

# *Did You Just See Me?*

*Wall Street et al.*

*Oh America, you bad bitch  
I picked the cotton that made you rich  
-Kendrick Lamar*

*i.*

new York was once new Amsterdam  
and new Amsterdam once had 11 men—then

lifetimes later spawned the empire city  
and the Black men & Red men built Wall Street

and the Black Women & Red Women—  
*oh America...*

and now, white men in cotton ties & gold cufflinks  
sip their coffees on the 3 and 4,

riding through the underground,  
mangling its ghosts.

*ii.*

exit: Lexington Ave., past that mosaic map of  
new Amsterdam before new York

enter: me, the toe of Black heels  
pressing *damn ma-s* into pavement before

*fuck you bitch, you ain't that bad anyway;*  
a white Woman with her tiffany crossbody

leverages the scene, says:  
*i'll get my uncle sam to fuck you up*

and my Black heels make like crossing graves  
i'm headed down Broadway & Nothing.

***and if the hag is not called off the person will lose her mind<sup>1</sup>***  
*[cw: sexual assault]*

*Don't let de hag ride ya!*

-said my ma & her momma & her godmother & her sister & her auntie & her grandma &...

today woke me  
halfway between dream & sleep  
with that phantom weight on my back  
my body: paralyzed & slack

horror sewed shut my mouth  
not a cry or scream or shout  
fear wrung me in her fist, and the  
devil, he told her to tighten her grip

wide-eyed, still, ghost-like  
this feeling now one I've felt twice:

he grabbed me—halfway between  
slow dance & conversational speech—

hands were      where they shouldn't be—  
and anyway, it was too crowded for me to scream,  
too noisy for anyone to see—  
this boy, his hands, my body,      and me—

that tomorrow i stood  
between what i should do & what i would  
    i decided on nothing at all  
and lived—quiet,      and small

would there be other girls? i couldn't know  
guilt sets fire to fear, and so—

the edge of my bed sighed deep when I sat  
and I wonder: if it was their weight  
I felt then on my back.

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<sup>1</sup> "People know when they are being visited by the boo hag because they will experience increasingly unpleasant dreams, and if the hag is not called off the person will lose his mind." – Margaret Washington-Creel, 1988

*I think you know I wanted you to stay.*

After having my first kiss  
during a long pause in  
“Sorry to Bother You”,  
*Sorry, am I doing this right—*  
it’s dark and I am not yet  
used to your face—*Sorry,*  
you say, *let me*  
*get out of your hair,*  
but it’s 11 am now and your  
head is still on the pillow  
and my hair is big and open  
and full of magical hiding  
properties; my hair is a 4.5  
star hotel on a bad day,  
and I’m sure it’s got a  
room for you—*kiss-my-teeth—*  
you can have one for free  
for as long as you need,  
my frizz can grab the remote  
so we can maybe  
watch “Sorry to Bother  
You” for real this time, my coils  
can conjure us up a real dinner  
that isn’t sold in a microwaveable  
bowl, my new growth  
can put on one of those  
corny Spotify make-out playlists,  
you know the one,  
“Lo-fi Love Jams”—or maybe  
my ‘fro and I are just  
delusional and sorry,  
like a white planter in 18<sup>th</sup>  
century Martinique watching  
his plantation desert itself,  
shouting, *Vous les négres nuls*<sup>2</sup>,  
*you’re gonna come crawling back!*  
*This cane is not gonna*  
*plant itself!* I mean,  
I’m a little uncomfortable  
with this analogy because  
I’m not French, I’m Jamaican,  
and, by the way,  
I’ve also never owned

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<sup>2</sup> You sorry niggers!

human beings, and I know  
it's not the same  
but I don't want to own  
you either—Sorry. My point,  
I mean, I think my point was,  
affection isn't a cash crop.  
And maybe you don't  
need me? But maybe I don't  
need you to need me—  
and maybe my hair is  
too big, and too magic,  
but: it won't be the thing  
to make you disappear.

### ***After Allen Iverson Discusses Breaking Michael Jordan's Ankles 20 Years Later<sup>3</sup>:***

And in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, on a date unknown: "When a white woman told a black veteran to get off the sidewalk, he replied that it was a free country and he would not move. For his audacity, a mob took him from town, bound him to a tree with tire chains, and fatally shot him as many as 50 times."

