

## *The Ant of the Self*



O P P O R T U N I T I E S , ” my father says after I bail him out of jail. He’s banging words into the dash as if trying to get them through my thick skull, “You’ve got to invest your money if you want opportunities.” It’s October of ’95, and we’re driving around Louisville, Kentucky, in my mother’s car. Who knows why he came down here, forty miles south of where he lives, but I don’t ask questions that are sure to have too many answers. I just try to get my father, Ray Bivens Jr., back across the river to his place in Indiana. Once we’re on the Watterson Expressway, it seems as if we’re about to crash into the horizon. The sunset has ignited the bellies of clouds; the mirrored windows of downtown buildings distort the flame-colored city into a funhouse. I can already see that it’ll be one of those days when the sunset is extra-brilliant, though without staying power.

My father just got a DUI—again—though that didn't stop him from asking for the keys. When I didn't give them up, he sighed and shook his head as though I withheld keys from him daily. "C'mon, Spurge," he'd said. "The pigs aren't even looking."

He's the only person I know who still calls cops "pigs," a holdover from what he refers to as his Black Panther days, when "the brothers" raked their globes of hair with black-fisted Afro picks, then left them stuck there like javelins. When, as he tells it, he and Huey P. Newton would meet in basements and wear leather jackets and stick it to whitey. Having given me investment advice, he now watches the world outside the Honda a little too jubilantly. I take the curve around the city, past the backsides of chain restaurants and malls, office parks and the shitty Louisville zoo.

"That's your future," he says winding down from his rant. "Sound investments."

"Maybe you should ask the pigs for your bail money back," I say. "We could invest that."

He doesn't respond; by now he's too busy checking out my mom's new car. Ray Bivens Jr. doesn't own a car. The one he just got his DUI in was borrowed, he'd told me, from a friend.

Now he takes out the Honda's cigarette lighter from its round home, looking into the unlit burner as though staring into the future. He puts the lighter back as if he'd thought about pocketing it but has decided against it. He drums a little syncopation on the dash, then, bored, starts adjusting his seat as though he's on the Concorde. He wants to say something

about the car, wants to ask how much it costs and how the hell Mama could afford it, but he doesn't. Instead, out of the blue, voice almost pure, he says, "Is that my old dress jacket? I loved that thing."

"It's not yours. Mama bought it. I needed a blazer for debate." The words come out chilly, but I don't say anything else to warm them up. And I feel a twinge of childishness mentioning my mother, like she's beside me, worrying the jacket hem, smoothing down the sleeves. I make myself feel better by recalling that when I went to post bail, the woman behind the bulletproof glass asked if I was a reporter.

"You keep getting money from debate, we could invest."

When most people talk about investing, they mean stocks or bonds or mutual funds. What my father means is his friend Splo's cockfighting arena, or some dude who goes door to door selling exercise equipment that does all the exercise for you. He'd invested in a woman who tried selling African cichlids to pet shops, but all she'd done was dye ordinary goldfish so that they looked tropical. "Didn't you just win some cash?" he asks. "From debate?"

"Bail," I say. "I used it to pay your bail."

He's quiet for a while. I wait for him to stumble out a thanks. I wait for him to promise to pay me back with money he knows he'll never have. Finally he sighs and says, "Most investors buy low and sell high. Know why they do that?" With my father there are not only trick questions, but trick answers. Before I can respond, I hear his voice, loud and naked. "I *axed* you, 'Do you know why they do that?' " He's

shaking my arm as if trying to wake me. “You *answer me* when I ask you something.”

I twist my arm from his grasp to show I’m not afraid. We swerve out of our lane. Cars behind us swerve as well, then zoom around us and pull ahead as if we are a rock in a stream.

“Do you know who this *is*?” he says. “Do you know who you’re *talking to*?”

I haven’t been talking to anyone, but I keep this to myself.

“I’ll tell you who you’re talking to—Ray Bivens Junior!”

He used to be this way with Mama. Never hitting, but always grabbing, groping, his halitosis forever in her face. After the divorce he insisted on partial custody. At first all I had to do was take the bus across town. Then, when he couldn’t afford an apartment in the city, I had to take the Greyhound into backwoods Indiana. I’d spend Saturday and Sunday so bored I’d work ahead in textbooks, assign myself homework, whatever there was to do while waiting for Ray Bivens Jr. to fart himself awake and take me back to the bus station.

That was how debate started. Every year there was a different topic, and when they made the announcement last year, it was like an Army recruitment campaign, warning students that they’d be expected to dedicate even their weekends to the cause. I rejoiced, thinking that I would never have to visit Ray Bivens Jr. again. And I was good at debate. My brain naturally frowned at illogic. But I don’t think for a minute that my teachers liked me because of my logical mind; they liked me because I was quiet and small, and not rowdy like they

expected black guys to be. Sometimes, though, the teachers slipped. Once, my history teacher, Mrs. Ampersand, said, "You stay away from those drugs, Spurgeon, and you'll go far." That was the kind of thing that could stick in my stomach for days, weeks. I could always think of things to say about a debate topic like U.S.–China diplomatic relations, or deliver a damning rebuttal on prison overcrowding, but it was different with someone like Mrs. Ampersand—all debate logic fell away, and in my head I'd call her a bitch, tell her that the strongest stuff in my mother's house was a bottle of Nyquil.

WE'VE CROSSED the bridge into Indiana but my father is still going. "THAT'S RIGHT! YOU'RE TALKING TO RAY BIVENS *JUNIOR*! AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!"

