The Tumbled

Ellis Maxwell
In this ethereal mirror,
The tumbled still lie in confusion—
Temples without knowledge.

- a poem, found scrawled on the gate outside the Pleutis house
“AAAAAHRRRR!!”

Jordan Pleutis woke with a jump as his grandmother Esther’s scream rattled through the house. He popped up and ran to her bedroom. His mother Amy was already there.

“What is it, Mom?” Jordan asked.

“An intruder, Amy!” Esther blurted out. “She was here! I—I—I saw her by the gate!”

“Was he armed?” Steve, Jordan’s uncle, poked his head in the door.

“She,” Esther said, “I couldn’t see if she was armed, but she was big, much bigger than any of us, and dark, dark as night, I’m telling you—”

“I’m going to get my rifle,” Steve grunted.

“I’m calling the police,” Amy rushed to the phone in the kitchen.

“Hurry, she could be getting away!” Esther shouted.

Jordan followed his mother into the kitchen, knowing what would happen next. She would dial two or three times before realizing—

“The line is dead!” Amy gasped. She put the phone to her ear and then back on the hook several more times before giving up.

“The phone doesn’t work, Mom, remember?” Jordan said.

“What do you mean, it doesn’t work?” Amy screamed. “I need to call someone for help!”

“There’s no one to call,” Jordan said calmly. “The phone doesn’t work.”

Amy made a strange, distressed sound and clicked the phone back onto its hook.

Steve came rushing into the kitchen holding his rifle. “I looked outside, but no sign of the intruder.”

Amy put her hands over her eyes. “This is a nightmare.”
“Yeah, well usually nightmares end,” Steve said. “If you wake up from this one, let me know.” Steve opened the rifle’s magazine to find it empty, like always.

“Thank goodness I was here,” Esther said loudly as she entered the kitchen, “otherwise who knows what could have happened? Someone’s got to protect this family.” She narrowed her eyes at Amy.

Jordan sat next to his mother and put an arm around her. “You all right?” he asked.

“I just forget sometimes,” Amy shook her head, still breathing heavily. “It’s been so long, you know?”

Esther whipped out her notebook and ruffled through it loudly. “Today marks six months.”

Steve rolled his eyes. Esther had anointed herself official timekeeper of the family as soon as it became clear that they were stuck behind the gate. Every now and then she would announce how long it had been. The numbers fluctuated wildly, but of course, no one could prove Esther was wrong. There was no way of knowing.

“This neighborhood is changing, Amy, I’m telling you,” Esther said. “Our family has been in Livingston how many generations? In my day you would never even think to do something like that.”

Amy looked down at her empty hands.

“I mean, we had our problems,” Esther went on, “but can you imagine? Walking right onto our property just to see what was ripe for the taking. Next she’ll probably be sneaking in the back door after dark. Or maybe,” Esther wagged her finger thoughtfully at Jordan, “maybe she already has.”
“Esther, you don’t know why she was here,” Amy said, her breathing back under control.

“There could be a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“Hmph,” Esther said angrily. “I’m just telling you, Amy, something has got to be done about this. Give ‘em an inch, they’ll take a mile.”

“Now, what’s that supposed to mean?” Amy frowned.

“It means whatever you think it means!” Esther slammed her fist on the table. “It means I’m tired of seeing good Livingston land fall into the hands of those—those roaches.”

“Esther!” Amy exclaimed. “What has gotten into you this morning?”

“Me?” Esther stood up. “I’ll tell you—”

A sharp knock at the front door quieted the Pleutis family.

Esther shot Amy a wide-eyed glance. “Give ‘em an inch,” she whispered, shaking her head slowly.

Amy got up quietly and moved towards the door. Steve clutched the unloaded rifle and followed her, Jordan close behind. They reached the foyer. Amy turned to look at Jordan and Steve and saw the rifle.

“Put that away!” she hissed, smacking Steve’s arm. He shrugged and ducked into the hallway, pulling Jordan with him. They stood just out of sight, Steve ready to spring out at the first sign of danger.

Amy exhaled slowly. She opened the door.

“Morning, Miss,” the man smiled. He wore a crisp white t-shirt and tan-colored khakis. Probably nearing forty, Amy thought. And black.

“M—morning,” said Amy. She crossed her arms nervously, remembering just then that she was still in her nightgown.
“My name is Savor Thomas,” the man held out a hand. “I live across the street.”

“Amy,” she smiled weakly, “Amy Pleutis.” She extended her hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Pleutis,” Savor shook her hand gently. “Listen, I just came to apologize—my daughter was practicing her pitching outside and a ball went over into your yard. I hope she didn’t alarm you, walking over to retrieve it. She’s got to work on her aim, I’d say,” Savor grinned. Steve loosened his grip on the rifle in the hallway.

“Oh!” Amy let out a small laugh. “It’s no trouble, really.”

Then it finally hit her: this man and his daughter had done something no one else had. They had opened the gate.

“Mr. uh—Thomas, is it?” Amy stammered. “Would you like to come inside for a coffee?”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t,” Savor shook his head, “really, I—”

“Mr. Thomas, I insist,” Amy placed a hand on his arm. “It’s not every day you meet a new neighbor.”

“All right, then,” Savor smiled. “As long as it’s not too much trouble.”

Steve nodded at Jordan, and they returned to the kitchen, satisfied that Amy was safe.

Savor followed Amy into the living room. It was sizable, but an assortment of armchairs and sofas gave the room a cramped feeling. There were muted colors everywhere, a dull green fabric covering one sofa, the other a dusty brown. In the center of the room was a thick rug, elegantly patterned with a cloudy, once-white background. Even the morning light coming in through the windows was grey, as though the house had stripped the outdoor light of its brightness.

“You have a beautiful home, Ms. Pleutis,” Savor said politely.
“Oh, you’re too kind,” Amy shook her head. “You’ll have to excuse the mess. I haven’t had a chance to straighten up.”

Savor stopped in front of a large painting—too large, he thought, to fit with the old house’s low ceilings. It was a dark, striking portrait: a man in a glistening black frock seated behind a desk, pen in hand, eyes serious and forever trained on his observer—Savor, in this case.

“Ah,” Amy chuckled, “you’ve found Robert Livingston, my husband’s namesake.”

“And the town’s, too,” Savor said.

Amy nodded. “My mother-in-law put it there,” she smiled wearily. “She’s read all about him, and insists she’s a distant descendant. I’ve always thought she was full of it, but in this part of New York, she’s far from the only one. Half the town claims relation. He was a very influential politician, of course,” she explained.

Not to mention a prolific slave-trader, thought Savor. “It’s quite a portrait,” Savor said.

“How long have you lived in Livingston?” Amy asked.

“Just a month,” Savor said. “Not long enough to know much, yet. How about you?”

“Oh, it’s been ages,” Amy said. “I’ve lived here since I married Robert, and his family has been here forever.”

