

6-2022

## Black & Boring

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Black & Boring

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

June, 2022

BY

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College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

DePaul University

Chicago, Illinois



# BLACK & BORING

Daryhl Covington

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## Foreword

I wrote most of this collection when I was 24 years old. It was inspired heavily by the two years I spent living in Southgate — a blue collar suburb of Detroit — before moving to Chicago to complete my second year of grad school at DePaul. Most of my time in Southgate was uneventful. I spent those two years playing basketball, writing raps, taking pictures, watching indie movies with Aaron, smoking weed, skateboarding, and walking through different parks in the area. My life was more mundane and repetitive than it had ever been, but I'd never felt freer. I wrote this collection to celebrate my days of being Black and boring. This collection is important to me because there's a widespread belief — rooted in white supremacy — that Blackness is inherently exciting, and any other representation is inauthentic. I wanted to paint an image of the Afromundane by showing readers what it looks like when Black people are allowed to exist without being eventful. There isn't much that happens in this collection — the stakes are never life or death and the characters are all, more or less, okay at the end of each story. Every piece is a snapshot of a much larger life because I believe life's most important lessons often come in the most mundane moments. More specifically, I like to think of this collection as a snapshot of my own life at 24. I'm still not sure what I'm doing after graduation. Maybe I'll become a famous writer who tells stories about nothing. Maybe I'll never get anything published and leave writing in the past, refusing to pen another poem, short story, or essay. Or maybe I'll land somewhere in the middle and become a professor who teaches creative writing from a nonwhite perspective. The only thing I'm certain about is my decision to write this collection. I can figure the rest out later. For now, I'm just grateful for the opportunity to tell stories that interest me because, as an aspiring Black writer, that's all I've ever wanted.

—Daryhl Covington, 2022

## Walking Through the Park

My roommate and I were walking through Young Patriots Park in Riverview when I heard a vehicle pulling up behind us. When I turned around, I was greeted by a police car parked on the sidewalk. The officer exited his vehicle and positioned his body in a way that allowed him to speak directly to me while ignoring my roommate. I already knew that I wasn't the person he was looking for, but I was still forced to play along. He asked if we were involved in a disagreement at a nearby park. The officer paused when I told him we hadn't been to any other parks, but the police radio went off before he was able to respond.

The dispatcher announced that the department was looking for a Black male regarding a park dispute. The look of embarrassment on the officer's face confirmed what I already knew – I wasn't supposed to hear that. Once the radio cut off, the officer told us, which was still only me, to have a nice day before scurrying back to the police car and driving away. I had to fill my roommate in on the situation because by the time he noticed what was going on it was already over.

## Afromundane

Picture a world where  
Blackness is uneventful  
like buying coffee  
barbecuing at the park  
or asking for directions.



## Cigarette Break

There's an old Ford Taurus parked at the side of the church on Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> It's a rejuvenated white — baptized and born again in last night's downpour. It sits so coolly on the pavement with its windows tucked away for safekeeping until the novelty of autumn air fades. The owner sits slouched in the driver's seat with a lit Marlboro resting between his fingertips as he listens to Desmond Howard and Kirk Herbstreit bicker and babble in the background. The man agrees with Desmond — Harbaugh is done if those boys don't knock down Ohio State. He adjusts the blue skull cap resting atop shoulder length, salt & pepper, locs so that the maize Block M is facing the front. He curses Habaugh's good for nothing coaching staff as the cigarette inches closer to his lips with each frustrated syllable until his mouth meets the Marlboro. He meanders his way through the midday menthol while the game plays out in his head — Patterson doesn't turn the ball over, Haskins rushes for over 100 yards, and Michigan Football finally returns to their rightful place at the top of Mount Olympus. The big house can be heard all the way in Ypsilanti as Michigan's band celebrates the hard-earned with their famous fight song, "Hail to the Victors." The man sings alongside the rest of the stadium until the Marlboro is finished, forcing him back to return to reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania is a really long road that runs through the Downriver area of Michigan.

## Heaven (12)

Maybe heaven is  
the moment before a cut,  
when you rejoice at  
the buzzing of the clippers  
and the comfort of the chair.

## Hypervigilance

I was the only driver on the street when I noticed the red and blue lights in the rearview. I wasn't speeding, I definitely wasn't swerving, and I knew all my lights were good. There was no legal reason for police to pull me over, but you already know how those situations go — especially at 1 a.m. in white ass Woodhaven, Michigan. Best-case scenario was a warning and a renewed hatred of police. Worst-case scenario was execution on the side of an empty street where no witnesses could testify that I didn't do anything wrong.

I pulled over and sat on the side of a well-lit part of the road while the police car charged towards me. License and registration on the dashboard because everything had to be in plain sight. I wouldn't need to make any sudden movements if everything was already out. I turned off the radio and texted my mom that I was about to get pulled over. My hands choked the steering wheel like it owed money to the mob, but I was still afraid that wouldn't be enough to get home safely.

My anxiety peaked when the cop caught up to me. I expected the police car to pull over, but it didn't stop for me — it blew past and continued into the night. I was afraid to relax in case the officer passed by mistake. He would've been the one at fault, but you know how those situations go — especially when it's our word against theirs.

I took a deep breath and texted my mom that it was a false alarm. I evaluated my performance while I put away my phone, license, and registration — my only mistake was forgetting to start an audio recording. Instead of beating myself up over it, I promised myself that I would remember next time. The rest of my drive home was spent

wondering whether or not my good luck came at the expense of another Black person. I said a prayer just to be safe.