Outside, autumn is over, and yet it's not quite winter. Indiana farmlands speed past in black and white. Beautiful. Until you remember that the world is supposed to be in color.

LATER, calm again, he says, "Imagine a stock. Let's say the stock is the one I was telling you about, Scudder MidCap. The stock is at fifty bucks. If it's a winner, it doesn't stay at fifty bucks for long. It goes to a hundred let's say, or two hundred. But first it's gotta get to fifty-one, fifty-two, and so on. So a stock *increasing* in price is a good sign. That's when you buy."

I make sure to tell him thanks for telling me this.

"Doesn't matter what you invest in, either," Ray Bivens Jr.



says. "That's the beauty. Don't gotta even think about it. That's something you won't hear from an accountant."

"You mean stockbroker. A stockbroker advises about stocks. Not an accountant."

His face turns bitter, as though he's about to slap me, but then he thinks the better of it and says, "So you know who to go to when you get some extra cash."

"Look. I just told you I don't have any money." I try to concentrate on looking for gas station signs in the dark.

"You will, Spurgeon," he says. He puts an arm around me like a prom date, and I can smell his odor from the jail. I don't have to see his face to know exactly how it looks right now. Urgently earnest, a little too sincere. Like a man explaining to his wife why he's late coming home. "I'll pay back every penny. I mean that."

"I believe you," I say, prying his arm from where it rests on my neck.

"You believe me," he says, "but do you believe *in* me?" He puts his arm back where it was, like he's some suburban dad, a Little League coach congratulating his charge.

"I believe in you."

His arm falls away of its own accord as he settles deeper into his car seat with this knowledge, the leather sighing and complaining under him. I take the exit that promises a Citgo, park at a gas pump. You don't usually see insects in this weather, but the garbage can between the diesel and unleaded swarms with flies. The fluorescent lights stutter off and on as I begin pumping gas. I can hear what my mother would say, that my

father is a cross I have to bear, that the Good Book says, "A child shall lead them," and all that crap, which basically boils down to "He's *your* father. Your blood, not mine." Ray Bivens Jr. leans against the car and stretches. Then he cleans the windshield with a squeegee. After that he sniffs and looks around as though he's checking out the scenery. When I'm finished filling the tank he says, "Hey, Spurgeon. How about breaking off a few bills? You know they frisked me clean in lockdown."

I give him a twenty and wait in the car. He's in the Citgo for what seems like half an hour. He's in there so long I get out and wipe off the squeegee streaks he left on the windshield. Finally, he comes back with a six-pack of Schlitz and a family-sized bag of Funyuns. "Listen," he says, handing me a beer, "we have to make a quick stop to Jasper."

Jasper, Indiana, is where his ex-girlfriend Lupita lives.

"I knew it," I say, and hand back the unopened beer before starting the car. "You're in trouble."

He opens the can, looking as though both the Schlitz and I have disappointed him. One of the fluorescent lights overhead blinks out. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Why do we have to go to Jasper all of a sudden?"

"If you *shut your mouth* and go to Jasper you'll find out."

"This is mama's car," I remind him. "She wants it back."

"Why you gotta act like everything I ask you to do is gonna kill you? You my *son*. I tell you to do something, you obey."

I *do* obey, and hate myself for it, turning the car out to the service road. I try to imagine the worst that can await him in

Seymour, figure out what he's running from: men who'll tie him up at gunpoint and demand the twenty dollars that he owes them, policemen waiting at his door, but those thoughts give way to the only thing we'll find in Jasper: Lupita, watching TV, painting her toenails. I've been to Lupita's place twice, but that's more than enough. It's full of birds. Huge blue-and-gold macaws. Yellow-naped Amazons. Rainbow lorikeets who squirt their putrid frugiverous shit on you. Tons of birds, and not in cages either. I don't think my father liked them perching on his shoulders any more than I did, but the birds could land anywhere on Lupita and she'd wear them like jewelry.

Then it occurs to me that this is the only reason he cleaned the windshield. "You're going to make me drive you and Lupita around so the two of you can get drunk. I knew it."

"If you don't shut up—"

I don't speak to him, he doesn't speak to me. We pass a billboard that reads, WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, MAKE LEMONADE. I try to think of what my mother will say. She knows I had to get him out of jail, that's why she let me borrow the car. But she wasn't about to pay bail, and she definitely won't want me coming home at midnight, her car smelling of cigarettes and Mad Dog.

My father sees me fuming and says, "I told you I was going to get your money back, right? Well, there's going to be a march, tomorrow. A million people in Washington, D.C. One. Million. People."

"No," I say. "Dear God, no."

"Exactly," he says.



Even though the windows are closed, I feel a breeze pass through me. At one point, I wanted to go to the March; I imagined it would be as historic as King's march on Washington, as historic as the dismantling of the Wall. The men's choir of my mother's church was going, but I didn't want to be trapped on a bus with a bunch of men singing hymns, feeling sorry for me being born with Ray Bivens Jr. for a father. And what's more, I have a debate tournament. I imagine Sarah Vogedes, my debate partner, prepping for our debate on U.S. foreign policy toward China, checking her watch. She'd have to use our second stringers, or perhaps even Derron Ellersby, a basketball player so certain he'd make the NBA that he'd joined the speech and debate team "to sound smooth for all those postgame interviews." This was the same Derron Ellersby who ended his rebuttals by pointing at me, saying, "Little Man over here's going to break it down for ya," or who'd single me out in the cafeteria, telling his friends, "Little Man's got skills, yo! Break off some a your skills!" as if expecting me to carry on a debate with my tuna casserole.

