

331 AM

This is the hour when the night slides down. When the night, without language or moon or mask or star, comes undone. She unshackles herself from herself, and sheds the smooth black of her cool skin, and begins to shake. The night is shaking, crawling, crying and kicking, and she thinks there is no one who can see her, but I can see her. From where I am, I can see everything. I can even see myself. I am there in the hour after night, the hour before day. I am there in the center of terror curled against the shadows that are hanging low and jagged, loose and incomplete. Like me. The woman who exists in the suspension of time. The woman who I can never let anyone meet. The woman without poems or silk or laughter or Chanel. The woman without composure or plan or dance or Rashid: my husband, the worker, the romantic, the Imam, the inmate.

403 AM

And I'm moving. The coffee has been made and now my bath is running. My clothes are ironed but where's the bra that doesn't have a steel underwire in it? I can only find the ones that set off the prison's metal detector, get me sent into the bathroom where I must remove the undergarment, and turn it over to an officer who will scan it for what? What? A knife, a gun? First time it happened, I asked the officer why didn't he just use the hand scanner on me? The hand scanner would show, as it always had before, that the only metal I possessed was the wire in my bra.

They don't want us to use that anymore, the officer told me. If you want to get in, you have to remove the bra and have it searched, he told me. Fine, I said walking over to the bathroom, as the familiar process of dividing myself began.

I am a body abandoned, sent into the world to face whatever humiliation, alone, without the presence of my soul, which I have successfully sifted out, locked up, buried deep.

520 AM

The private van service that takes me up to the prison each week is already in front of my house and filled with women and children who are going to visit husbands, boyfriends, fathers, and sons. *Good Morning*, I say softly as I climb in and take my seat. *Good Morning*, comes the response from an uneven chorus, and after this silence. For the next four hours, which how long it will take, from door to door, to get to the prison, silence.

1132 AM

I close my eyes and hear a baby crying for its mother. I hear small children running, bursting at their seams, and on my left there is a woman who laughs just a little bit too loud.

I remember long walks through the west side neighborhood of my Manhattan childhood.

I never told you that I had a job down there, by where you grew up. Rashid says this to me. He says, *after I got off work, I'd hang out on the benches, somewhere by the Beacon Theater.* *Me too*, I tell him!

I tell him I know those benches, and sat on them and watched the people and then, and then...

We lean back through the years, back into the days of unrestricted air, and the indefatigable push of city living. We recall the mercurial arrogance of teenaged-wisdom, and out loud we wonder if ever we once sat near each other, said hello, asked, do you have the time, a light?

What if we'd met before you came to jail? What would have happened if we'd become friends on those benches, I ask Rashid as a police radio suddenly barks into our hiding place, and hijacks us out of a fantasy past, drops us roughly into a visiting room present.

I'm just glad we know each other now, Rashid says. But after a minute he adds, *Of course, if we'd met back then, there is no telling.*

1233PM

I complain about vending machine popcorn, and wanting a baby. Rashid smiles, says he cannot control what they put in the machines, but a baby? That he can give me next time we're together. How long, I ask, meaning before our next conjugal visit finally comes around. *Eight weeks, five days, but who's counting*, Rashid tells me, pulling me close, closer, tighter and tighter.

My face is in my husband's hands. Rashid whispers that he loves me and praises Allah for the professor who brought me up to the prison to read my poetry during Black History month all those years ago. I thought you were so beautiful then but somehow you're even more beautiful now. *All these years later.*

You're so beautiful asha, even in this dress, he complains, that, *come on baby, you have to know is just too short.*

116PM

Where are we, beloved? Are we really in a place where life stalks through time wearing state-issue greens? Could this really be us, building a marriage bordered by a forty foot wall, thick steel doors, and gun towers all around? And us, discussing children, financial planning, and my journal entry from last Monday morning, unbounded loneliness, and my upcoming travel schedule? Us, offering up everything private, personal, here beside a guard who snarled on one limp afternoon, that he could never respect any woman who comes up to see a man in prison! Not for any reason, the guard said, and then waited for you to blow so he could stuff you into a stereotype you continue to defy.

119PM

Rashid takes my hand, leads me out of my silence. *Let's go outside*, he says, and we step into a yard that is not really a yard, but a glass and cement cage with barbed wire that criss-crosses the top and passes for a ceiling. Even still a slim shard of sun, in a wild act of resistance slants down onto our faces. We pull up towards the warmth, and my husband whispers, *Dance with me*.

As we do, he sings in my ear,
*Drifting on a memory
ain't no place I'd rather be
than with you.*

Even here, Rashid says. And then, unbelievably adds, *I'd rather be in prison and with you, than be free and without you.*

248 PM

Rashid is giving me instructions, reminding me to call his best friend, his attorney, and a vitamin company. I try to listen, but there are only twelve more minutes left to our visit, and I feel a thick metal bat banging inside my head. *Stop talking, just hold me, stop talking, just hold me, stop talking juststop just stop.*

Kipling said *if we could fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run, than ours is the earth and everything that's in it*. But what if I don't want everything, and what if I still fill the minute, the hour, the day, the week, the month and the year? Could I be guaranteed just one thing then? If I did that? Then could I?

Did I say how prison made me shake down my desire, past the flesh and blood of it, past the sinew and bone and marrow of it? Did I say how I am a single cell with one remaining strand of a DNA code that reads, here is a woman who wanted just one thing: for her husband to come home healthy to her, to come home whole to her, to come home today. To her. Today.

*Come on back to me, baby.
Come on back right now.
And keep right there,
keep it right there.*

302 PM

How did we learn
to love this way:

in pieces and
public installments?

731PM

This is the hour when the night sneaks back in. When the night, without rest or façade or caress or ease comes home and stretches herself into herself and coats the sky with the cool and black of her long smooth skin. She coats the sky and rides the sky and pulls the whole of the world down into her belly and laughs at the clouds and the quarter moon and anyone else who thinks they can see her.

I can see her. From where I am, I can see everything. I can even see myself. I am there, alone, in the center of terror seeking out the shadows that hang low and jagged, loose and incomplete. Like me. The woman without flesh or soothe or hand or arch, but who exists. In the broadest sense of the word: exists.