## Belleville, MI

We find sanctuary in the Belleville Walmart  
cause sometimes we need a break from the Ghetto Walmart

and we seek refuge in A&W on Columbia  
cause they closed the one we had on Washtenaw

and we pilgrimage to Denny's on Rawsonville  
cause we never had one to begin with — only IHOP

And we always drive ten under the speed limit  
cause Belleville police can't stand the thought of niggas

hoggin all the hot dogs & root beer floats  
and gobblin up every goddamn grand slam in the outskirts

cause their city is serene and slow,  
and they swore a solemn oath to protect it

from all that is ghetto, by increasing police presence  
and setting strict Strawberry Festival curfews.

## Heaven (5)

Maybe heaven is  
that seventy-degree breeze  
after three sweaty  
weeks of hundred-degree heat  
and air sticky like spilled sprite.

## Jalen Explains the Scar on His Right Hand

I met Charles at the party store on Prospect. He was in the parking lot begging everyone for a sip of their alcohol because the cashier didn't sell liquor to dogs. I decided to share my Bacardi with him because he looked even rougher than I did. His fur was so mangy and matted that even fleas had trouble finding their way through it, and I couldn't blame the maggots for setting up shop in his open wounds because he smelled like he'd been dead for weeks. I was scared to offer him Bacardi at first because mom would kill me if she found out I was hanging around crack dogs and bringing parasites into her house, but I couldn't help myself.

I cracked open the Bacardi and we sat on the curb passing the bottle back and forth, talking between pulls. The conversation was light at first — we complained about how humid July was and argued about whether or not the Lions could still compete without Sanders in the backfield — but the liquor did a great job of breaking the ice. That's how I found out his real name is Charles but his people in New York call him Charlie — he said he wants to go by Charles now because it sounds more grown up.

Charles said he grew up in Queens but moved to Ypsilanti for rehab after his family kicked him out of the house. His people were pissed that the government offered free rehabilitation for dogs affected by the crack epidemic while they were forced to fend for themselves. His family didn't understand that those free programs weren't all they were cracked up to be. Most free rehabs had insanely long waitlists, and a lot of dogs died waiting for their chance to get better. Charles said watching most of his closest friends die was bittersweet — he hated to see his people go, but he was happy they didn't have to suffer anymore. Plus, as much as he hated to admit it, his dead friends made the

waitlist shorter, which meant he might've been able to get help before it was too late. He asked me if crack dogs go to heaven too. I wasn't sure, but I told him I really hope so.

A lot of places turned him away when he finally made it to the top of the waitlist because they didn't take Pitbulls. The few places that didn't turn him away because he was a Pit turned him away because his family was Black. The only place that took in Pits from Black families was a facility more overcrowded and run down than the kennel Charles lived in before his family adopted him, but he was just grateful for the opportunity to finally get clean, which he did after three months of recovery. He did well for himself after he got out — he had a good paying job at the plant and saved his paychecks until he had the money for an apartment on the south side — but everything fell apart when he tried calling his family to tell them the good news.

Charles' family died while he was in rehab. His friends back home tried delivering the news but couldn't get in contact with him since his phone had been off for months and nobody knew where to find him in Michigan. He relapsed a couple weeks later, and it wasn't long before he found himself right back where he started, maybe even worse.

I was drunk as hell by the time we finished the bottle, but Charles was still pretty coherent. He asked if I wanted to buy more alcohol, but I told him I wasn't sure I'd be able to walk home after finishing another bottle. I slid him a twenty instead and told him to hit the party store on Michigan Ave. because I knew a lot of dogs that bought liquor there. When I told him I was headed home, he helped me up and thanked me for the money, Bacardi, and conversation.

Standing up showed me that the liquor hit even harder than I'd originally thought. I couldn't stop stumbling and tripping over my own feet. Charles tried to hold me up, but my legs gave out and I landed on his tail — that's when he bit me. He said it



was a reflex and gave an extensive apology before offering to give back the twenty, but I told him it was cool. I apologized for landing on his tail before dapping him up with the hand that wasn't bleeding and walking back home.

I went back to the party store the next morning to pick up Gatorade for my hangover, but I couldn't get into the store. The entire parking lot was taped off and there were animal control officers everywhere. The officers said they came in response to a call that a crack dog was loitering and assaulting people in a party store parking lot. I knew they were talking about Charles because his body was lying on the curb with three bullets in his skull and four in his midsection. I still think about him whenever I look at the scar on my hand or crack open a bottle of Bacardi.

## Death Poem (28)

The same ancestors  
who gave us life will help guide  
our splintered spirits  
from this earth to a place  
where healing truly begins.





## “even some rap”

Workshop started with an icebreaker. The entire zoom room took turns sayin their name, hometown, and poetic influences. *Daryhl. Ypsilanti, Michigan. 90s East Coast rap cause I love effortless, intricate, rhyme schemes and vivid storytellin.* The white woman who answered after me commented that music also inspires her poetry – *even some rap.*

It was the way she said it. *Even some rap.* I think she knew that shit was offensive and tacked it on at the end to help soften the blow. She said it as if rap was barely music, let alone poetry. As if the only worthwhile rap was rap that she approved of. As if her opinion on Black art – which is representative of the Black experience – actually held weight. *Even some rap.* As if rap is the cocoon that could turn into somethin beautiful. As if it ain’t already the butterfly. As if it ain’t been that way since the 80s.

*Even some rap.* I wanted to respond to the woman’s three-word masterclass on how to subtly uphold whiteness, but a voice in my head told me to let it go. Not the voice that’s ready for war whenever white people try pullin some slick shit. The other voice. The voice that would rather keep the peace cause it’s sick and tired of havin to fight all the time. The voice that maintains the status quo by sayin it isn’t worth making the first day of workshop awkward for everyone. The voice that pretends it doesn’t hurt every time I have to bury my honest reactions for the sake of not seeming like the pissed off, hypersensitive, Black man in class. The voice that I still regret listenin to cause ignorin the woman was more painful than actually confronting her.