I'd never missed a day of school in my life, and my mother had the framed perfect-attendance certificates to prove it, but the thought of Sarah Vogedes's composed face growing rumpled as Derron agreed with our opponent makes me feel something like bliss; I imagine Derron, index cards scattered in front of him, looking as confused as if he'd been faked out before a lay-up, saying, "Yo! Sarah V! Where's Little Man? Where he at!"

For once I'm glad Ray Bivens Jr. is scheming so hard he

doesn't see me smiling. If he could—if he sensed in *any* way that I might be willing—he'd find a way to call the whole thing off.

"That's in Washington, D.C.," I remind him, "nearly seven hundred miles away."

"I know. But first we're going to Jasper," he says. "To get the birds."

TECHNICALLY, the birds are my father's, not Lupita's. He bought them when he was convinced that the animals were an Investment. He tried selling them door to door. When that didn't work and he couldn't afford to keep them, Lupita volunteered to take care of them. Lupita knew about birds, she'd said, because she'd once owned a rooster when she was five back in Guatemala.

It is completely dark and the road is revealing its secrets one at a time. I ask, once more, what he plans on doing with these birds.

He tells me he plans on selling them.

"But you couldn't sell them the first time."

"I didn't have a million potential buyers the first time."

For a brief moment I'd wanted to go to the March, perhaps even see if Ray Bivens Jr. got something out of it, but no longer. I tell him that I can take him to Jasper, Indiana. I can take him home, even, which was what I was supposed to do in the first place, but that I absolutely cannot, under any circumstances, cut school and miss my debate tournament to drive him to D.C.

"Don't you want your money back?" he says. "One macaw alone will pay back that bail money three times over."

"What are a million black men going to do with a bunch of birds? Even if you could sell them, how're you going to get them there?"

"*Would you just drive?*" he says, then sucks his teeth, making a noise that might as well be a curse. He stretches out in his seat, then starts up, explaining things to me as if I'd had a particularly stupefying bout of amnesia: "You're gonna have Afrocentric folks there. Afrocentrics and Africans, *tons* of Africans. And what do Africans miss most? That's right. The Motherland. And what does the Mother Africa have tons of? Monkeys, lions, and guess what else? *Birds*. Not no street pigeons, but real birds, like the kind I'm selling. Macaws and African grays. Lorikeets and yellow napes and shit." He might as well have added, *Take that*.

He's so stupid, he's brilliant; so outside of the realm of any rationality that reason stammers and stutters when facing him. I say nothing, nothing at all, just continue on, thinking quickly, but driving slowly. He hits the dash like he's knocking on a door to make me speed up.

Off the interstate, the road turns so narrow and insignificant it could peter out into someone's driveway. The occasional crop of stores along the roadside look closed. We pass through Paoli Peaks and Hoosier National Forest before finally arriving in Jasper.

We pull into Lupita's driveway. In the dark, her lawn ornaments resemble gravestones. Motion-detector floodlights

buzz on as my father walks up to the house. Lupita stands on her porch, wielding a shotgun. She's wearing satiny pajamas that show her nipples. Pink curlers droop from her hair like blossoms.

"What do *joo* want?" Her eyes narrow in on him. She slits her eyes even more to see who's in the car with him, straightening herself up a little bit, but when she sees that it's just me, just nerdy ol' Spurgeon, she drops all signs of primping.

I stay in the car. She and my father disappear into the house while I watch the pinwheel lawn daisies spin in the dark. The yelling from inside the house is mostly Lupita: "I am tired of your blag ass! Enough eez enough!" Then it stops. They've argued their way to the bedroom, where the door slams shut and all is quiet.

But the calm doesn't hold. Lupita breaks out with some beautiful, deadly Spanish threats, and the screen door bangs open. My father comes out clutching cages, each crammed two apiece with birds. I can hear birdseed and little gravelly rocks from the cages spill all over the car interior when he puts them on the backseat. The whole time he doesn't say a word. Looks straight ahead.

He makes another trip into the house, but Lupita doesn't go in with him. He comes back with another cageful of birds.

Lupita follows him for a bit, but she stops halfway from the car. She stands there in her ensemble of sexy pajamas and pink sponge curlers and shotgun.

"Don't get out," Ray Bivens Jr. says to me. "We're going to drive off. Slowly."



I do as my father says and back out of the driveway.

Lupita yells after us, "Joo are never thinking about maybe what Lupita feels!" For a moment I think she's going to come after us, but all she does is plop down on her porch step, holding her head in her hands.

ONCE THEY get used to the rhythm of the road, the birds swap crude, disjointed conversations with one another. The blue-and-gold macaw sings "Love Me Do," but recent immigrant that it is, it gets the inflections all wrong. The lorikeet says, repeatedly, "Where the dickens is my pocket watch?" then does what passes for a man's lewd laugh. If there's a lull, one will say, "*Arriba, 'riba, 'riba!*" and get them all going again.

"Bird crap doesn't have an odor," my father says. "That's the paradox of birds."

"She loved those birds," I say. "And you just took them away."

"They learn best when stressed out," he says. "Why do you think they say '*Arriba!*' all the time? They get it from the Mexicans who're all in a rush to get them exported."

He almost knocks me off kilter with that one, but I stick to the point. "Don't try to make excuses. You hurt her. And what about the birds? You didn't think to get food, did you?"

"You are a complete pussy, you know that?"

He'd only used that word once before, when I was twelve and refused to fight another boy, and said if I didn't whup that boy the next day that he'd whup me.



"You *need* to go to this March. When you go, check in at the pussy booth and tell 'em you want to exchange yours for a johnson."

