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MURIEL SAID THAT TO BE A JEW IN THE 20TH
CENTURY IS TO BE OFFERED A GIFT

“Late Friday night, several hundred torch-bearing men and women marched on the main quadrangle of the University of Virginia’s grounds, shouting, “You will not replace us,” and “Jews will not replace us.”—The *New York Times*, August 11, 2017

We New York City kids always felt superior,
but then I wake up and it’s 2017, and suddenly
I’m all jealous of the cold rocks under other
people’s feet: the kids who got the coolest bullies
to sign their leg casts are now CEOs rewriting
the meaning of cloud script. *Resist, fail, and resist.*
Mrs. Whitebread’s been in the same hallway
for thirty years pretending we didn’t see her
crying behind the history textbook, triggered
by the passage her family erased. So why
not just fold your childhood into a terrycloth
swan? Ignore the blobs of bubble wrap, dirty
erasers—the mountains of cell batteries
in a place whose name you can’t pronounce.



In a place whose name you can’t—
you try to embrace the rage, the *stone insanity*
with all its cracks. Run into the crowded street,
the Bill of Rights written on your ass in eyeliner,
so the enemies you moon will finally understand
the uses of free speech. Click, pause, reset.
Become the anger you envy in other people.
Ignore the paperwork, bills, piles of laundry.

What color is the parachute of an airplane
in flames? Your future career was meant to be
an asteroid or telepathic frog. What happened?
Your new password is FUCKTHAT. Your
username is: theMemoryofSlaveryRacismLoss.



The memory of slavery, racism, loss
is not the same as the feeling of remembering
slavery, racism, loss. What you thought
was the ghost of the 20th century is just
a mustard yellow bikini top tied to
a sunburnt toddler at the public pool
in Park Slope, Evanston or Marin.
So little is covered, so why is it still around?
And who are we to complain? Former children
to the accidents of privilege. Born to families
with two-car garages, glass-door bookcases
and folk-song-packed grade-school assemblies
where white children sing songs about Rosa Parks.
Is this what we thought democracy looked like?



This is what we thought democracy
looked like: reading poetry in the sandbox,
the ocean removing its rubber mask,
revealing tongue-shaped retractable blades
The kids' books we read on our parents'
faux-Chinese sofas included details
about charred bodies and lamps made
from human skin. Dear Reader, fill in
the details of your own tragedy. History,
please explain—how does comfort end

and responsibility begin? Privilege,
when will you flip over, and let us listen
to the B-side, the one where if you play it
backwards, the present moment makes sense?



Backwards, does the present moment makes sense?

At 18, I fell in love with an activist, and we spent our days in the Texas heat, walking around parking lots with clipboards gathering signatures for water regulation. I never completely believed in the reality of the world, felt more myself in the dissolving boundaries of de Kooning's blurry yellow. Even with clipboard in hand, did I have faith in my own relationship to the Earth? I couldn't feel it. I didn't need to. I rented other people's passion.

One evening, I borrowed a housemate's vase so my boyfriend could display the algae from the polluted lake to city council. A fancy vase was all she had, opaque, orange glass with spiderlike designs. I think it was from Pottery Barn.

Of course, he lost the prop in the chaos of the hearing. My housemate was furious.

I was working on a essay on dolls in Rilke and Djuna Barnes that night, far from downtown, so I couldn't tell her where it had ended up.

In the next day's *Statesman*, the story ended with a joke about the abandoned vase. No one could tell the reporter why that vessel was sitting on the floor.



No
one
could
tell
the
reporter
why
that
vessel
was
sitting
on
the
floor!



Why was that vessel sitting on the floor?
Are we the vase or the algae within it?
*The clouds and the towers are not enough
to hide the country we maybe always were
or are. Here in this divided time.* Here
with these conflicting signs. I watch the news
in a small town hotel room on the way
to visit my husband's Trump-voting dad.
On my laptop, a blurry photo of a young
woman holding up a handwritten sign:
THIS IS THE MOMENT HEBREW SCHOOL
PREPARED ME FOR, and I think of
Rukeyser's words, *The gift is torment*,
but also *full life*.