## SMACK/URL PRESENTS: TAY ROC VS ILL WILL

We watch towering figures  
shield the battling emcees  
from external distractions

as a war of words is waged  
through language and bravado  
with only pride on the line

fingers in place of handguns  
punchlines as ammunition  
we decide who lives or dies

and when the venue erupts  
with joyous energy and  
battle rap becomes divine

air horns and "Don DeMarco!"  
imitate hallelujahs.

## jadakiss freestyle (he goes in)

The video fades into a chest- up shot of Jadakiss at an unnamed radio station. He's got headphones on and a microphone suspended in front of his face. The beat drops and Jada shouts that you already know cause I already do. His voice was made for hip-hop — confident and raspy as fuck. There aren't too many niggas in the game that can freestyle like him, and he's bouta prove it.

*I'll tell you this much, hip- hop is not dead.*

*Change gon come just like Barack said.*

*Money, Power, Respect like The Lox said.*

*'You'll be the man of the house,' my pops said.*

*Now you can picture me rollin, like Pac said.*

*Do it for the inmates and all of the hotheads.*

*Heat the streets up right quick, it's all timin.*

*Gucci everything, Sierra Leone Diamonds. Tell you this —.*

Jada stumbles.

*This ain't even a rap, it's a controlled substance —.*

He stumbles again. I'd be worried if Jada were any other rapper, but I know better than to doubt the nigga that dropped *The Champ is Here* and *Kiss of Death* in the same year.

Jadakiss is ready to rap again when the host interjects that he's allowed to curse.

He repeats the information in disbelief before attackin the beat again.

*Head- on- head collision, I'm a problem.*

*& nobody can solve em, I'm long division.*

*On the road of success, but it's more of a mission.*

*They said I would be dead or I was goin to prison.*

He's got everything I want in a freestyle. Punchlines, multis, internal rhymes, and sustained schemes. Every bar takes Jada further and further from Earth and validates his bold declaration on the *Made You Look* remix – he really is top five dead or alive.

Jadakiss freestyles like it's easier than speakin, and for him that's probably true. Every bar Jada spits is punctuated by an ad lib cause the host can't contain his excitement. It's so beautiful to watch a nigga get his flowers in real time.

*Nowadays it's different & I was fortunate*

*cause I did a lot of listenin, the new era is missin it.*

*Everybody 357 & four fif'in it.*

*Drugs program — two to four, three to six'in it.*

Jada's head bobs alongside each bar as proof that he's finally caught stride. There isn't a doubt in my mind that he plans to rap until the host cuts the beat, but I still get goosebumps when I hear *& you can't stop* cause it confirms that he's still got more in the chamber.

Jada's second verse is not only his victory lap, but also his fastest lap.

*A lot of niggas lost they pops to the drug game,*

*other niggas lost they blocks when the thugs came.*

*They knew how to box, but ain't know bout the slug game.*

*As soon the money get right, that's when the love change*

Jada makes it clear from the beginning that, unlike other niggas, he can stand the test of time. That's why he confidently declares himself as both the cornerstone of the corner store and the D-Block general. No claim feels too outlandish – not when he's spittin like



this. Jada's dope really is strong enough to give fiends hiccups just like he really does say grace before givin niggas buck fifties.

I watch Jadakiss gradually return to Earth's surface as the beat fades out. *April 7th, baby. The Last Kiss. You know what it is, baby!* The album promo ends with his signature laugh – a raspy ass sound somewhere between amusement and an extremely dry cough. I wish it was still 2009 because I'd love to pick up a physical copy. It's funny how excited Jada was when he found out he could curse since he never actually did. He said nigga a few times and made a couple drug dealing references, but that's it. I doubt he really cared about cursin in the first place though. I think he just needed the freedom of knowin that he could.

## Layoffs & Furloughs

I knew you weren't comin in today,  
but when mornin came I still prayed  
that everything would stay the same —

we meet in the parkin lot around 8:25  
at the usual spot beneath the row of flickerin lights  
and I see you in your blue bruised- up Subaru and smile

at the empty box of Krispy Kreme's  
buckled into the backseat and tease you  
cause you never leave any donuts for me.

On our break we smoke weed,  
listen to old Aaliyah CDs,  
and walk to sticks to pick up somethin to eat

and after work we hoop with Mike & Jericho  
and you brick your layups every time you try to finger roll  
and we both live in Oakbrook

and you never move to West Willow  
and we never learn the difference between layoffs and furloughs  
and a young white couple never moves into your old house.

## Heaven (33)

Maybe heaven is  
Al's Fish & Chicken on Holmes  
where fries are baptized  
& reborn in the name of  
lemon pepper seasoning.

## The Plan

The plan was to be productive as hell after work. Maya and I agreed on finally finishin our thesis proposals after months of procrastination, but that wasn't til seven. That left three hours between clockin out and meetin up, and that's a dangerous amount of downtime. I had to stay productive if I ain't want my mind to leave work mode. I planned on cleanin my room, goin to hoop, and makin somethin healthy for dinner, but shit went downhill the second I got home.

My room ain't get cleaned cause the floor was covered in clothes, and I ain't hoop cause thinkin about cleanin made me too tired to drive from my apartment to IM West. I took a two-hour nap instead. I ordered Domino's when I woke up and ate pizza in bed 'til Maya was outside.