I check the rearview mirror, then cross all lanes of I-65 North until I'm on the shoulder. It's the kind of boldness he'd always wanted me to show to everyone else but him.

"You better have a good reason for stopping," he says.

"Get out," I say, as soon as I stop the car. The birds also stop their chatter, and when I turn around they're looking from me to him as though they've placed bets on who will go down in flames.

Ray Bivens Jr. clamps his hand to his forehead in mock dumbfoundedness. "You ain't heard that before? Don't *tell me* nobody never called you no pussy?"

"Get out, *sir*," I say.

"Yeah. I'll *get out* all right." He opens the passenger-side door just as a semi whooshes by, and even I can feel it. He slams the door and traps the cold air with me.

IT'S LATE: past midnight. I stop at the next exit to call my mother. She says if I don't get my tail back in her house tonight, she'll skin me alive. I tell her I love her too. She likes to pretend that I'm the man of the house, and says as much when she asks me if I've locked all the doors at night, or tells me to drive her to church so she can show off what a good son she has. But it's times like this when it's clear that the only man of the house is Jesus.

I buy a Ho Ho at the gas station and as I separate the cake

part from the creamy insides with my teeth, I think about how Derron would have shrugged Ray Bivens Jr.'s schemes away with a good-hearted hunch of the shoulders. "Pops is crazy," he'd say to the mike in an NBA postgame interview, then put his gently clenched fist over his heart like someone accepting an award, "but I love the guy."

I get back in the car and the birds squawk and complain at having been left alone. I return to the last exit before heading north again, going slow in the right-hand lane. When I see my father, I pull off to the shoulder, pop open the electronic locks. He acts as though he knew I would come back for him all along. We don't talk for nearly an hour, but everything is completely clear: if I am not a pussy, I will cut school, forget about debate, and go to D.C.

JUST OUTSIDE Clarksburg, West Virginia, I pull over. I can't make it to the exit. Twice I almost nodded off. When I slump onto the steering wheel my father gets out and rouses me enough for us to exchange places, even though he's not supposed to be driving.

I don't know how long I've been asleep, but I wake to the umbrella cockatoo chanting, "Sexy, sexy!" My eyes adjust to the dim light, first making out the electric glow of the dash panels, and then the scenery beyond the cool of the windows. We are on a small hilly road. It is so dark and so full of conifers I feel like we're traveling through velvet.

Ray Bivens Jr., I can tell, has been waiting for me to wake.

At first I think he wants me to take over the wheel, but then I realize he wants company. He raps on the car window and says, "In ancient Mesopotamia it was hot. There was no glass. What they did have was the wheel—"

The yellow-naped Amazon breaks into the Oscar Mayer wiener jingle before I can ask my father what the hell he's talking about.

"Shut up!" he yells, and at first I sit up, startled, thinking that he's yelling at me. The bird says "Rawrk!" and starts the jingle over, from the beginning.

He sits through the jingle, and as a reward, there is a peculiar silence that comes after someone speaks. For once in his life, he has had to use patience. "Here's why windows are called windows," he says with strained calmness, but the lori-keet interrupts: "Advil works," the bird says, "better than Tylenol."

My father blindly gropes the backseat for a cage, seizes one, and slams it against another cage. All the birds revolt, screeching and shuffling feathers, sounding like bricks hitting a chain-link fence. One of them says, almost angrily, "And here's to *you*, Mrs. Robinson!"

But Ray Bivens Jr. raises his voice over the din. "The Mesopotamians cut out circles, or O's, in their homes to mimic the shape of the wheel, but also to let in the wind," he yells. "And there you have it. Your modern-day window. Get it? Wind-o."

I look to see if he is taking himself seriously. He used to say shit like this when I was little. I could never tell whether he was kidding me or himself. "You're trying to tell me that the

Mesopotamians spoke English? And that they created little O's in their homes to let in the wind?"

"All right. Don't believe me, then."

WE MAKE it into Arlington at seven in the morning, park the car at a garage, and take the Metro into D.C. with the morning commuters. White men with their briefcases and mushroom-colored trenchcoats. White women with fleet haircuts, their chic lipstick darker than blood. The occasional Asian, Hispanic—wearing the same costume but somehow looking nervous about it. More than anything though, we see black men—everywhere—groups of black men wearing identical T-shirts with the names of churches and youth groups emblazoned on them. Men in big, loose kente-cloth robes; men in full-on suits with the traditional Nation of Islam bow tie.

My father hands me two cages. He hefts two. While the morning commuters eye us, he breaks down the bird prices loudly, as though we're the only people in the world.

When we get to the Mall, all you can hear from where we stand are African drums, gospel music blaring from the loudspeakers, and someone playing rap with bass so heavy it hurts your heart. Everything has an early-morning smell to it, cold and wet with dew, but already thousands have marked their territory with portable chairs and signs. Voter registration booths are everywhere; vendors balance basketfuls of T-shirts on their heads; D.C. kids nudge us, trying to sell us water for a dollar a cup. The Washington Monument stands in front of us



like a big granite pencil, miles away, it seems, and everywhere, everywhere, men shake hands, laugh like they haven't seen one another in years. They make pitches, exchange business cards, and congratulate one another for just getting here. But most of all they speak in passwords: *Keep Strong, Stay Black, Love Your Black Nation*.

The birds are so unnaturally quiet I can't tell if they don't mind being jostled about amid the legs of a million strangers or if they're dying. As we work our way through the masses, Ray Bivens Jr. keeps looking off into the distance in perpetual search for the perfect customer. I try to follow my father, but it's hard to plow through the crowd holding the cages.