The house was comforting in its subtle way. It was like the rest of the neighborhood in its design, Savor thought: not particularly imaginative, but smart. It wouldn’t catch your eye from the road as you drove past, but once you were inside, its simple precision could grow on you. The golden-brown cherry wood beams lining the living room ceiling, sloping up from each wall until they met in the middle. The stone-grey fireplace, flanked by elegant windows on either side. Once you were inside the gate, the house was inviting. Still, it managed to retain its privacy—the
kitchen served as a buffer between the living room and the bedrooms in the back. There was no requirement to show more than you wanted a visitor to see.

Amy led Savor into the kitchen. “This is my mother-in-law Esther, my son Jordan, and Steve, my sister-in-law’s husband.” Amy gestured to each of them.

Savor gave Steve a nod and Esther a small bow. “Savor Thomas,” he said, “a pleasure.” Esther looked him up and down quickly.

“Jordan, say hello to our guest,” Amy nudged him.

“Hi.”

“How old are you, Jordan?”

“Thirteen.”

“Only thirteen? You look at least sixteen, I swear,” Savor said.

Get stuck long enough in an endless time loop, or whatever this place is, Jordan thought, and you, too, might appear older than you are.

“He’s growing so fast these days!” Amy shook her head, putting a pot of water on the stove.

Jordan frowned miserably at his mother and disappeared to his room.

“So, Mr. Thomas,” Esther said, “what brings you into our home on this fine morning?”

“My daughter, I suppose,” Savor smiled sheepishly, “Her fastball rises pretty high sometimes.”

“She was just in our yard to get her ball back,” Amy explained quickly.

“Is that so?” Esther folded her arms.

“I do apologize if she caused you any distress, ma’am,” Savor said.

“I think she ought to learn to knock before entering someone’s property,” Esther said.
Amy sighed. “Esther, please—”

“I agree completely,” Savor said, his gaze serious and trained on Esther.

Esther nodded, impressed.

Jordan looked out his bedside window. Sure enough, the gate was open. He blinked twice and shook his head to make sure what he was seeing was real. The grass in the front yard was still mostly dead and brown, but some patches were beginning to green. The magnolia tree was showing hints of blossoming. And the gate was open.

The girl was standing just inside the gate, tossing a bright yellow softball up and catching it in her glove. She was tall, but didn’t look much older than Jordan. She wore a tank top, athletic shorts, and a visor. Jordan watched in amazement as her tosses went higher and higher, her glove following the ball outside the gate and back inside again. How free she looked. How easy it was for her to move around, unencumbered by the gate.

He rose to his feet. What was stopping him? He looked in the mirror. There would be no going back from what he was about to do—if it worked, anyway. He would have to build a life all on his own, and might never see his mother again. But he had no choice. He laced up his sneakers and ran out the side door.

“So what do you do, Mr. Thomas?” Amy poured coffee into a mug and handed it to Savor.

“Thank you,” Savor said, taking a sip, “I’m a poet, first and foremost. But most of my work these days is not with my own writing.”

“How’s that?” Steve asked.
“I perform as a historical interpreter,” Savor said. The kitchen was quiet. “You know, dress up in old costumes and pretend to be people who’ve been dead for a while?” Savor grinned at Esther.

“What sorts of people do you ‘pretend’ to be?” Esther narrowed her eyes.

“I myself am an interpreter of Frederick Douglass,” Savor said.

Now the kitchen was really quiet. Esther shot Amy a suspicious glance.

Savor chuckled. “If you’re wondering how a small-time actor like me can afford a house in a neighborhood like this, spare yourself the trouble,” he looked down at the kitchen floor. “My wife is in real estate.”

“N—No, it’s not that,” Amy said. “It’s just—my husband,” she sighed. “My husband Robert was a historian too.”

“You don’t say!”

“He was working on a biography of Frederick Douglass when he died.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Savor shook his head. “I am so sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you,” Amy smiled weakly. Her head was spinning, trying to put the pieces of the morning together. Savor had opened the gate, and now here was this undeniable link with Robert. It had to be a sign. But what did it mean? Years – who knew how many, but it had to be years – of nothing, and now everything happening all at once. She wished she had more time to think.

Jordan slowed to a walk as he approached the gate, not wanting the girl to suspect anything out of the ordinary. She waved at him.

“Hi,” he managed, his voice thin, and raised a hand.
“What’s your name?” she smiled.

“Jordan,” he said, standing still and upright fifteen yards away from her. From the gate.

“I’m Sharon,” she said. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” Jordan’s heart was racing. If he could get past Sharon and through the gate, he was free.

“You got a glove? If you want, we could—”

“I’m going for a walk,” Jordan said flatly.


“Sorry.”

No one moved for a moment. Finally Jordan took a cautious step towards the gate. Then another. And another—

A giant force, like an invisible wind, sent Jordan tumbling down, his head snapping back as he hit the ground.

“Whoa!” Sharon hurried over to him. “Are you okay?”

Jordan heard a voice. A gentle whisper, like a small wave. It seemed to come from all around him, but he couldn’t make out the words.

Amy walked Savor to the door.

“Well, I’m glad you were able to stop by,” she said.

“My pleasure,” Savor said. “And thank you for the coffee.”

Amy smiled warmly and opened the door. Her eyes found Jordan, on the ground near the gate. Savor’s daughter seemed to be trying to help him up. How kindly she extended her arm to
him, without hesitation. The concern in her voice. This, Amy thought, must be the final sign. She had an idea.

“Mr. Thomas,” she said quickly, then hesitated a moment.

Savor was already out the door, but turned back to her. “Yes?”

“We’re having a memorial for my husband Robert tomorrow morning,” Amy said, her mouth moving faster than her mind. “It would mean the world to me if you were there. Maybe give us a little performance?”

Savor tried to hide a frown. He didn’t like the idea much, but it was hard to say no.

“Of course, I understand if it’s too much trouble.” Amy couldn’t stand the silence. “You probably have things—”

“I’ll be there,” Savor nodded. “Good day, Ms. Pleutis.”

Amy smiled wide.

Savor walked through the front yard and left with Sharon, closing the gate behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, Jordan saw Sharon kneel down, right outside the gate, as if she had found something. She frowned and stayed there for a minute, talking quietly to herself. She was repeating something, but Jordan was too far to hear what she was saying. Finally she got up and followed her father across the street. Jordan walked gingerly back toward the house, his back still in pain. Amy put her arm around him and kissed the top of his head as they went inside, a worryingly hopeful grin on her face.

Esther was frying eggs and bacon in the kitchen. Steve had gone back to bed, it seemed.

Amy cleared her throat. “Tomorrow we’re going to have a memorial for Robert,” she announced.
“What?” Esther whirled around to face Amy. Amy stood in the kitchen doorway, hands on her hips, eyes on her mother-in-law. Esther chuckled. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“Three-and-a-half years stuck in this hellhole and now you want to bring Robert into it? For what?”