- Arthur E. Barbeau and Floretter Henri, 1974

I have broken so many white ankles.

These white ankles, man,  
I see them: in ashy Birkenstocks  
                    squelchy flip-flops  
                    curtained by cuffed jeans  
                    and crease-ironed slacks.

I still remember my first play.

Me, on my way  
to French, the two of us  
opposite ends of the street,  
us, all headphones,  
and heads and phones, you  
look to me, then  
back down, as if to confirm, yes,  
I'm really not worth seeing—  
I feel my legs brace to step  
onto the grates.

*I can't cross you—  
you are the greatest player  
to ever play—shit, you invented  
the whole game—*

Honestly,  
I don't know why I did it.

Maybe it was that countdown:

That numbered flash,  
pedestrian white, that  
hurry up, let's go, that Rico  
Nasty blasting, that left to right ear  
stereo, that *G-g-goodness*  
*gracious*, me: walking on the right  
you: left, straight ahead, no sign  
of stopping, I guess you're

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<sup>3</sup> An interview with Ambrosia for Heads: <https://ambrosiaforheads.com/2017/03/allen-iverson-discusses-breaking-michael-jordans-ankles-20-years-later-video/>.

thinking I'm thinking I'll  
move out of your way, but I've  
got nothing in my hands to dribble  
but the spectrum  
of my own visibility, so I'm  
here,

    now I'm  
there,  
                    here,  
                    there,

no, I'm (not going)  
nowhere.

And I don't know much about basketball  
    but goddamn if I wasn't  
the Allen Iverson of the sidewalk.

I'm still getting used  
to snatching surprise  
from those blue eyes.  
I still have to bite the inside  
of my lip to cage  
the automatic apology,  
and cross until my  
shell-toes crease—  
                    *swish*  
this is a petit marronage.

I am getting better at this game.

Off the concrete we  
meet up for a hypothetical coffee:  
I say I learned all I got  
from you. And you seeing me  
doesn't make me feel much better,  
your teeth whiter than those ankles  
when you smile, say,

*"Well, I couldn't have been too much  
of a hero to you, if you  
crossed me like that."*

Fuck this coffee, man.

I have broken so many white ankles.

Heading down the street  
my instinct  
tells me to make room,  
the game  
tells me to play quarter,  
and I—

I can't think  
that one day they'll know to  
see my body  
against the pavement, or  
adapt to its presence at all,  
still, now I stand  
here,  
and wait:

## THE GOLDEN DOOR

LADY LIBERTY, statue, 100s, green, wing-woman to SPEAKER  
SPEAKER, woman, almost-20s, Black  
YOU, unknown to reader, friend to SPEAKER

SHE SAYS as one door closes another one opens but,  
I can't even remember to close my own door behind me, that's why:  
last time someone rode in on the out-swing and left fingerprints all over my mirrors—

I'VE WALKED through a lot of doors  
walked and crawled and ran and sometimes  
peeked inside— then shut back again,

SO,

SHE DRAGS me, with silent lips, kicking and screaming, to your step  
I think I'm a quivering fish, and insist on nosediving back into the saltwater  
even though (I know) I cannot swim

I'VE WALKED past your door once a few times again  
I think I'm screwing the metaphor but, I am a pretty shitty key, a skeleton  
so, I don't even bother to try the Master-Lock

BUT,

SHE TELLS me, “your world isn't directed by Jordan Peele”,  
“life isn't a horror film”, and  
“you should probably bring up those trust issues with your therapist,”

I'M STILL pacing 'round your porch with some ackee 'n saltfish in a Tupperware  
hoping you might catch the scent from the other side of the wood  
or peep my silhouette through the sidelight

AND,

SHE CAN'T know what it's like to wish you were ginger ale  
to spill, and leak underneath this sill and onto the hardwood floor to be  
a puddle sticky, and waiting for someone's rainboots to splash in—

YOU JUST rattled the chain! I'm statue-still, out of my mind, I'm carbonated ice!  
(maybe I should stop writing poems about you right outside your door)  
did you just see me?! (yes...) your laugh is a Basquiat crown.



## A Bunch of Things That People Use

I think that I'm a quivering fish in  
a bubbling pool of ginger ale, where floats  
a stuffed doll from the crooked arm

of a 2-year-old, and soaks  
a fitted sheet rolled up in a  
linen closet, with an empty

can of condensed milk, and a dry  
tube of expired mascara.  
I think that I am unlikeable.