"Brother," one man says, shaking his head at me, "I don't know if them birds males or not, but they *sho ain't* black!"

I nod in my father's direction and say, "Looks like you've got a customer."

He shoots me an annoyed look. "Let's split up," he says. "We'll cover more area if we're spread out."

"O.K., chief," I say. But I pretty much stay where I've been.

AFTER A few speeches from Christian ministers, a stiff-looking bow-tied man gives an introduction for Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. I'm so far back that I have to look at the large-screen TVs, but as Farrakhan takes to the stage, the Fruit of Islam phalanx behind him applauds so violently that their clapping resembles some sort of martial art.

I make my way toward the edge of the crowd to get some

air. Though I'm already as far from the main stage as one can be, it still takes me a good half hour to push through the crowd of men, most of them patting me on the back like uncles at a family reunion. Although I've seen a sprinkling of women at the march, some black women cheer as they stand on the other side of Independence Avenue, but others wave placards reading "Let Us In!" or "Remember Those You Left Home." Quite a few whites also stop to look as if to see what this thing is all about, and their hard, nervous hard smiles fit into two categories: the "Don't mug me!" smile, or the "Gee, aren't black folks something!" smile. It occurs to me that I can stay here on the sidelines for the entire march. A hush falls over the crowd, then they erupt into whistles and cheering and catcalls, and though I can barely see the large convention screen anymore, people begin chanting, "Jesse! Jesse!"

I look at the screen and see him clasping hands with Farakhan, but he doesn't do much more than that. If anything, I'd like the chance to hear him speak in person, purely for speech and debate purposes, but it seems as though the day will be a long one, with major speakers bookended by lesser-known ones.

Now a preacher from a small town takes to the platform. "Brothers, we have to work it out with each other! How are we going to go back to our wives, our babies' mothers, and tell them that we love *them* if we can't tell our own brothers that we love them?"

At first it sounds like what everyone else has been saying,

breaking a cardinal rule of public speaking: One should reiterate, not regurgitate. He reads from a letter written in 1712 by William Lynch, a white slave owner from Virginia. It occurs to me that Farrakhan read from this same letter, the content of which got lost in his nearly three-hour speech. The letter explains how to control slaves by pitting dark ones against light ones, big plantation slaves against small plantation slaves, female slaves against male ones. The preacher ends by telling everyone that freedom is attained only when the ant of the self—that small, blind, crumb-seeking part of ourselves—casts off slavery and its legacy, becoming a huge brave ox.

“Well, well, well!” An elbow nudges me. “Wasn’t that powerful, brother?” A man wearing a fez extends his hand for me to shake.

I shake his hand, but he doesn’t let go, as if he’s waiting for me to agree with him.

“Powerful!” the fezzed man shouts above the applause.

“Yes,” I say, and turn away from him.

But I can feel him looking at me, staring through me so hard that I’m forced to turn toward him again. “Powerful,” I say. “Indeed.”

I must not be convincing enough because the guy looks at me pleadingly and says, “*Feel* this! The *power* here! This is *powerful*!”

I look around for someone to save me from this man, but everyone is cheering and clapping for the next speaker. I decide that my only recourse is to shut the man up with the

truth. Maybe then he'll leave me alone. "Don't get me wrong. I love my Black Nation," I say, adding the mandatory chest thump, "but I'm just here because my father made me come."

The fezzed man screws up his face in the sunlight, features bunched in confusion. He puts his hand to his ear like he's hard of hearing.

"My father!" I yell. "My father made me come!"

People twenty deep turn around to shoot me annoyed looks. One man looks like he wants to beat the crap out me, but then looks apologetic. I in turn duck my head in apology and murmur, "Sorry."

"*Made* you come? *Made* you? This, my brother," he nearly yells, "is a day of atonement! You got to cut your father a little slack for caring for your sorry self!"

Everyone's eyes are on me again, but I'll be damned if this man who doesn't even *know me* sides with Ray Bivens Jr. "I thought the whole point of all this was to take responsibility. Put an end to asking for slack. If you knew my father you'd know that his whole damn life is as slack as a pantsuit from JCPenney!"

"Hold up, hold up, hold up," a voice says. The voice comes from a man with a bullet-smooth head, the man who earlier looked as if he wanted to stomp my face into the ground. Now that he's turned toward me, the pistils and stamens of his monstrous Hawaiian flower-print shirt seem to stare at me, and suddenly his face is so close I can smell the mint of his breath.

"You need to learn that *responsibility* is a two-way street!"



The Hawaiian-shirt guy points to my chest. “*You* have to take responsibility and reach out to *him*.”

Now many, many people have turned to look at us, and though I try not to look guilty, people know the Hawaiian-shirted guy is talking to *somebody*, somebody who caused a disturbance. The Phalanx of Islam is on its way, moving in the form of crisp, gray-suited men wearing stern looks and prison muscles. The Hawaiian-shirted guy sees them and waves me away with his hand as though I’m not worth his time. Then, suddenly—despite the Fruit of Islam weaving through the crowd toward us—he decides to have another go at it. “Let me ask you a question, my brother. Why are you here? You don’t seem to *want* to atone—not with your pops, not with anybody.”

Those around me have formed a sideshow of which I seem to be the villain, and they look at me expectantly. The Hawaiian-shirted man folds his arms across his chest and jerks his chin up, daring me to answer him.