“I invited Mr. Thomas.”

Esther scoffed. “You amaze me, Amy, really.”

Amy turned to Jordan for support.

“Uh,” Jordan swallowed, “why a memorial?”

“First, we wake up and the gate is open,” Amy said, “then we find out our new neighbor is an interpreter of Frederick Douglass, who was Robert’s hero. Aren’t you following the signs?”

Karen swung her bedroom door open and entered the kitchen, pulling on one of Steve’s old t-shirts and filling the air with the stench of sweat and sex.

“What signs?” she swiped a piece of bacon from the pan and took a loud bite. Steve came in behind her, his hair ruffled, and took a seat at the table. Karen sat on his lap.

“Hmph,” Esther growled.

“A very nice man and his daughter found their way inside the gate today,” Amy explained, “and I think they could be our ticket out.”

“Out?” Karen asked. “You’re going to get us out of here?”

“If I do, it’ll be no thanks to you,” Amy snapped at her sister-in-law. “But anyway, it’s not me, it’s Savor.”

“Savor?”

“The man who opened the gate.”
“His name is Savor?” Karen laughed.

“Maybe that’s one of the signs,” Amy shrugged.

“Let me get this straight,” Karen raised her hand. “A black guy opens the gate one time, and now all of a sudden he’s the answer to our prayers?”

“How did you know he was black?” Amy frowned.

“It was obvious,” Karen said. “It was how you said it.”

“Well, m—maybe race has something to do with it,” Amy reasoned.

“How’s that?” asked Steve.

“Maybe it has something to do with why we’re stuck here,” Amy said.

Jordan thought of the invisible force knocking him down just in front of the gate, while Sharon walked through easily.

Esther slammed her spatula down. “What are you saying, that I’m a racist?”

“I didn’t say that,” Amy said, “just that—”

“I don’t have a racist bone in my body, goddammit!”

“Everything happens for a reason,” Amy said, “even if we don’t know what it is. Us being stuck here. His daughter throwing the ball into our yard. Maybe it’s connected somehow.”

The kitchen was quiet again.

“What’s the harm in trying, anyway?” Amy said. “We’ve been stuck here how long?”

Esther checked her notebook once more. “Nearly a decade,” she spat.

~

Amy woke with a frenetic energy the next morning. She scurried around the house in her best black dress, hopping from one task to the next, making sure everything was in order for the memorial. Jordan followed a few paces behind.
“Do me a favor and wipe down that table, will you Jordan?” Amy handed him a spray bottle and a rag.

Jordan couldn’t remember the last time his mother was this excited about something. In the early days behind the gate, he and his mother would do things together, like cook dinner or play cards. Sometimes they would read together before bed. After a while, though, it all stopped. Amy moved about the house like a ghost, her eyes glassy, almost dead. Most days she hardly spoke to Jordan. When he had trouble sleeping, Jordan would knock on his mother’s door. Sometimes she would open it wordlessly and let him into bed with her. Other times the door stayed closed and Jordan wandered back to his bed, alone.

The others handled it in their own way. Esther was always occupied, either cooking or scribbling furiously in her notebooks. And Karen and Steve were always—together. Jordan heard them from his room, at night and in the morning. The five of them, all stuck in one house, and sometimes it seemed they barely had time to look at each other.

“It’s not unreasonable,” Amy was saying, “to think that race might be a factor in why we’re here.”

Jordan nodded. Amy was busy polishing a silver serving spoon, and didn’t see his reaction.

“I mean, I like to think we are relatively conscious,” Amy continued, “but nobody’s perfect, right? Like your grandmother”—Amy quieted her voice—“she can say some pretty ugly things.”

They finished in the kitchen and went next to Robert’s study, which came as a surprise to Jordan—he thought his mother had forgotten about it. Jordan was pretty sure he was the only one who had been in the study since his father died. It was a small, square-ish room, no more than ten
feet long or wide. Books filled tall shelves along all four walls, with dozens more books stacked high on the floor. A black typewriter sat in the middle of the dark brown desk, the edges piled with envelopes and loose-leaf paper, torn and yellowed. The whole room was covered in at least a half-inch of dust.

“I’m just saying, it’s a possibility,” Amy said, wiping down the desk. “Maybe whoever is in charge of the gate has the wrong idea about us.”

Jordan thought to tell his mother about the invisible force, but decided to keep it to himself. He didn’t want to ruin her good mood. Karen appeared next to him in the doorway.

“Maybe it’s something we don’t even remember,” Karen offered.

“Huh,” Amy paused, her hands on her hips. “That’s a thought.”

“Racism is ingrained in us from the beginning, right?”

Amy’s eyes grew wide as she considered what Karen had said.

“Relax!” Karen laughed. “I’m kidding. You really think we’re stuck in this hellhole because we’re a bunch of racists?”

“This is not hell,” Amy said through her teeth.

“What else do you want to call it?”

They heard a sharp knock. Amy shot Karen a stern glance.

“This is not hell,” Amy repeated, walking out of Robert’s study as if to demonstrate her freedom of movement. She closed the door to the study and turned to Jordan. “Leave this closed until our guest leaves, okay? I don’t want him to think we’re living in filth.”

Jordan nodded.

Amy went to open the front door. “Savor!” she exclaimed. “Please come in.” Jordan stayed behind his mother.
“How do you do, Ms. Pleutis?” Savor removed his hat and bowed. He was already halfway in character, wearing a sharp brown suit, a thick striped tie, and a fedora. 

“We’re just fine,” she smiled.

“Thank you,” Savor said, setting his briefcase down by the door. “Ms. Pleutis,” his expression was serious, “I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Oh.” Amy took a small step back. In all her excitement she had almost forgotten that it was a memorial she was preparing for. A memorial for Robert. “Yes, well—you look fantastic, by the way. Spot on.”

“Why, thank you,” Savor said, smiling kindly.

Amy returned the smile, standing aside to let Savor in.

“Karen, where is Mr. Thomas?” Esther called loudly.

Karen found her in the bathroom, turning her face this way and that in the mirror.

“Is he here yet?” Esther asked, applying a dull pink lipstick. She wore a soft, long-sleeved white blouse covered by a thick black fur vest.

“Someone’s perky today,” Karen smirked, and folded her arms.

“If Amy’s idea is right,” Esther squinted at her daughter, her voice low and serious, “then I figure I ought to look my best for our honored guest.”

“You look well-rested, Mom,” Karen said. “I’d say your good looks have almost returned.”

Esther scowled. “You could stand to freshen up a bit, don’t you think?”

Karen frowned and turned to look at herself in the mirror. Esther went to the kitchen.

“Hello, there!” Savor stood by the stove, smiling.
“Why, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Douglass,” Esther said with a wide smile. “I’m a great admirer of your work.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Savor bowed and gestured, playing along. “And what is the name of the beautiful, kind supporter with whom I am speaking?”

“Esther Pleutis,” she held out her hand, “mother of the deceased.”