The pizza left me with a case of the itis that made it impossible to finish a thesis proposal. I hoped seein Maya hard at work would help motivate me, but it turned out she ain't feel like workin either. She not lazy like me, though. Just depressed. I was cool wit it when she suggested doin somethin unrelated to grad school. We talked about maybe workin on proposals later in the night, but that was only to make ourselves feel better. We spent the rest of the night on my living room couch – gettin high, eatin pizza, and watchin *Martin* reruns like we always did.

## You Wasted August

It's September first,  
or that's what you think you heard  
Channel 7 say.  
You haven't left the bed in  
days which will soon become weeks.

The rising sun looks  
an awful lot like sunset  
when it's viewed through the  
shut windows and closed curtains  
of your ground floor apartment.

You wasted August  
watching too much Sportscenter  
and missing July  
and letting laundry pile up  
while your dishes grew green mold.

Your phone stays dead for  
hours then the hours stretch  
to days, ignoring  
calls until you're left voicemails  
that reference older voicemails.

Still alive, all thanks  
to the boxes of freshly  
expired ramen  
that you stored in the pantry  
when you first moved here from Flint,

but you still can't seem  
to figure out why -- after  
two years in Boston  
you still feel like the same sad  
sack of shit you were back home.

## Blackstone Bookstore Shut Down Due to COINTELPRO

YPSILANTI, MI – Blackstone Bookstore & Cultural Center, a bookstore located at 214 W. Michigan Ave. in Ypsilanti, closed Tuesday, June 1st.

On the bookstore's front door hangs a sign stating, "Due to circumstances beyond our control, Blackstone Bookstore & Cultural Center is closed for business."

Eastern Michigan University student Malcolm Williams, a Black Studies major who shops at Blackstone twice a week, read the sign with frustration in his voice. He was visibly upset, stating "everybody in the city knows "circumstances beyond our control" is just code for government involvement."

"Black people can't have shit around here," Williams said. "These white people shut us down whenever we try building our own institutions!"

Blackstone's sudden closing reminded Williams of What's In Your Cup, We The People Opportunity Farm, Puffer Reds, Hungry Hustla, and Corner Health Center — other Black owned businesses and nonprofits in Ypsilanti that closed in 2021 — because they also notified customers of their closing through a sign on the front door.

"You know how these white people do. You see how they did us in cities like Tulsa, Rosewood, and Clinton," Williams said. "Don't let these white people trick you — COINTELPRO ain't dead. I know they got somethin to do with it!"

Blackstone Bookstore & Cultural Center was the second independent bookstore in the city when it opened back in November 2013. Blackstone was also famous for being the only bookstore in the city to specialize in African- American books and culture.

## It Was Supposed to Be Ed

Can't believe dis bullshit. It was s'posed to be Ed  
& dem crackas know it too! Man worked his ass off  
for years & ain't got shit to show for it!

What dem crackas done did dat got you fussin & cussin  
like I ain't tryna sleep!? Can't even get no rest witchu  
yellin at the tv like its fixin to say sum'n back.

Dem crackas scared off Ed so dey could replace em wit some  
white pilot who couldn't e'em fly for shit. I heard he only had  
two months ah trainin fore dey gave em a suit & sent his ass to da moon!

Who dis Ed you keep goin on & on about?  
You talkin like y'all was boys or sum'n back in the day,  
specially wit da way you throwin his name around.

Boy, I'm talm bout Ed Dwight! Man was ah helluva pilot & his face  
was everywhere after he got picked for space trainin. Ebony, Jet, & Sepia  
all had em on da cover. He da one who really s'posed to be on dat ship.

If he da one s'posed to be up on dat ship how dey stop em from goin?  
Seem like you should be ah shoo-in for da job once you do all dat trainin,  
ain't like dey got astronauts growin on trees.

Dem white folk over at NASA ain't pick em when da time came –  
dat's how. Had his ass doin' all dat work knowin damn well  
dey wasn't gon pick em.

What he end up doin after dey passed on em?  
He still tryna be a astronaut or is he back  
flyin' planes like he was before?

He walked away from all dat back in '66, but I heard  
he out in Denver now tryna up open some restaurant.  
I just hope dem crackas actually let em do sum'n dis time.



## Death Poem (47)

Short- lived youth made me  
seek refuge in an adult  
body, but the skin  
was always too loose so I  
never got comfortable.





## My First Experience at Printer's Row Literary Fest

I didn't want to go to Printer's Row — a yearly literary festival in Chicago that showcases the Midwest's literary community — because I hate how literary events are overwhelmingly white and I wasn't tryna spend my Sunday surrounded by white people. I wanted to spend the day listening to Sade, smoking with Max, and anything else that didn't involve predominantly white spaces. I only went because my ENG 309 professor required us to attend three literary events before the end of the semester.

The festival was just as white as I thought it would be, but thankfully I wasn't the only nonwhite person. I got a free English translation of the Quran from a man named Akram. He was surprised when I pronounced his name correctly and told me to email him if I had questions about anything I read. There were two other Black people there too, Cornelius and Dave. Cornelius wrote novels aimed at teaching leadership skills to Black children and Dave wrote about the intersection of leadership and African spirituality. I left their booth with free, signed, copies of their books because they love to see Black writers chasing their dreams.

I closed out my time at Printer's Row by attending a panel where two white writers — Margaret and D.W. — spoke about the publishing industry needing more Black stories. Margaret discussed her critically acclaimed essay collection, *In Defense of Slavery*, while D.W. discussed his bestselling novel, *Real Nigga*. During the discussion, Margaret thanked every Black person that advised her against publishing *In Defense of Slavery* because our disapproval helped motivate her to keep going. D.W. had a similar struggle, complaining that the book's title, *Real Nigga*, coupled by his decision to dedicate the novel to Emmett Till caused D.W. to lose his only Black friend. The

predominantly white audience erupted in applause, praising the writers for their bravery.