“Atoning for one’s wrongs is different from apologizing,” I begin. “One involves words, the other, actions.” I don’t want to dignify all this attention with a further response; don’t want the four men who are now brisk-walking straight toward me to hurt me; don’t want to say anything now that the air around me is silent, listening, now that the sun in my eyes is so hot I feel like crying. I continue, delivering a hurried, jibbering philippic on the nuances between atonement and apology, repentance and remorse. What I’m saying is right and true. Good and important. But I can feel myself getting flustered, can feel the debate judge mouthing *Time’s up*, see the disbelief

and disappointment in the men's faces, nearly twenty in all, and more turn around to see what the disturbance is about. An Oxford-shirted security guard grabs me by the arm.

"What," he says, "seems to be the problem, son?"

"Look," I say finally to him and anyone else who'll listen, "I'm not here to atone. I'm here to sell birds."

I finally spot my father, the cages balanced on his shoulders, when the marchless march is pretty much finished. The sky is moving toward dusk, and though there are still speakers on the podium, you'd stick around to listen only if they were your relatives or something. My father and I get pushed along with other people trying to leave.

I don't bother telling him how security clamped me on the shoulder and sat me down on the curb like a five-year-old and gave me a talking-to, reminding me of the point of the March. I don't tell him how they fed me warm flatbread and hard honey in a hot plastic tent that served as some sort of headquarters, or how they gave me three bean pies, some pamphlets, and a Koran. I know he can tell how pissed off I am. Anyone can.

And he can see I haven't sold any birds, and I see he hasn't either. I wonder if word got around to his section about how security took me out of the crowd for "safety purposes," but apparently he doesn't give a shit. Ray Bivens Jr. grabs a passing man by the arm. The man's T-shirt reads: "Volunteer—Washington D.C."

"Where's a good bar?" my father asks. "That's cheap?"

The man raises his eyebrows and says, "Brotherman, we're

trying to keep away from all that poison. At least for one day.” His voice is smooth and kind, that of a guy from the streets who became a counselor, determined to give back to the community. He smiles. “You think you can make it for one day without the sauce, my brother?”

THE BAR we end up in is called The Haven, and it’s nowhere near where we left the car. Before we left the March, I asked Ray Bivens Jr. how he felt knowing that he’d come nearly seven hundred miles and hadn’t sold a single bird. He didn’t speak to me on the Metro ride to the bar, not even when the birds started embarrassing us on the subway.

The bartender looks at the birds and shakes his head as if his patrons never cease to amuse him.

Even though he’s sitting in the place he loves most, Ray Bivens Jr. still seems mad at me. So do the birds. None of them are speaking, just making noises in their throats as though they’re plotting something. I ask the bartender if the birds are safe outside; if someone will steal them.

“Not if it’s something that needs feeding,” the bartender says.

“Speaking of feeding,” my father says, “I’m going to get some Funyuns. Want any?” He says this more to the bartender than to me, but I shake my head though all I’ve eaten are the bean pies and honey. The bartender spray-guns a 7 Up in a glass for me without my even asking, then resumes conversation with the trio of men at the end of the counter. One man has a goiter. One has processed waves that look like cake frost-

ing. While those two seem to be smiling and arguing at the same time, the third man says nothing, smoking his cigarette as though it's part of his search for enlightenment.

The smoker ashes his cigarette with a pert tap. "You been at the March, youngblood?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

They all laugh, but no one tells me why.

The bartender towels down some beer glasses. "Anybody here go?" When nobody says anything, he says to me, with a knowing wink, "These some *shiftless* niggers up in here!"

There's general grumbling, and to make them feel less bad about missing the March I say, "I didn't get all pumped up by the speeches, but in a way I was glad I was there. I think I felt more relieved than anything else."

"Relieved? What about?" the smoker asks, his voice wise and deep, even though he's just asking a question.

I try to think. "I don't know. I'm the only black kid in my class. Like a fucking mascot or something," I say, surprised that I said the f-word out loud, but shaking my head as though I said words like that every day. "I just get tired of it. You skip it for a day and it feels like a vacation. That's why I was glad."

There's a round of nodding. Not sympathy, just acknowledgment.

"Man," the guy with the goiter says, "I'm happy to hear that. You got the *luxury* of feeling tired. Back in the day, before you were born, couldn't that type of shit *happen*."

He seems to be saying less than he means, and looks at me,



his eyes piercing, his goiter looking like he's swallowed a lightbulb. "We the ones *fought* for you to be in school with the white folks." He looks behind him, as if checking if any white people are around, though that's about as likely as Ray Bivens Jr. going sober for good. He lowers his voice so that he almost sounds kind. "We sent you to go spy on them. See how the hell those white folks make all that money! Now you talking 'bout a *vacation*!"

They all laugh like it's some sort of secret code that got broken.

"You'll be all right, youngblood," says the smoker. "You'll be all right."

Just as I begin to realize that they're humoring me, Ray Bivens Jr. comes blustering in through the door like he lives there. He flashes a wad of money. "Luck," he says smiling, "is sometimes lucky."

The trio at the bar high-five one another and laugh in anticipation of free drinks.

"Who," I say, "did you take that from?"

"*Take?*" He chucks his thumb toward me as if to say, *Get a load of this guy*. He counts out the bills so fast that he can't actually be counting them. "Sold a bird. Rich white dude. Convenient store. I said, 'I got birds.' He said, 'I got money.' Six hundred bones."

I'm upset, though I don't know why. Six hundred bucks. Who in this neighborhood even *has* six hundred bucks? I lean toward him and whisper, "I bailed you out of jail, remember."

"Don't worry," he says, "I'll buy you a drink."