Karen entered with a cold half-laugh at her mother. She sat at the kitchen table and began flipping through an old magazine, one she had read dozens of times. Esther glared at her.

Savor looked sympathetic. “This must be an incredibly difficult time for you, Ms. Pleutis.”

“Now, now,” she waved him off. “Don’t let’s waste time pitying me. Especially when I have the good fortune to be in the presence of one of the most esteemed men of the nineteenth century.”

“Those are kind words, Ms. Pleutis,” Savor smiled. “Surely they are meant for someone else, and not me.”

“No, sir!” Esther put a hand to her chest. “Your work on women’s suffrage has inspired me greatly. Even now, if I were to hear your speech at Seneca Falls, I could not help but burst into tears.”

“‘Mrs. President, Ladies and Gentlemen: I come to this platform with unusual diffidence—’”

“Oh, don’t start, now!”

Savor laughed.

“Will you be reading from that speech for us today?” Esther asked.
“No, my dear Ms. Pleutis,” Savor said, staying in character. “I’m going to read a portion of my eighteen fifty-two Independence Day address.”

“And what is that one about?” Karen asked.

“It’s a masterpiece,” Esther jumped in, “a powerful statement on the need for the nation to unite as one.” She smiled wistfully.

Savor raised a finger. “Actually, it’s—”

“One of my favorites,” Esther went on, “a perfect expression of this country’s excellence.”

Savor let out a small huff, in spite of himself. “Well, Ms. Pleutis, you do know your history. I’m impressed.” He had learned not to challenge his audience members directly, no matter how lost they were—better to save his fire for the performance.

“Of course I do! Where do you think Robert got it from?”

Karen laughed.

“Unfortunately,” Esther said quietly, “my daughter does not share the family passion.”

“Well, I understand your son was quite the historian,” Savor said with an uncomfortable smile.

“Destined to be,” Esther nodded. “We’re descended from the original Livingstons, you know. Men of great influence.”

“Although at odds, perhaps, with a man like me,” Savor said, trying to keep his tone light as he pushed back against Esther.

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind,” Savor reassured her.
Esther sighed. “You were my son’s hero, Mr. Douglass. He so admired your eloquence, in the face of everything.”

“I assure you, it is a great disappointment that I never got to meet the man.”

“Tell me, now,” Esther beckoned Savor close to her, lowering her voice to just above a whisper. “What’s your secret?”

“Ma’am?”

“Your regalia is impeccable. The suit, the shoes, the hat, the cane—all just right. And the wig, of course, perfectly gray, distinguished, though a bit nappy—”

Savor recoiled at Esther’s last word, but tried to remain polite. “Thank you, Ms. Pleutis. I am fortunate to have a friend who is an excellent stylist.”

“—But it’s the skin tone that really does it. It looks so—so natural. What do you use, charcoal or cork?”

“What’s that?” Savor blinked.

Karen put down her magazine and went back to her bedroom, mouthing an apology in Savor’s direction as she left the kitchen.

“I used to dress the kids up, you know, in the neighborhood, a long time ago,” Esther said. “Give them a way to learn about history in a way that didn’t seem so—”

“Dull,” Savor offered, dreading what Esther would say next.

“Yes! You understand, of course,” she placed a hand on Savor’s arm. “I thought it was important for them to learn not just about Jefferson and Lincoln, but Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman too. Like I said, Douglass was Robert’s hero, from the time he was a child. He begged his father to make him a cane, like Douglass had, and stormed around the house reciting his favorite lines from Douglass’s speeches.”
Savor’s eyes darted around the kitchen and towards the living room, looking for someone to rescue him from the conversation. Amy caught his glance and hurried towards them.

“Well, to really get him into character,” Esther continued, “sometimes I would use a little burnt cork, you know, help him blacken up. But I never got it to look like this. How do you do it?”

Savor nearly choked on his breath. “Ms. Pleutis—”

“Esther!” Amy exclaimed too-cheerfully, “I got you a drink, dear. Why don’t we let Savor here prepare for his performance?”

Esther accepted the drink with an icy scowl, and shuffled back to her room.

“I apologize for my mother-in-law,” Amy shook her head, “she’s of a certain age, you know? I hope you’ll trust we’re not all like that.”

“Of course not,” Savor looked into Amy’s eyes, hoping she took his smile to be convincing.

“What was she telling you, anyway?”

“Just some family history,” Savor said with a small chuckle. “Your husband’s childhood dress-up parties.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Amy buried her face in her hands. “I am so sorry, Mr. Douglass— no, your name’s not Douglass! Mr.—”


“Mr. Thomas, I can assure you none of us here would ever do anything like that,” Amy shifted from left to right, her voice growing louder. “I mean, hello? Blackface is not okay anymore.”

“Anymore?” Savor said, his eyebrows hopping up a half-inch before he could stop them.
“Not now, and not ever,” Amy said, slamming her fist into her open palm. “This country has so much ugliness in its past. Sometimes I wonder if we will ever be able to put it all behind us. Learn to love each other so that we can move forward.”

Savor nodded.

“Well, what do you think?” Amy asked.

“What do I think of what?”

“Do you still have hope?” A beat of silence. “I assume you do, or you wouldn’t be doing work like this.”

“Of course, there are—there are always reasons to hope,” Savor said absently.

“I’m glad we can talk, Mr. Thomas,” Amy said. “I just think that as long as people like you and me keep having this conversation, things will turn out just fine.” Amy nodded to confirm the truth of what she had said.

“Well put, Ms. Pleutis,” Savor agreed, wondering what conversation she was referring to.

“Please, call me Amy,” Amy insisted. “It’s such a pleasure to have you here. I do think this is just what we need to get out of this rut we seem to be stuck in.” She held Savor’s eyes with a hopeful smile.

“It’s an honor to be here,” Savor said, after a beat. “Inspiring, really, to see a family as conscientious as yours.”

Amy beamed.

Jordan lay in his bed under a thick blanket.

“We are gathered here today,” Jordan heard his mother muttering from her room, “to remember a man who—who was truly good.”
She was rehearsing her remarks, her voice quiet and hollow, speeding through the words as though they held no meaning. Jordan pulled the blanket over his eyes and groaned.

He could sense the urgency in the house—his mother and his grandmother both putting on an act, hoping to impress Savor somehow. Amy’s plan, Jordan could see, was doomed to fail. It was as though she had developed the first part of the plan, and then gone to get something from another room and forgotten to think up the second part. They were staging a memorial for Jordan’s father, during which Savor would perform as Frederick Douglass, and then—and then what? Savor would declare them all wonderful people and let them go, holding the gate open for them and smiling on the way out? It made hardly any sense at all. Plus, Jordan knew, just because the gate was open did not mean they would be able to walk through it.

“He was taken from us far too soon, because of forces beyond our control,” Amy was saying.

Jordan recoiled, but he wasn’t sure why.