Once the formal discussion ended, the conversation was opened to the audience for questions. I asked the panelists how they supported themselves while completing their projects — turns out they both won \$70,000 fellowships for white writers who write about Black issues. I wanted to ask if they felt bad for stealing opportunities from actual Black writers, but the MC had already passed the mic to the next person. The other audience members didn't even ask real questions — they just took turns inflating the panelists' egos with unwarranted acclaim. Thankfully, the event ended twenty minutes early because an audience member, and everyone who agreed with him, was struck by lightning after declaring *Real Nigga* as the most important piece of Black literature since Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

I got an automated response when I emailed the completed event review to my professor. The message opened with an image of my professor's back, covered in bright red scars that looked like trees. The body of the message said she was under medical observation for severe burns and promised to respond to emails as soon as she was released from the hospital. My professor went on discussing how beautiful she thought her scars looked and how they've inspired her to legally change her name to Sethe. It was a terrible idea, but I had to let Toni handle it again because I didn't want to say anything that could mess up my grade. I got 100% on the assignment and my professor was struck by lightning the second her name was legally changed.

## Radio Advertisement for Chick Inn Drive In (Ypsilanti, Michigan)

Chick – Inn Chicken –  
boy, I do miss it!  
They got  
little vintage whips  
filled  
to the brim,  
with Chick – Inn Chicken!

## Student Balances Afro Pick on Nose to Combat Racial Inequality

ANN ARBOR, MI – A University of Michigan student with over 300 Guinness World Records to his name recaptured one of his previous titles by balancing an afro pick on his nose for 48 minutes and 17 seconds.

Brayden Simon, who spends his free time breaking “diverse” world records to help combat racial inequality, originally set the record for longest duration balancing an afro pick on his nose in 2017, when he reached the mark of 4 minutes and 32 seconds.

Simon’s initial record was later beaten multiple times by other white people hoping to combat racial inequality. The record stood at 17 minutes and 38 seconds when Simon decided to take on the challenge again.

"It was difficult. I was almost ready to give up after 20 minutes, but I kept going for every poor Black child depending on me to break the record. I did this for them. I had to show those children that anything is possible if you put your mind to it," Simon said.

He finished with a time of 54 minutes and 17 seconds, more than tripling the previous mark.

*Correction: An earlier version of this story used “urban comb” instead of afro pick. The article has been updated with more culturally sensitive terminology.*

## A Portrait of Jean- Michel

I used to drink  
and write on walls,  
it's embarrassing to bring up —  
a waste of time.

That was a long time ago,  
I was suppressed and now I'm spoiled.  
An expressionist, seen as  
primal.

They call me Ape  
because I can't be upset  
if they're polite enough to use  
a capital A, right?

Those people.  
Those People.  
I know Those People —  
Those People don't know me.

Those People are academic references  
I use to juxtapose  
what I do normally since  
most people are crude, believe it or not.

And despite regal roots,  
I spent my childhood throwing bottles —  
a practice born from frustration.  
I wholeheartedly hope

that defiance carries over  
because the fear of  
going soft and losing  
cultural expression

reminds me of waste of time days  
too embarrassing to discuss —  
back when I still drank  
and wrote on walls.



## He Learned from the Stork

I hadn't slept in a week, but that's normal when you're raising a newborn in a cramped studio apartment right off of the Southfield Freeway. Our son's endless crying drove Ashley to the silent sanctuary of her parent's cabin in Traverse City. She said she needed a break to help clear her head, but once a month had gone by I began to suspect that she wasn't coming back. That's probably why she left so much breastmilk in the freezer. I guess it was stupid to believe that having a child together would save our marriage.

The walls in the complex were paper-thin and my neighbors never ceased to remind me of that. Most of them were patient and understanding at first since they had families of their own, but most of them reached their limit around the same time Ashley did. Their frustrations were usually manifested in passive aggressive ways like playing loud music to drown out the crying, banging on walls, and giving me side-eyes in the hallway. I never received any formal noise complaints, but Mr. Montana from apartment 409 said he would throw my boy off the balcony if I couldn't get the crying under control. I always made sure to hold my son a little tighter whenever he was around. I never thought the threat was serious, but I knew it was better to be safe than sorry.

The worst crying spell lasted eight straight days. He cried when he ate, when I held him, and even in his sleep. It felt like he got progressively louder with each passing night, but that was probably just sleep deprivation taking its toll. I promised myself I was going to get some sleep on the ninth day because the noise reduction ear muffs that I ordered had finally arrived. The product description emphasized that the construction-grade ear muffs were designed to drastically reduce even the loudest of noises. Before my son was born, I often found myself going to bed a couple hours after sunrise and

waking up when most people were already on their way home from work. I couldn't help but think about every hour of missed sleep that I took for granted as I placed my crying child into his crib.

Once I put the ear muffs on, I was able to crawl into bed with a smile on my face for the first time in months. Finally experiencing the sweet solace of silence for myself helped me understand why Ashley never came back. It was much more pleasing to the ears than the sound of a crying baby coupled with the constant arguments of a dying marriage. I closed my eyes and managed to sleep for around ten minutes before I was awakened by a sound that the ear muffs managed to reduce to a murmur. I tried ignoring the sound in order to fall back asleep, but the longer my eyes were closed the louder the sound became. After throwing off my ear muffs in frustration, I was bombarded by the sound of a shrieking baby coupled with neighbors banging on the walls. Unsure of what else I could do to alleviate the noise, I grabbed my son from his crib and locked him in the closet. I wasn't proud of myself, but sometimes parenting forces you to make tough decisions. The crying was nowhere near silenced, but I hoped that the closet door coupled with the ear muffs would help lower the volume enough to make sleeping possible.

