should not be on my mind I can’t help but think of the image of the two of us to an onlooker. I wish I could say that I am not suddenly ashamed, that I do not blush or turn to look and see if we are noticed. As I glance around the room, I try to remind myself that we are just a couple in a bar having a drink, and that if one were to turn and look they would only see two people, each of them cautious and fumbling, who are continuously learning how to be.

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LaTanya McQueen’s fiction and nonfiction have been published in Black Warrior Review, Fugue, New South, Grist, New Orleans Review, Fourteen Hills, North American Review, Booth, Nimrod, and other journals. She received her MFA from Emerson College and is in the PhD program at the University of Missouri.

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