THREE HOURS pass, and my father has beaten all the regulars trying to win money from him at pinochle when a woman appears out of nowhere. Her skin is the color of good scotch. She sits between me and my father, twirls around on her barstool once, and points a red-enameled finger toward the goiter man changing songs on the jukebox. "Play 'Love the One You're With.' Isley Brothers."

"I was going to," says the Goiter, "just for you."

She spins around on the barstool again so that she's facing the bottles lined up on display. "Farrah," she says and extends a tiny limp hand in my direction. "Farrah Falana."

"That's not," I say, "your real name."

"Yes it is," she says dreamily. "Farrah Falana. I was named after that show."

Now I see that she's going on fifty. She smiles at me with her mouth closed, and for a moment she looks like a beautiful frog.

My father takes a long, admiring look at her seated behind. "Farrah and Ray," my father says. "I like how that sounds." For a moment, he looks like Billy Dee Williams. The smile is the same, that same slick look.

"I like how it sounds, too," Farrah says. She actually slides on her barstool and leans toward him, leans so close it looks as if she might kiss him.

"Farrah and Ray," I say. "That sounds like a Vegas act."

"It *does*!" she squeals.



MY FATHER and Farrah get drunk while I play an electronic trivia game with the Goiter. He knows more than I gave him credit for, but he's losing to me because he bets all his bonus points whenever he gets a chance. The Goiter and I are on our tenth game when Ray Bivens Jr. taps me on the shoulder. I look over to see him standing very straight and tall, trying not to look drunk.

"You don't love me," he says sloppily. "You don't *understand* me."

"*You* don't understand you," I say.

Farrah is still at the bar, and though she's not saying anything, her face goes through a series of exaggerated expressions as if it were she responding to someone's questions. I plunk three quarters in the game machine. "Your go," I say to the Goiter.

"Does anybody understand themselves?" he says to me softly, and for a second he looks perfectly lucid. Then he says it louder, for the benefit of the whole bar, with a gravity only the drunk can muster. "Does *anybody*, I say, *understand* themselves?"

The men at the bar look at him and decide it's one of their many jokes, and laugh, though my father is staring straight at me, straight through me as though I were nothing but a clear glass of whiskey into which he could see the past and future.

I grip my father's elbow and try to speak with him one on one. "I'm sorry about what I said at the March."

"No you ain't."

"Yes," I say, "I am. But you've got to tell me how to understand you." I feel silly saying it, but he's drunk, and so is everybody else but me.

He lurches back then leans in forward again. "Tell you? I can't *tell* you." He drums each word out on the counter, "That's. Not. What. It's. A-bout. I can *tell* you about Paris, but you won't know 'less you been there. You simply under-*stand*. Or you don't." He raises an eyebrow in clairvoyant drunkenness before continuing. "You either take me, or you *don't*." He throws his hands up, smiling as though he's finally solved some grand equation in a few simple steps.

"Please," I say, giving up on him. I beckon the Goiter for another game of electronic trivia, but he shakes his head and smiles solemnly, a smile that says he's more weary for me than for himself.

"Let me tell you something," Ray Bivens Jr. says, practically spitting in my face, "Lupita *understands* me. That woman," he says, suddenly sounding drunk again, "*understands*. She's It."

Farrah, suddenly sober, smacks him on the shoulder and says, "What about me? What the fuck about me?"

ANOTHER HOUR later he says, all cool, "Gimme the keys. Farrah and I are going for a ride."

I've had many 7 Ups and I've twice asked my father if we could go, told him that we either had to find a motel outside the city or plan on driving back soon. But now he's asking for



the keys at nearly three a.m., the car all the way over in Arlington, and even the Metro has stopped running.

"Sir," I say. "We need to drive back."

"I said, Spurgeon, dear son, that Farrah and I are going for a ride. Now give me the keys, dear son."

A ride means they're going to her place, wherever that is. Him going to her place means I have to find my own place to stay. Giving him the keys not only means he'll be driving illegally, which I no longer care about, but that the car will end up on the other side of the country, stripped for parts.

"No," I say. "It's Mama's car."

"*Mama's car*," he mimics.

"Sir."

"*Maaaamaaa's caaaaar!*"

I leave the bar. I'm walking for a good minute before I hear him coming after me. I speed up but don't run. I don't even know how I'm going to get back to the car, but I pick a direction and walk purposefully. I hear the *click click click* of what are surely Farrah's heels, hear her voice screaming something that doesn't make sense, hear his footfalls close in on me, but all I see are the streetlights glowing amber, and the puffs of smoke my breath makes in the October air. All I feel is that someone has spun me around as if for inspection, and that's when I see his face—handsome, hard-edged, not the least bit sloppy from liquor.

Sure. He's hit me before, but this is hard. Not the back of the hand, not with a belt, but punching. A punch meant for

my face, but lands on my shoulder, like he's congratulating me, then another hit, this one all knuckles, and my jaw pops open, automatically, like the trunk of a car. I try to close my mouth, try to call time out, but he's ramming into me, not with his fists, but with his head. I try to pry him from where his head butts, inside my stomach, right under my windpipe, but he stays that way, leaning into me, tucked as if fighting against a strong wind, both of us wobbling together like lovers. Finally, I push him away, and wipe what feels like yogurt running from my nose into the raw cut of my lip. I start to lick my lips, thinking that it's all over, when he rushes straight at me and rams me into something that topples over with a toyish metal clank. Sheaves of weekly newspapers fan the ground like spilled cards from a deck. I kick him anywhere my foot will land, shouting at him, so strangely mad that I'm happy, until I finally kick at air, hard, and trip myself. I don't know how long I'm down, how long my eyes are closed, but he's now holding me like a rag doll. "What the hell are you talking about?" he says as if to shake the answer out of me. "What the *hell* are you talking about?"