I felt the madness begin to take over when my son realized that he needed to cry twice as loud in order to compensate for the closet door that existed between us. I let out a cathartic, guttural, scream before taking him out of the closet, but that only made him cry louder. Once I realized that scaring him into submission was impossible, I understood what needed to be done. Holding my son underneath his armpits, I ran outside and threw him over the balcony of my 4th floor apartment. I didn't wait around to hear him hit the pavement, or a car, or whatever else he may have landed on.

I was so happy to be relieved of the crying that I returned to bed without closing the balcony door, but I was only able to enjoy my newfound peace for a moment. The silence had been broken by a childlike laughter coming from outside. Unsure of what was causing the sound, I returned to the balcony to investigate. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw my son flying in front of the balcony. He was flapping his arms like a bird and laughing instead of crying. That was the first time that I'd seen him smile, and I couldn't help but smile as well. It was the first time I felt like a good dad.

## Grandma's Husband

Suffering because of the summer sun  
I sat slouched in a lawn chair  
waiting for shade to come.  
Uncles offered me E&J in red solo cups but  
there's nothing fun about being sweaty and drunk.

In place of cooling clouds came my stumbling grandfather  
who always had a sixth sense for when I didn't want to be bothered.  
And with slurred speech, he sloppily preached  
the importance of staying clean and doing the right thing  
as I nodded along politely pretending his words had meaning

because barbecue or not he was always drinking.  
I couldn't look him in the eyes without immediately thinking  
back to that chilly winter evening  
when mom came clean about everything  
grandma shielded the grandkids from seeing.

Like the brand-new car that he crashed  
and slapping grandma at her mom's funeral  
and every curse he spat at mom  
and shooting craps instead of seeing his family  
and the fact that he never seemed to learn.

I finished our conversation with gritted teeth  
keeping every response brief  
while waiting for him to finish his drink  
because that was my only opportunity to leave —  
I went inside the second he left to refill his cup.

## A Deer Stared at Me

We locked eyes  
on that somber  
summer evening  
when spirits were high  
in place of heads hung low.

Silent and still  
at the hill's crest,  
your hooves planted firmly  
into the old dirt road.

Our gaze nestled between  
seconds and centuries,  
a quiet farewell separating here  
and the hereafter.

You retreated into the forest  
as suddenly as you came  
and long after you left  
I stood there still  
paralyzed by the solace.

## Heaven (15)

Maybe heaven is  
your dad's brown dodge stratus with  
the broken window  
cause you thought it'd be funny  
to roll down when he rolled up.

## Godzilla vs. Mike Tyson (Live @ Madison Square Garden)

Godzilla was undefeated during his career, but most people thought Mike Tyson would beat his ass. After all, Iron Mike was the only fighter with 44 knockouts and one ear bite. ESPN boxing analysts didn't think Godzilla stood much of a chance either because they couldn't look past his lack of accolades when compared to Tyson — Godzilla didn't have a single WBC heavyweight title, Olympic medal, or golden gloves championship. To Americans, Godzilla was nothing more than a washed-up movie star, and Tyson was supposed to prove that point in front of the sold-out Madison Square Garden crowd.

The building boiled over with applause as Tyson exited the tunnel and walked into the ring. He was accompanied by 100 U.S. soldiers, all armed to the teeth with assault rifles and rocket launchers despite those weapons never working against Godzilla in any of the old movies. Government officials knew the soldiers couldn't harm Godzilla, but enlisted them anyway because the president wanted to look intimidating in front of international audiences.

Tyson walked into the arena already drenched in sweat. He hadn't fought professionally in 10 years, but his body was still in incredible shape. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him, just 220 pounds of straight muscle. He even had the same fade he rocked back in '86 — the year he won his first heavyweight title. Tyson's menacingly muscular physique terrified everyone in the arena except Godzilla, who was 300 feet too tall to worry about the 5' 10" boxer.

Godzilla was a mountain in motion with legs thicker than city blocks, biceps bulkier than Popeye's arms after eating spinach, and dorsal plates sharper than a reverend on Resurrection Sunday. He was the pale horse born from America's decision

to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Godzilla didn't need to go into matches dripping in sweat or staring opponents down in order to elicit fear — his appearance alone was synonymous with mass destruction. That's why most people thought the fight would go all twelve rounds. In reality, Tyson didn't make it out of the first.

Most of the audience didn't hear the fight bell because their ears were already ringing. Tyson opened the round with a flurry of furious fists that would send even the most seasoned heavyweights into a vegetative state. He would've been scraping brain matter from his knuckles thirty seconds into the fight if he were up against a normal opponent, but his fists got nowhere near Godzilla's head. Tyson was only tall enough to reach Godzilla's toe, so his punches didn't do any damage. Tyson's knuckles were a mangled mess because punching Godzilla's toe was the same as punching a brick wall. The crowd crescendoed as Tyson connected on consecutive cranium crushing combos, and Godzilla bared his fangs as the crowd increased in decibel. Godzilla was ready to use his deadly atomic breath on the noisy arena when he finally took notice of his opponent — Iron Mike had resorted to head-butting Godzilla's toe because his fingers were too fucked up to form fists.

Godzilla ripped Tyson limb from limb and spat his appendageless torso into the front row, where billionaires murdered one another for the right to Iron Mike's mutilated midsection. Soldiers fired at Godzilla in retaliation for Tyson, but their bullets bounced off Godzilla's impenetrable skin as he ripped through riot gear, slaughtered sergeants, and chomped corpses.