But really, I just listed a bunch of things  
that people use—except the fish  
in the pool of ginger ale—I *was the one*

*who used that*, in a poem—anyway, I think  
people do like these things, but when they're  
done using them, where do they go?

No, really: the stuffed doll sprawled  
underneath the 2-year-old's bed by  
the time they turn 9; the fitted sheet

quite literally slept on, sometimes  
residually steeped in bodily fluids  
from the night before,

sweat, semen, or tears, or some  
other gross combination; the empty can  
of condensed milk set out to be

recycled after a pot of rice and peas  
has cooked and cooled—but, hang on,  
I don't really know where the recycling

bin goes—and I probably haven't  
peeled off the paper wrapper—*do we*  
*even need to do that?*—I mean, I feel like

I really should know more about recycling,  
but, truthfully all I remember is the 3Rs  
from elementary school: reduce,

reuse, recycle—that dried up tube of

expired mascara could probably be recycled too, right? But not reused? Plus,

we're not supposed to share mascara wands with each other, something about bacteria and eyelashes and

not being careful—I wish I'd be more careful.

And if I am writing about these things that

people use, as if they're supposed to be a metaphor for me being used—well, *should I just end this here, then?*

I'd like to think that I am really writing about these things that people use because I think that

they're important and not because I want to use them to articulate my own shitty feelings about myself and

how I am treated by people—*that would probably be called degrading*—to liken myself to a balled up fitted sheet,

or a dirty pool of soda on the ground. But, this could all be objective. I'm sure the stuffed doll choking on dust and

the mascara tube and the milk can are functioning just fine without me writing about them. In fact, they're

probably doing much better than I— I do feel sorry, for all the things I've used as metaphors without really thinking.

The next time I eat fish, I won't stop to wonder whether the pulp of its meat between my teeth feels

like the soft of my body underneath all of those hands—and just swallow.

*Planetology // Joyce*

I am poking at the flesh your stomach gathers – and the wrinkles that carry your breasts.  
And I cannot know if I am making you self-conscious.

I am only 5.  
And when I have enough of touching,  
I peer at you through a pair of binoculars –  
then a telescope – I want to know  
more about this planet – this body  
that is always following me around (and  
sometimes other people),  
picking me up, and holding me when I cry.

Now I look in the mirror, and hide  
the parts of my body meant to mountain and  
hollow.

I look at the picture of you at your wedding, you,  
a Kingston barbie doll – the big white veil neon  
against your skin, you  
revolving down the aisle with a father nowhere but  
at the end  
of your name – this is a transplant of ownership.  
And in that moment, you had become the Moon.

I am tracing the blue-green magma in your veins  
and my finger fumbles at where your arm craters.  
I do not understand  
why the Moon would need to be afraid of smallpox.

You died before I could tell you about my first kiss.

I'm not sure if I would have told you anyway –  
but it would have been nice to know that I could  
have. The closest I have  
to knowing what you would have said is that time  
we laid on the couch and watched Titanic  
when I was 11.

That scene where Rose and Jack get in the old car  
and fog up its windows  
is my first-time watching sex in a movie with an adult watching with me  
who doesn't cover my eyes with their hand.

As soon as they start kissing, I look over to you, already preparing my counterdemonstration – to roll my eyes beneath your palm and complain that *kids my age I know are already doing it so what is making me miss parts of the movie going to do?*

But, you don't.

You are only smiling – you aren't even looking at me –

I'd like to think that if you had lived a few more years and I had told you that I'd had my first kiss

and that I look in the mirror at the accretion of my body, poke at the flesh my stomach gathers, hold my breath and rip out the hair around my bellybutton with strips of sticky plastic, pretend that the hands holding my breasts higher are really the air, and breathe and revel as my flesh condenses, and glower as it expands,

you would've told me:

that I am beautiful and metamorphic, and life should be a constant flaring of romantic energy,

and that I don't have to give that up when I get married, and that I never did make you self-conscious because I was just a little kid fascinated with the sight and texture of a body that wasn't my own.

And that, the next time I look in a mirror, I should think of that kid, and how she would see an entire world reflected in it.

Just fascinating.