I only now realize what I've been screaming the whole time. "Wind-o!" I yell at him. "You and your goddamn 'wind-o'! There was never any 'wind-o'! And you don't know *shit* about birds! *Arriba! Arriba!*" I say mockingly.

When he grabs my collar, almost lifting me from the ground, I feel as though I'm floating upward, then I feel some part of me drowning. I remember something, something I know will kill my father. My father dodged the draft. They

weren't going to get this nigger, was his view of Vietnam. It was the one thing I'd respected him for, and yet somehow I said it, "You didn't know fucking Huey P. Newton. You never even *went* to Vietnam!"

That does it. I had turned into something ugly, and of all the millions of words I've ever spoken to him in all my life, this is the one that blows him to pieces.

"Vietnam?" he says, once, as if making sure I'd said the word.

I'm quiet. He says the word again, "Vietnam," and his eyes somehow look sightless.

I try to pull him back, begging in the only way you can beg without words. I go to put my hand on his shoulder, but a torrent of people, fresh from the March, it seems, has been loosed from a nearby restaurant. They slap one another's backs, smelling of Brut and Old Spice, musk-scented African oils and sweat. I go to put my hand on his shoulder, but already my father has gone.

RAY BIVENS JR. left with the car and Farrah left with someone else. The birds are gone. My blazer is gone. After I have a scotch, the bartender says, "Look. I can float you the drinks, but who's going to pay for that, youngblood?" He points to one of the bar's smashed windowpanes.

After I pay him, I have no money left for a cab or a bus. The bridge over the Potomac isn't meant for pedestrians, and it takes me half an hour to walk across it. For a long time I'm on New Hampshire Avenue, then for a long time I'm on Georgia.

I ask for directions to the train station and someone finally gives them to me.

I wonder if he's right about Lupita. When she sat on the porch and held her head, it seemed she felt more sorry for him than she did for herself; not pity, but sympathy.

I pass by an old-fashioned movie theater whose marquee looks like one giant erection lit in parti-colored lights. People pass by, wondering how to go about mugging me. A well-dressed man asks if I'm a pitcher or a catcher, and I have no idea what he means. I tell myself that it's good that Ray Bivens Jr. and I fought. Most people think that you find something that matters, something that's worth fighting for, and if necessary, you fight. But it must be the fighting, I tell myself, that decides what matters, even if you're left on the sidewalk to discover that what you thought mattered means nothing after all.

"WHERE DO you want to go?" the Amtrak ticket officer asks.

"East," I say. "Any train that goes east this time of night."

"You're in D.C., sir. Any further east and you'll be in the Atlantic."

Of course I'm not going east anymore. I'd been going east the last day and a half, and it's just now hitting me that I can finally go west. Go home.

After the events of the day, I'm not surprised that I get the snottiest ticket officer of the whole damn railway system. I look into the his gray eyes. "West, motherfucker."



The ticket officer stares at me and I stare right back.

The ticket officer sighs. He looks down at his computer, and then at me again. "Where, pray tell, do you want to go? West, I'm afraid, is a direction, not a destination."

"Louisville, Kentucky," I finally say. "Home."

He enters something into his computer. Tilts his head. He smiles when he tells me there is no train that goes to Louisville. The closest one is Cincinnati.

I walk away from the counter and sit down, trying to think of how I'm going to pay to get to Cincinnati, then from Cincinnati to Louisville. The only other white person in the station besides the ticket officer is an old woman in a rainbow knit cap. She's having quite an intelligent conversation with herself.

I'll have to call home, ask my mother to give her credit card number to this prick. I start to try to find a phone when a man approaches the ticket counter, his half-asleep son riding on his back. He probably just came from the March. Probably listened to all the poems and speeches about ants and oxen and African drumming, but still had this kid out in the hot sun for hours, then in the cold night for longer. It's almost five o'clock in the morning, and all this little boy wants, I can tell, is some goddamned sleep.

"Hey," I say to the man. When he doesn't respond, I tap him on the non-kid shoulder. "It's pretty late to have a kid out. Don't you think?"

He puts his hand up like a traffic cop, but apparently decides I'm harmless and says to me, "Son. I want you to

promise me you'll go clean yourself up. Get something to eat." He produces a wallet from his back pocket. He hands me a twenty. "Now, don't go spending it on nothing that'll make you *worse*. Promise me."

It's not enough to get me where I'm going, but it's just what I need. I sit down on a wooden bench. The old white woman next to me carefully pours imaginary liquid into an imaginary cup. The man with the kid goes up to the ticket officer, who stops staring into space long enough to say, "May I help *you*, sir?"

"Do y'all still say 'All aboard'?"

"Excuse me?" the ticket officer says.

"My son wants to know if y'all say 'All aboard.' Like in the movies."

"Yes," the ticket officer says wearily. "We *do* say 'All aboard.' How else would people know to board the train?"

Now the boy jiggles up and down on his father's back, suddenly animated, as if he's riding a pony. The ticket officer sighs, hands grazing the sides of his face as though checking for stubble. Finally he throws his arms up in a "Sure, what the hell" kind of way, and disappears into the Amtrak offices for what seems like an hour. The father sets the boy down, feet first, onto the ground. An intercom crackles and a voice says:

*"All aboard!"*

The voice is hearty and successful. The boy jumps up and down with delight. He is the happiest I've seen anyone, ever. And though the urge to weep comes over me, I wait—holding my head in my hands—and it passes.