The foundation of the arena convulsed as Godzilla let out a dissonant roar louder than an upstairs neighbor moving furniture in the middle of the night. The government sent additional soldiers, tanks, and helicopters to the arena in hopes of taking him



down, but the reinforcements weren't nearly enough to bring down the king of monsters. Dismembered soldiers decorated the rafters like retired jerseys while bloody limbs rained down like manna from the heavens as Godzilla maimed marksmen and butchered brigadiers until Madison Square Garden reeked of death.

After the fight, sports media ripped Tyson apart as well, calling him an embarrassment to his country for not putting up more of a fight against Godzilla. Every Sportscenter segment started with a slow-motion video of Tyson's left leg being ripped apart from his body — even segments that had nothing to do with boxing — and the First Take panelists spent hours arguing about how dying at the hands of Godzilla would impact Tyson's legacy. Social media wasn't any better — memes of Tyson's death trended for weeks on twitter, a picture of Elon Musk posing alongside Iron Mike's torso became the most liked Instagram post of all time, and white nationalist groups vocally supported Godzilla for murdering a Black man before remembering that Godzilla is Japanese.

A month later, Godzilla defeated the corpse of Muhammad Ali in another first round massacre. The event ended with a surprise highlight video of Tyson's greatest career knockouts to help build early anticipation for the next big event — “Godzilla Vs. Tyson II.” The video said more details about the highly anticipated rematch would be released as soon as scientists figured out how to piece Tyson back together.

## Battered Bones Kinfolk

Our wailing shoulders  
carry similar burdens,  
battered bones kinfolk  
forsaking all solitude  
to heal our wounds together.





## “What Happened to Desmond?”

I was smokin on the porch when I saw him flyin down the street in that ugly- ass, bright purple, Charger. He had the music so damn loud I heard him way before I could see him, though. You couldn't hear shit but the bass, but he was rappin to it like he heard every word. Even had some jewelry on – couple gold Cubans and a iced-out Rollie. His fade was crispy too.

He wanted the whole block to see him flex. Especially Ashley. He had his whole upper body hangin out the window just to make sure she saw him. He was so distracted he ain't even notice the car was driftin.

I think he realized what was goin on when his ass started drivin over the curb. He tried slammin the brakes, but all that did was make the tires squeal. Thank God he crashed into Mrs. Johnson's old tree instead of her kids or the house.

The Charger got fucked up, but that was bout it. It ain't seem like he was in any pain, and I couldn't find a scratch on him. I asked if he was straight, but he ain't hear a word I was sayin. He just kept cryin bout how his older brother was gon beat his ass.

## Walkin Man's Blues

You took away my favorite shades  
& all my favorite hues  
you took my favorite everything  
& left me wit the blues.

I was lookin for the beagle  
til they said you took em too  
& once I found the boxed- up bones,  
I knew they was tellin the truth.

My pockets plump wit nothin  
I was all tapped out on booze  
& I couldn't cruise to clear my head,  
cause the van ran outta fumes.

So I did my share of walkin  
til my feet was swole & bruised  
swear I done traveled every goddamn road,  
& they all lead back to you.

## Heaven (40)

Maybe heaven is  
a sultry quiet storm song  
that swallows close friends  
whole before coughing them up  
in the image of lovers.

## Street Fighter II

I mashed buttons in place of memorizing complex combinations coupled with in- depth strategies because I was too young to care about how it got done — only the fact that I won.

But once again my best effort wasn't nearly enough because Jwuan was a calculated killer, famous in our household for abusing axe kicks and hadoukens to gradually decrease my health meter.

And when the 8-bit announcer declared him victorious, I threw the genesis controller to the floor in frustration because that was my seventh consecutive loss and it was easier to throw controllers than admit he was better player.



## The Taste of Strawberries

Freshly picked from his grandma's garden, the boy planned to eat strawberries until his tiny nine-year-old stomach begged for mercy. The strawberries sat confidently on the kitchen table inside his grandma's favorite stained Tupperware container like small scarlet goliaths ready to be slain in order to satiate the boy's irrepressible desire for the fruit.

He held each strawberry firmly by the stem as he crunched with a conviction that finished even the most sizeable strawberries in two bites, only needing a third bite when he was scolded by his grandma for eating too hastily. He loved the feeling of the strawberries' seedy skin against his innocent unseasoned teeth as well as the feeling of the strawberries' juices dripping from his lips down to his chin before finally reaching the kitchen table and the way that his hands were damp and tinged with a soft shade of red. He found great bliss living in youthful excess and clinging firmly to the belief that only adults were confined to moderation.

And once the Tupperware container was empty aside from a few discarded stems and leftover juices, the boy ran outside to meet his grandma in the garden where he pleaded his case for seconds. She asked if the strawberries were good which brought the boy to the realization that no matter how hard he tried he couldn't remember the taste of the strawberries, only the routine of eating them.

When the boy hesitated to answer a small smile appeared on his grandma's face that reminded him of his schoolteachers when he finally began to understand a difficult lesson and the smile remained on his grandma's face as she gathered the second batch

of berries, only picking the red ones and saving the green- bottomed berries for a later harvest.

The boy carried the bucket of berries from the garden to the kitchen where he watched as his grandma cleaned the strawberries in a large mixing bowl before rinsing each strawberry individually under the tap and placing them in a Tupperware container for the boy to eat. While handing him the berries, his grandma flashed a wrinkled smile and told him not to forget the taste this time.

## Kitchen Sink Baptism

My locs were baptized at the kitchen sink  
in the name of natural hair gurus,  
the lingering odor of ACV,  
and roots that rejoice at build- up removed.