“We hold him close in our hearts, today and every day, because he meant so much to all of us,” Amy concluded.

Jordan realized he had heard these words before. His father’s funeral, the day after he died. Ages ago. How long? None of them could remember. But Amy was reciting her speech word for word.

Savor turned down the hallway, looking for a bathroom. He found a closed door and knocked, then waited. He knocked again. No answer, though he thought he might have heard a faint noise coming from inside the room. He opened the door.

“Whoa there!” Steve shouted.
Karen sat upright and naked on top of Steve. She gasped, covering herself quickly with a blanket. Savor froze in the doorway.

“Well come in or don’t,” Steve chuckled, “but close that door, will you? You’re letting the cold in.”

“I—I’m sorry, I thought this was the bath—”

“Hey, wait a second,” Steve raised his eyebrows. “Do you sing?”

Savor swallowed.

“You’re not a bad Douglass, but I tell you,” Steve wagged a finger in Savor’s direction, “with a change in the hair, you’re a dead ringer for Sammy Davis Jr. ‘Me and My Shadow,’ what do you say? I’ll be Sinatra.”

Karen nodded. “Steve is a wonderful singer,” she said dreamily.

“I—I don’t sing,” Savor managed.

“Savor,” Karen turned towards him, the blanket barely covering her top half. “Is it alright if I call you Savor?”

Savor nodded at her warily.

“Well I’m Karen, and this is Steve,” she patted his bare chest. “Now tell me something, Savor,” she smiled at him. “What year is it?”

“Uh, eighteen fifty-two,” Savor smiled nervously, hoping he was playing along with her game correctly. Sometimes his audience members asked him questions like this, to test him. Though to be sure, they were not usually naked when they asked such questions.

“Very good,” Karen chuckled. “But what year is it really?”
Savor did not know what Karen was asking, but he didn’t like it. “I should be going,” he said, and closed the door hastily. He turned back towards the kitchen, and bumped right into Amy.

“Oh, there you are, Savor!” Amy laughed. “We’re just about to start the service outside in the backyard.”

“Where is the bathroom?” Savor blurted out.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Amy pointed. “Two doors down on the right.”

“I’ll just be a moment,” Savor smiled.

He ducked into the bathroom and locked the door, breathing quickly and quietly. At first it had been hard to distinguish between the Pleutis family’s behavior and the discomfort that Savor so often felt with white audience members. But Savor had never been this disturbed before his performance even started.

Savor heard footsteps and muffled voices, and then the faint spring of the porch door opening. The voices faded, and the door swung shut. He listened for another minute—silence, except for a soft, persistent thump coming from Karen and Steve’s room. Savor took a breath and shook his head. He opened the door slowly, and slipped past Karen and Steve’s room into the kitchen. He crouched to keep his head below the window above the sink, catching a glimpse of Amy, Jordan, and Esther in the backyard, and made his way to the foyer, and finally to the front door. Then he was gone.

Amy sat in a folding chair in the backyard, tapping her foot rapidly. Her heel started to tear through the thin, brown grass, and she hit dirt. She flipped through her notecards one more time. For a brief moment she looked at the magnolia tree in the front yard, smiling at its faint
pink blossoms. It was strange to think that the memorial was about to start. Everything had happened so quickly. She had known Savor for barely twenty-four hours, and now here she was putting all her faith in him.

Jordan sat between his mother and Esther, who was gazing past the house, towards the gate, a desperate grin on her face.

How long had Savor been in the bathroom? Amy checked her watch – just before noon – but she couldn’t remember what time it had been when she had last seen him. It had to be at least ten minutes now. The porch door opened and Amy popped up out of her seat, but it was only Karen and Steve. They came outside and joined the others, Steve buttoning his shirt as he went.

“Amy, your friend Savor is a bit of a prude,” Karen said.

Steve chuckled.

Amy shook her head. “I’m going to go in and see what’s taking him so long.”

“Maybe he wised up and flew the coop,” Steve said.

“Oh, shut up,” Esther hissed.

They sat for several minutes in a thick silence. Finally Amy burst through the porch door and ran outside, her breathing heavy as she spoke.

“He’s—he’s not here,” Amy turned her head all around, scanning the backyard for Savor.

“I checked all over the house, he’s not here.”

Esther jumped up from her seat. “What?”

“Maybe we scared him off, huh, Karen?” Steve nudged her and laughed.

“I said he’s not here!” Amy shouted.

They all went quiet again. Jordan watched his mother. Esther looked out past the front of the house again, her eyes glazed over now. Karen kissed Steve’s cheek and bit his earlobe gently.
“Is the gate open?” Esther asked.

“What?” Steve asked.

“If he really left,” Esther went on, her voice unusually soft, “maybe he left the gate open. For us.”

Amy’s head swiveled quickly towards the front yard. She hurried over to the side of the house to get a look at the gate.

“Oh my,” she gasped. “It’s open.”

“You’re saying it’s open?” Steve exclaimed.

“It’s open!” Amy called. “Wide open!”

Amy took several steps toward the gate, the others rushing to join her. Amy broke into a jog, Esther close behind her. Karen and Steve ran, hands clasped together, several paces behind. Jordan tried to catch up to his mother, to tell her what he knew, but he lagged far behind, his legs feeling heavier with each step.

They were thirty, twenty, fifteen yards away. Amy reached her hand out as she ran, feeling the freedom of the air outside the gate.

Suddenly an impossibly powerful force slammed Amy down onto the ground. She landed on her back with a thud as the others met the same force and fell down beside her.

Jordan came to a stop just past the front of the house. Amy looked back at him, her face a mess of confusion. He tried to give her a reassuring smile. She got up and tried to run through the gate again, but the invisible force sent her tumbling back down. The gate slammed itself shut.

Jordan heard the voice again, louder than before. It poked at him with sudden jabs, left ear, right ear, closer and closer with each word—still, he couldn’t understand what the voice was saying. Finally, it ceased.
Esther stood at the stove searing pork chops and sautéing broccoli, the flame running high as she shifted angrily from left to right. She held tight to the handle of the black cast-iron skillet, feeling the heat break through her skin. Her jaw clenched and unclenched. Jordan sat alone at the kitchen table.

Steve came into the kitchen. “Cooking something?” He wore a tank top and boxer shorts, his chest hair glistening.

Finally Esther let go of the handle. “Dinner,” she said, wincing.

“Smells delicious.”

The smell wafted through the house, and seemed to call the others into the kitchen.

Karen came in next, wearing a silk robe. “Smells good, Mom,” she said, taking a seat next to Steve, kissing his neck lightly and swinging an arm around him.

Finally Amy entered. She looked almost like she was sleepwalking, her eyes trained on the ground a few steps in front of her. She sat down wordlessly next to Karen.

Esther put the pork chops on a large serving platter and set it down in the center of the table. She put the broccoli in a dish next to a heaping bowl of mashed potatoes she had reheated. She gestured to the food with both her hands, inviting them to serve themselves. Steve lunged towards the meat right away.

The Pleutises ate quietly, forks providing the only noise as they scraped their plates. Steve tore through his pork quickly, not bothering to look up until he had moved on to the potatoes. Jordan took small bites of mashed potatoes and chewed slowly. Amy nibbled on broccoli.
Karen made it halfway through her pork chop, then looked at Steve’s empty plate and offered him a bite. His eyes lit up as she picked up a piece of the meat with her fork and raised it to his mouth. He opened his mouth and took the bite of meat, then closed his eyes and groaned approvingly. Karen laughed, her face no more than an inch from his, and squeezed the back of his neck gently.

“Hmph,” Esther grunted. She held her fork upright as she watched them from across the table. Karen paid her mother no mind and kissed Steve passionately, her hand sliding to the front of Steve’s neck and then down the middle of his chest.

“Amy,” Esther said calmly, “you’re lucky you have a son.”

Karen pulled away from Steve slightly. Amy kept her eyes on her plate.

“At least with Jordan,” Esther continued, “we know he won’t grow up to be a slut like my daughter.”

Karen gulped and turned to face Esther. Jordan held his bite of mashed potatoes in his mouth, twirling the food around silently with his tongue.

“Twenty-three years!” Esther shouted. “Twenty-three years stuck behind that gate and you scare away the one man who could help us!”

“Nice dinner, Mom,” Karen said. “Pork’s a little dry.”

“And for what? This sorry excuse for a man?” Esther gestured dismissively to Steve.

“Food’s delicious, Esther,” Steve grinned. “As always.”

“It really is good,” Jordan chimed in sincerely. He watched Amy as she swept her fork across her plate, picking through her broccoli, turning her pork over, spreading her mashed potatoes out and then piling them up.
“Esther, have you thought about the possibility—and hear me out,” Karen said, frowning and pausing for effect, “that it wasn’t us that scared him off?”

Esther stewed in her chair.

“Have you considered that maybe,” she reasoned, “it was you and all your talk about playing dress-up in blackface?”

Esther shook her head and bit into a piece of pork.

“Let’s not point fingers,” Steve said, placing a hand on Karen’s shoulder. “It’s been a hard day for all of us, with the memorial, and then the disappearance of…” Steve trailed off.

“That’s strange,” he frowned.

“What?” Karen asked.

“What was his name?”

“Who?”

“Him—the man who was here, the—the Douglass guy,” Steve stammered. “I can’t seem to remember his name.”

Steve turned to Karen, then Esther, then Amy, who had finally looked up from her plate. They were united in their confusion.

Suddenly Amy got up from her chair and turned to leave the room. Jordan got up quickly and followed her down the hall to her room.

“Mom!” Jordan called, but she had already closed her door.

There he was. Jordan saw his father, alive, sitting at a table at the end of a long white hallway. Robert gestured to the open chair next to him.
Jordan walked toward his father. He went slowly and warily, thinking maybe this was a dream, that the father seated at the table was just a mirage. Robert watched him, checking a clock on the wall as if to say, *I haven’t got all day.*

The hallway seemed to stretch and extend as Jordan walked. He moved with a purpose, but with each step his father only looked further away. Still, it was him, he was real, he was alive. Jordan eased into a jog.

The hallway was still getting longer, but Jordan was making up ground. He could just make out his father’s glasses now, sloped down on his nose like they always were when he was working. Jordan smiled to himself, picturing it now. His father typing diligently, stopping only for a bite to eat every now and then. But here he was unoccupied, sitting at an empty table in an empty room, waiting for Jordan. *Waiting, waiting,* Jordan thought, *don’t keep him waiting.* He increased his pace again.

He looked down and saw his feet gliding easily across the floor like a sled over a soft bed of snow. He was close, now, very close, at a near sprint as he neared the end of the hallway. The open chair next to his father was waiting, waiting—

Jordan ran smack into a gate and tumbled to the ground. How could he have missed it? There it was, he could see now, between the hallway and his father. Locked, like always.

He heard a faint noise echoing through the room. A voice, starting out almost silent, then slowly growing louder. It came from everywhere, spiraling its way around Jordan and bouncing off the walls. The voice rattled through him—he covered his ears and tried to scream. Suddenly all was quiet in Jordan’s head.

“Ancestors.” the voice said, softly, but clear as could be.

Jordan looked through the gate at his father, but he seemed very far away.
“Ancestors!” the voice hissed angrily. “Ancestors!”

Jordan covered his eyes and began to cry, sitting on the floor in front of the gate as his father moved ever further away from him, a speck in the distance now.

“Mom!” Jordan called out in spite of himself, panting as he woke from the dream. He tumbled out of his bed and went through the dark hallway and straight to her door.

“Mom,” Jordan whispered urgently, careful now not to wake any of the others. He knocked quietly. “Mom, can I come in?”

Jordan stood there at the door for several minutes, knocking and calling for his mother, but she didn’t answer. He sat outside her door silently for what felt like hours, then knocked again, but there was still no answer. Finally Jordan went back to his room and got back in his bed. He shut his eyes tight and pulled the covers over him. He took several deep breaths and tried to fall back asleep.

But the sun was rising now, which meant it was time to wake up. Which meant it was another day.
It was right around July 4th when I started working on this story, so I was already thinking about Frederick Douglass. It has become fashionable in the world of anti-racist social media to mark the United States’ celebration of Independence Day by sharing Douglass’ speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”, given before a white audience of members of the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society on July 5th, 1852. In this online context, the speech is meant to convey a simple message—that in the U.S. today, as in 1852, the freedoms white people celebrate are not extended to Black people. When shared by a white person, it also sends a second message. *I am against racism.*

The original invitation was for Douglass to join the Rochester abolitionists for a celebration of the fourth of July, but Douglass’ speech performed, as Neil Leroux describes, “an attention-shift from celebration to mourning.” What would it look like, I thought, to re-stage Douglass’ 1852 address in front of a white audience in present-day America? People who, like the Rochester abolitionists, expected one thing when they invited him to speak and received another?

> What is the absence of humanity inside of me created by [w]hiteness?  
> And what would it mean to fully grieve that absence?

> -Abe Lateimer, “Grieving the White Void”

Whiteness has been linked with grief for me since my mom died. I had just started my first semester at Oberlin College in September 2015 when my uncle called me to say that my mom had taken a turn for the worse – she had been diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer two
years earlier – and that I should think about coming home to be with her. He didn’t quite tell me that she was going to die, but I knew that was what he meant. I came home and was blessed to spend six weeks with her before she passed.

I experienced those six weeks as both exhilarating and brutal. Brutal because my mom was dying, slowly and in front of me, and it was a painful and ugly sight. Exhilarating because the backdrop of steady, continuous pain meant that every good moment magnified itself—a pleasant nap or a shared laugh made all the horror seem far away, even if just for a moment. There was never anything more important than the moment we were in together. I remember thinking of myself as living “out of time,” living “close to death.” These feelings, I think, come through clearly in “The Tumbled,” mostly through Jordan’s character. I may not have been literally trapped in a hellish time loop and locked inside a gate by an invisible force, but the day-to-day dreariness, the temporal uncertainty, the lonely sense of being stuck—I experienced all of that.

In the six weeks before my mom died, and in the four-plus years since, the family members and friends who have made up my (and my mom’s) support system have shown me immense love and care. But receiving their support has also given me an opportunity to observe its limits. Some have been willing and able to sit with me and acknowledge the full weight of losing my mother. I recognize this acknowledgment as a gift, and am endlessly grateful to those who have shared such a gift with me. There have been many others, though, who extended shallow support to me, keeping themselves removed with statements like “I can’t imagine” or “she was so young” or “how are you handling this so well?” I have come to think of statements like this as signifying a refusal to, borrowing Frank Wilderson’s language, “dance with death.” A
refusal to dance with death, Wilderson argues, is one marker of anti-Blackness in political movements.

I don’t mean to say here that the ways in which white people grieve are entirely different from how, say, Black people grieve, but I am fascinated by what white death does to whiteness and white people. Of course, it is not that white people are unfamiliar with death, but I think there is a particular way that white people often react to white death: like a promise has been broken. The lie that racial capitalism tells its beneficiaries is not only that brutal violence and genocide is necessary to produce and maintain social life, but also that death and dispossession is something that happens to someone else. Within this structure of violence, I believe whiteness is fundamentally incompatible with grief.

I understand whiteness in America as a political identity formed through colonialism, enslavement, and genocide. As Philip F. Rubio argues, “the white race is not a passive demographic act but an invented voluntary social institution whose only utility is oppression.” Being white, then, means inheriting an “ongoing and unfinished history” (Ahmed) of colonial violence, a history of white freedoms “produced through an other’s body” (Sharpe).

“The white man wants the world,” Frantz Fanon writes, “he wants it for himself alone…An acquisitive relation is established between the world and him.” Whiteness is built to reproduce itself, to grow limitlessly and endlessly. It is a political identification based solely on accumulation—how, then, can whiteness accommodate loss?

“The Tumbled” is an exploration of failed white grief, with personal, historical and political consequences. I wanted to write a story in which white characters were trying – but failing – to assert the power, the control that they (we) are so accustomed to having, and to that end, grief fit as a setting. I wanted to connect this failing to a broader white and American
historical failing or misunderstanding, and I ended up with the strange idea of a white family inviting a Frederick Douglass impersonator to perform at their loved one’s memorial service.

For many history reenactors, reenactments are more than ‘mere’ remembering but are in fact the ongoing event itself, negotiated through sometimes radically shifting affiliation with the past as the present.

-Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains*

The specter (for it is certainly haunting) of the Douglass impersonation brings to this discussion an important word: reenactment. Once I began thinking about reenactment, I saw it everywhere. The celebration of July 4th is itself a national reenactment, an opportunity taken once a year to “sacralize” (Nyong’o) the history of the founding of the United States. But Douglass, in his speech, does not sacralize history; he “profanes” (Nyong’o) it. The white Rochester abolitionists assumed he would join in their celebration, and instead he disrupts it.

Sara Ahmed argues that the white world “is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival.” This speaks to the anti-Indigenous, anti-Black roots of settler-colonialism and manifest destiny, in which “genocide of the Indian, [and] the enslavement of Blacks, [are] precondition[s] for the idea of America.” (Wilderson) Time is crucial in both Ahmed’s and Wilderson’s framing: Wilderson mentions “preconditions,” while Ahmed’s point is about what is “already given.” Within this understanding of the present as reflecting what has already been determined, reenactment comes to the forefront as a loaded site of historical engagement. And the idea of a Douglass reenactment at a memorial service in a hellish landscape whose white residents’ fates appear to be “already given” adds several more layers of contested remembrance and haunting.
When one thinks about historical reenactment in the United States, war reenactment probably comes to mind first—and perhaps especially Civil War reenactment. White southerners, one assumes, participate in or observe Civil War reenactments out of nostalgia for what they have “lost,” namely slavery. This category of reenactment provides comfort to white people, a kind of gentle, violent reassurance of power and security through a retelling of history. Such reenactments serve a colonialist, anti-Black agenda that interprets the present through the past. But it is not really the past: there is pretending at every step. Even if the South “lost” the Civil War, white people never “lost” the benefits of chattel slavery; even as white Civil War reenactors gesture towards a past, it is towards an imagined past. The function of the reenactment is not so much to remember a past as it is to manufacture a present. To “bury the remnants of denigration and disgust,” as Anne Cheng writes, in order to romance a narrative of “progress and the formation of an ‘American identity.’”

But the character of Savor, a Frederick Douglass impersonator, points to another method, another theory of reenactment. Just as Douglass himself in 1852 would not go along with his hosts’ celebratory reenactment, Savor’s non-performance at the Pleutis’ staged memorial obviously does not conform to his audience’s needs or expectations. “The sound of black bodies audibly surrogating the national thing,” Tavia Nyong’o writes, “serves as a reminder of the accumulation of time and the dispossession force Blackness asserts against it.” Amy Pleutis invites Savor to her husband’s memorial – itself a reenactment of his funeral – hoping that Savor could somehow deliver her family from their doomed fate. But Savor flees before the performance—instead of vindicating the Pleutises as not-racists, he leaves them in a state of confusion, to mourn the control they have lost, their stuck-ness in a hellish world of their own ancestral fantasy (Whyte). Douglass’ speech profanes the Rochester abolitionists’ expectation of
celebration, while Savor’s silence cinches the Pleutis family’s dispossession of the power and security of whiteness. He reminds them of their ever-tumbling state.

_White people cannot exist as white and do anything to address racism, because whiteness in action is racism...There is nothing redeeming or redeemable about whiteness—by definition._

-Hari Ziyad & Kevin Rigby, Jr., “White People Have No Place In Black Liberation”

It is a known fact that many white people are terrified of being called racist. There is at least one damaging reason for this: racism is often understood (mostly by white people) in terms of individual prejudice rather than structural violence. This allows white people to gain social capital in liberal circles by identifying themselves as exceptions—people who are aware of their privilege and therefore less culpable of racism. The result of this misunderstanding is a very strange world in which betraying one’s individual racist views is considered much more serious than being responsible for massive, structural anti-Black violence. One example: Donald Trump is (rightly) excoriated by Democrats and some Republicans for calling Haiti a “shithole country,” but there is no problem with _treating_ Haiti as a “shithole country” – that’s bi-partisan colonial policy – only with saying it out loud. In this climate, it is only the perception and accusation of individual racism that is to be avoided.

The stakes in my story are high: the Pleutis family believes that if Savor sees that they are not racist, they will be absolved of their sins and finally free to leave their property. I don’t think it is very far off, though, to say that white people desire and ask for this absolution from Black people under much less dramatic circumstances every day. Subtly or not, white people who are invested in being seen as not-racist seek validation from their Black peers all the time, knowing
that if the question is *am I racist?* the answer must come from outside. A gaping void of grief and guilt lies at the center of this question.

There are two related questions I want to address that may come up in reading this story. One is whether the Pleutis family deserves the fate they have received. Some of them are bound to stick out as more racist, more distasteful than others, so why are they all lumped together? I imagine some readers will feel particularly sympathetic towards Jordan—he’s just a kid!

I do not necessarily mean to argue with this story that all white people deserve to rot in hell, or wherever the Pleutises are, simply because they are white. Not because I *don’t* believe that white people deserve that, but because it’s not my judgment to make. For this reason, I left some aspects of the Pleutis family’s fate unexplained. Maybe they are in hell, or maybe, as they seem to believe, they are stuck in something like purgatory, and passing some sort of test can get them out. Maybe they are alive and frozen in time, or maybe they are dead.

I do think, though, that if the Pleutises (or a real-life family with similar circumstances) found themselves stuck in this way, they would not have much right to complain. Several people I love who have read this story have described it as heartbreaking, brutal, or difficult to read, in part, no doubt, because the Pleutis family’s outlook is so bleak. But part of my goal with this story is to question literary norms about what characters deserve, how their fates are explained and justified, and how race informs those author/reader relationships. The horror genre in particular has a long history of killing off Black characters for no other reason than that they are killable, i.e., the (white) audience does not care about them. White characters are almost always treated with much more care; if bad things are going to happen to them, the author is expected to justify it in a “punishment fits the crime” kind of way. It is difficult, in the context of these literary norms, to write a story about the inherent violence of whiteness, white family, white
social life. Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* shines as a rare successful and popular example of such an effort—every single white character in that movie is racist, and their racism only grows and compounds through their familial and social lives.

Some of the characters in “The Tumbled,” particularly Jordan, are not as obviously racist, and may be read as undeserving of the broader Pleutis fate. I see this as an opportunity to rethink the misconceptions discussed earlier about racism as individual rather than structural. If we recognize the Pleutis family as a well-established and multi-generational “unit of accumulation” (Reckson), functioning through an inherited and continuing legacy of genocide and enslavement, isn’t that enough for them to deserve whatever comes to them? Esther Pleutis’s fascination with blackface is different from Jordan’s clear-headed sincerity and relative abstention from his family’s racist shenanigans, but both grandmother and grandson are wrapped up in the same structural, familial violence.

So don’t feel too bad for Jordan! Anyway, his situation is not as bleak as it seems. The Pleutises appear to have a never-ending amount of food, and of all the places to be stuck, they are stuck in a house with a front and back yard in the historic town of Livingston (despite Esther’s concern that the neighborhood is “changing”). If there is a reason to feel bad for Jordan, it’s that the rest of his family seems to be wholly unable or unwilling to process Henry Pleutis’s death, leaving him alone in grieving his father’s loss. Jordan’s life (death?) is mostly unfortunate not because he is stuck, but because whiteness breeds bad parenting.

*It is this: they have been raised to believe, and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible some of their lives may be and no matter what disaster overtakes them, there is one consolation like a heavenly revelation—at least they are not black.*

-James Baldwin, “The American Dream and the American Negro”
The second question is whether or not the Pleutises – whether or not white people – are redeemable. Again, my aim is not to answer this question, because it is not mine to answer (although my vote would be “no”). The Pleutises themselves, except perhaps for Jordan, certainly think they are redeemable, if they even admit that there is something from which they must be redeemed. Maybe they are right—maybe there is some theoretical way that they could be saved, or save themselves. What I do know is that if it is up to them to figure out what that way is, they will most certainly fail, and they will fail precisely because they are invested in whiteness. As they lose the control whiteness grants them in this unsettling situation, they cling to whiteness desperately, believing that it must be the answer. And if there is an answer, if white people are ever able to redeem themselves, I feel confident that it will be due to a disinvestment in their (our) oppressive conception of power—a total disinvestment from whiteness.

“The Tumbled” begins with a territorial concern. Esther’s scream awakens the Pleutis house with an expression of white fear that, I think, tells the whole story all by itself. Esther’s first response – as well as Amy’s and Steve’s – to seeing the gate suddenly open after being locked for some amount of years is not to run towards freedom, but to defend her damn(ed) territory. It seems to take several pages for anyone to notice that the gate is actually open, because they are so preoccupied with the imminent threat of their Black neighbor’s presence in their yard. The Pleutises, even after being mostly deprived of the spoils of white supremacy for so long, still clinging to their (imagined) history, their ancestry, and their territory. Even when the alternative possibility of freedom seems to be staring them right in the face, they jump to assert their (imagined) power – the police can’t be reached; the gun is not loaded – expressed through anti-Blackness. This is “whiteness in action” (Ziyad and Rigby), motivated by the “heavenly revelation” Baldwin speaks of: *At least we are not black.*
“We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere,” Avery Gordon writes. “We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there.” “The Tumbled” is a story about a distinctly white failure to remember a past, to live in a present, and to build a future. The Pleutises would like nothing more than to live elsewhere—or so they say. They try to imagine that elsewhere, coming up with a convoluted plan that shows at least a hint of recognition of their own sins. But in general, they do not really know where they live. Jordan seems to have an idea—he, at least, appears to have given up hope of an easy escape from their situation. To the extent that there is a way forward for white people (what a silly phrase), I do think it must be based on “know[ing] where we live” (Gordon), and knowing where we have lived. And I believe grief can be a way to work towards such knowledge. Grief, as Claudia Rankine writes, “might align some of us, for the first time, with the living.” This is the necessary task that the Pleutises fail, tragically, to take up: to practice grief in a damned state.

Endnotes

1. The title of this story comes from a found poem passed out by Nathan Richardson at his performance at Tabb Library in Yorktown, VA in November 2019. The original author of this found (or erasure) poem is unknown. The poem on the title page is my own erasure of that poem—a twice-found poem.
2. On page 14, the line, “sometimes it seemed they barely had time to look at each other,” comes from Our Town, a play by Thornton Wilder.
3. On page 16, the line, “You look well-rested, Mom…I’d say your good looks have almost returned,” comes from the ending to “Judgment Day,” a short story by Flannery O’Connor.
4. On page 30, the repeated line, “Ancestors!” in Jordan’s dream comes from a dream my aunt Kate had as a child, and is also referenced in Ancestors, a memoir written by my grandfather, William Maxwell.
Works Cited


Other texts that influenced this project:

Toni Morrison – Beloved, Love, and Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination
George Saunders– Lincoln in the Bardo and Tenth of December
Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah – Friday Black
Dante Alighieri – Inferno
Karen Russell – “The Prospectors”
Jean-Paul Sartre – No Exit
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