Mom patiently purified each loc –  
ignoring my tender- headed pleas  
while paying special attention to knots  
known for collecting gunk, dust, and debris.

Her healing hands helped give my hair new life  
by stripping all the unnecessary  
weight until my locs were finally light  
enough for my tired scalp to carry.

Pleased with her work, mom finally sighed  
and I sang her praises while my hair dried.

## A Shared Obsession

Exhaustion shows on his face like a poorly kept secret,  
but not even his languid legs can stop him

from hoopin with the young boys over at prospect park.  
Every now and then he'll luck his way into an easy bucket but

instead of gettin back on defense he takes the opportunity to  
flash a self-satisfied smile and holler out "I *stiiill* got it, baby!"

And the bold, boomin declaration almost makes you believe  
father time hasn't defeated him yet, but he can't hide those knees.

Not from you, anyway. You can tell years of college ball feasted  
on his joints 'til they were worn down like old no. 2 pencil erasers

just like you can tell every flamboyant finish is his best attempt  
at drawin attention from his hesitancy to drive to the basket.

He'll spend the next few days tethered to his favorite recliner,  
only gettin up to eat, pee, and replace melted ice with frozen corn

but you still cheer him on after every made basket because you understand  
the obsession and that innate desire to get another bucket – regardless of the cost.

## Heaven (52)

Maybe heaven is  
Big Ben's series saving block  
on Shaquille O'Neal  
cause he's the reason y'all rock  
red sweatbands on your biceps.

## “Diesel”

His parents swore he could dribble a basketball before he learned how to walk. All of his early days were spent arguing with the other kids at daycare because he refused to share his ball. The only way to stop him from practicing his handles was to throw on a Lakers game. Refusing to miss the fast-paced scoring, purple & gold jerseys, and players that took their sweet time returning to the hardwood after emphatic slams, he'd scurry to the nearest television like a scared puppy to its owner.

Shaquille O'Neal was his favorite player. He rejoiced when Shaq dominated the defense and complained when defenders intentionally fouled. He even grew to hate Kobe because of the notorious ball hogging that stole possessions from Shaq. There was never any question about what he wanted to be when he grew up. Anyone that paid attention could tell by his unwavering focus as he watched Shaq disrespectfully dunk over three defenders.

The only thing he ever wanted to be was Shaq. He owned two copies of “Shaq Diesel” on vinyl and wore his Shaq Attaq sneakers long after they were split at the seams. He'd only refer to himself as “Diesel” because he wanted it to catch on, but it never did. His obsession with Shaq caused him to be cut from every high school, intramural, and church league team that he tried out for.

He wasn't even a bad player. Nice handles, solid court vision, and a decent jumper. His height was the biggest issue. He was only 5'5", 135 pounds, but that never stopped him from trying to bang in the paint and play bully ball with the six footers. Stubborn as hell too. He only tried out for center and refused to play anywhere else on the floor even if it meant a spot on the team. Over time he developed a negative

reputation and people refused to pick him for games of 5-on-5. With nowhere else to play, he boxed up his old Shaq records, finally threw away the worn-out Shaq Attaqs, and gave up on basketball altogether.

Basketball was exchanged for a quiet life with a wife and two sons. He avoided the games when they were on television, took the long way home to prevent the temptation of packed parks where neighborhood kids played ball, and signed his sons up for soccer. He was prepared to live the rest of his life without basketball until his wife surprised their sons, ages seven and nine, with a basketball hoop one afternoon. He wanted to turn down the offer when his sons asked him to play. His first step wasn't as quick, his knees were unreliable, and his back was stiff with age, but every anxiety went out the window the second his son checked the ball. It was like watching Shaq in his prime. Elbows thrown carelessly in the post, blocked shots that flew into neighboring yards, monstrous dunks that rattled and rocked the 8-foot rim, and rebounds snatched aggressively from his sons' grip. If only the park players who refused to pick him up could see him playing against his sons. He was unstoppable.







## Afterword

I want to thank my mom and dad for always believing in me and encouraging me to follow my dreams. I want to thank everyone, both teachers and classmates, from Genesis Christian Academy because y'all helped lay the foundation for the person that I am today. I want to thank every elementary, middle, and high school teacher that realized I was a good writer way before I ever did. I want to thank Mr. DeLong for teaching the 7<sup>th</sup> grade creative writing elective that got me interested in writing short stories. I want to thank Dr. Figueroa because your AAAS 100 class was my introduction to the world of Black studies. I want to thank Dr. George, Dr. Maefield, and Dr. Royster because y'all are the kind of Black professors that I aspire to be if I ever go into academia. I want to thank Dr. Baker- Bell for opening my eyes to the world of Black Linguistics and Linguistic Justice. I want to thank Aaron, Azya, and Cristena for reading earlier versions of the pieces in this collection. I want to thank everyone that's ever given me feedback in writing workshops. I want to thank Tatiana, Jadae, Lexi, Michael, Barry, and all the other Black writer's in the MAWP program. Y'all are so talented, and I can't wait to see where the future takes all of us. I want to thank Jyere, Isaiah, Tre, Greg, Max, Imani, Mycala, Mia, and Timi just because I love y'all. I want to thank Grandma for believing that I would do great things and watching over me from the other side. I want to thank Uncle James for being one of the most supportive, involved, uncles a person could ask for. I want to thank Nerissa because our biweekly therapy sessions helped keep me sane throughout my time in grad school. I want to thank Prof. Harvey for agreeing to serve as my thesis director and putting up with my unconventional, extremely disorganized, writing. I'd like to thank Prof. Johns- Trissler, as well as the rest

of DePaul's English department, for believing in my work because it's the first time I've felt support at an institutional level. None of this would be possible without y'all, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart.