

“The Recipe for Water”

By Lourdes Taylor

“Black feminist theory is already after the end of the world,” —
Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive*

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The Recipe for Water

On the first day of summer in the year 2103, two things happened in Ola's life for the last time: she argued with her mother far too early in the morning about nothing out of the ordinary, and she hugged her father, who had died the year before by drowning. Both events anchored the buoy of her adolescence to New York, which made it impossible for Ola to carry it with her when she left home that night. Her mother, on the other hand, had dreamt the night before about birds chirping outside their apartment. She'd never seen any in real life, and neither had her mother, and her mother's mother had only known them in the zoo, before there wasn't enough water for zoos anymore. So there had never been any reason for her to think that the omen they traveled so far to carry to her was anything other than a funny dream.



Ola raised the spoon from the bowl in her lap to her mouth, unaware that her chewing had become mere reflex. Even as background noise, she hardly registered the bouncy *pitter-patter* of cereal as it slipped from her spoon and hit the bamboo floor. Ola's eyes and ears were glued to the holostream, glowing a soft white against the early morning darkness that washed over the apartment. The sun was barely beginning to rise, but Ola didn't notice the bright orange and yellow colors peeking in from the window-wall behind her.

When she wasn't grounded, Ola holostreamed the local and national news every morning at six AM sharp. This last week had been torture—no holostream, no going out, no guests. The 'H double G' of grounding, as her mother called them, and a list of chores longer than her mother's constant lectures about "being an adult." Had her dad been there and heard her graduation speech, he would've been proud of her. He probably would've talked her mom out of the grounding. She had probably tried to ruin things for him at some point too, or so Ola thought.

A slight *creak* came from her mother's bedroom door.

Ola immediately muted the holostream. She quickly flashed her eyes to the right, checking to see if her mom was coming out. Several seconds went by before she turned back to the full-body projections, turned on the captions, and leaned back into the couch.

Michelle was at the opposite end of the apartment trying to decide whether she was going to catch the subway or the bus to work— in other words, whether to get to work a little late, but sweating, or a little *more* late, and dry. In the meantime, she pretended to *just now* hear her daughter using the holostream when she wasn't supposed to. The last half hour of feigned ignorance was a gift, one her own mother would not have been so kind as to grant.

"What exactly are you doing using the holostream? Have you forgotten that your grounding does not end until *tomorrow*?" Michelle threw her phone and charger into the purse on her bed, which took up nearly all the space in the room. Unlike her daughter, Michelle hated the news. But today, her distaste was secondary: she had a presentation to give almost a year in the making. She did her best to fend off thoughts of all the supportive things Koffi would've said if he were here— the more comfortable they got in her mind, the more she wanted to scrap the presentation altogether and crawl defeatedly into bed. As much as she wanted his support today, she would give anything for him to be here to finish it himself. He was a journalist, and finishing

his article as an archival project would never do the story justice, it would never honor him the way she wanted it to.

“Oh my god, I can’t even watch *the news*? This story is breaking on every channel, even nationally.” Ola’s response broke her train of thought. She inhaled before responding.

“Ola, the point of this grounding is to give you the opportunity to clear your head after last week’s *debacle*. Not to watch whatever protest is going on *this week* on holostream and then play pretend.” Michelle didn’t know that Ola had been so anxious about the speech that she actually didn’t bring it to the graduation at all. Even standing at the podium, it took her until the very last nanosecond to decide to close her binder with the reviewed speech and deliver the unapproved one from memory.

Ola turned off the holostream and silently hunched over her phone, while a chirpy ding! came from Michelle’s.

“Reminder: Company-wide mandatory check-ups due today.” Lora™ was the connective operating system for the apartment, car, she and Ola’s phones, and all their other devices. All company employees were required to install Lora™ to make sure internet access was running and stable at home 24/7, so as not to ever miss an email or holocall.

“Shitttttt.” Michelle gritted through her teeth, and put both hands on her forehead. She tried to keep her voice low, so Ola wouldn’t hear. She didn’t need her thinking it was acceptable language.

“I’m sorry: is something wrong?” There came a point when the company had to make Lora™ sound *more* robotic, because so many people found her hyper-human voice unsettling. Michelle had been one of the first to complain.

“No, Lora, I’m fine. Thank you.” She waved her hand in the air dismissively, even though Lora couldn’t see her.

“Have a good day, Michelle.” With goosebumps on her arms, Michelle tried to concentrate on the problem at hand. She could go after work but if she went later, there would be no chance to get home before Ola went to sleep. She tried to see Ola at the end of the day every day, even when all she did was complain about a punishment she had *well* earned.

Train-sweat it was. She would stop at the company clinic first, then head to the conference room. Michelle reminded herself that these check-ups never took longer than thirty minutes, and the lab work wasn’t available for pickup until the next day. There was no reason to panic. Michelle scanned the room for her keys, and spotted them underneath her nightstand. Throwing them in with everything else, she took one last look in the mirror. Hair: bone-straight from yesterday’s relaxer. Makeup: clean, polished. She was ready, even if she would have to rush to make it to the train. She glanced at her holowatch. Fifteen minutes.

“Breakfast is here on the stove, okay? I made your favorites to finally celebrate your graduation even if you did try to ruin it. That kind of behavior will be inexcusable in college, valedictorian or not, you know.” The bedroom door clicked shut behind Michelle as she stepped out into the kitchen-side of the room. “And your chores *will* be done by the time I come home, yes? Summer break isn’t a break from being clean, Ola. You don’t want to be the girl no one wants to live with because she’s dirty.” From the living-room side, Ola rolled her eyes discreetly and scrolled through messages on her phone. Michelle slung her bag over her shoulder and took three strides to arrive at the front door. “That means trash, dishes, bathroom. The CO² levels are high today, you’ll need a filter when you go out.” She sat down, and started to pull on her best rubber soles. “Ola, I’m speaking to you.”

“Don’t you even want to know what it was about?” Ola whipped her body over the arm of the couch, and jerked her own toward the hologram projector. The tone of Ola’s voice caught Michelle by surprise, and there was a moment of pause before she knew how to respond.

“Ola, I don’t have time today, okay? Today’s —today’s presentation day. You know, I’m finishing dad’s project.” Michelle stopped what she was doing, and looked at her daughter’s face for the first time that morning. Ola’s round brown eyes were alive with energy, even somber. Ola sighed, and her shoulders visibly fell. Neither of them said anything, until Michelle could remember some good news.

“Hey, we’re running errands tonight, so be ready when I get home.” Ola’s expression brightened at the code word. She’d at least get to see Uncle Kwame while she was being punished.

“Okay.”

“Okay. Good.” Michelle strapped her *mono*, a mono-cartridge filter, across her face.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Ola?”

“It was about Jetson, they said they can’t keep up with the demand and the population is too big and it’s driving the price of extra parcels through the roof.” Ola spit everything out as fast as she could. Extra freshwater parcels were already a luxury most people couldn’t afford, or that were only given as *very* expensive wedding gifts by the ultra-wealthy. Federal distribution of the parcel amounts for households nationwide was done through Jetson Desalination Incorporated, as was the desalination process itself for the entire east coast.

Michelle took her hand off the doorknob.

“So, what are they saying they’re going to do about it?” She felt sheepish. It was awkward to ask questions about her own employer—the Fresh Water Preservation branch of the National Archives was also managed through Jetson Inc.

“The government is talking about *reducing allotments*.” Ola’s voice wavered when she spoke, and Michelle felt the urge to scratch the back of her throat. Without a word, they both immediately knew what Koffi would’ve said. ‘*Population, my Black ass*’. He’d written a dozen articles on how things changed after The Salting: federal sterilization programs, medically “encouraged” postpartum ovary removal, etc. Mostly for Black people.

He always talked about how corporations knew they were causing the Salting as early as 2000, maybe even the 1970s. When she was little, she’d always tell him science wasn’t as good back then, that there was no way we could blame all those innocent people for what happened. She’d pout her mouth into a frown and cross her arms in defense of the past. He’d laugh, and kiss her on the head before kneeling down to her eye level. She’d try to look as confident as he always did on holostream, somehow getting to the story before other journalists even knew where to look. With his softest voice he’d tell her, “it’s not about blame, Ola-Bola. It’s about living. Who gets more, who gets less, and why.” She didn’t know what he’d say now.

“Try not to think about it too much, okay honey? It’ll be okay. They probably mentioned that they’re working around the clock on solutions, didn’t they?”

“Ask me tomorrow. You told me to turn it off before they could finish.”

Michelle shot a look at her daughter, and pulled on her *mono*.

“I’m going. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.”

“Love you.”

“Love you bye.” Ola said the words altogether, like she couldn’t separate them. Or wouldn’t.

Michelle had seven minutes to get to the MTA. The street was loud with the sound of dozens of pairs of soles squeaking against the newly-elevated sidewalk as they carried the whole block to work. The city had flooded again last week, so the mayor issued an order to raise it even higher than just the week before. Enormous sewage grates lined the road on either side to fill the gap. She made it to the train with a minute to spare, squeezing through the turnstile with just enough time to jump through the metal doors. She sat down in a single seat that another woman had just vacated, and leaned her head against the window. For no specific reason, she suddenly remembered that they’d all been dead; the birds in her dream. The train hummed as it went along, and it reminded her of the song she used to sing to Ola when she was born.



It only took one bite of breakfast for Ola to realize she was in fact still hungry from the bowl of cereal she didn’t eat. Carving into her plate, she almost forgot to be mad, it was so good. The waffles were thick and fluffy, just how she liked, and there had even been a strip of bacon underneath them. A graduation gift, no doubt. She wouldn’t see bacon again until Christmas. She drank her meal water allotment with the glass her mom had set out instead of the usual cardboard, and did a “cheers” with the air. She ate in silence, since she couldn’t turn on the holostream, but she hummed an old song she’d heard somewhere to herself between bites.

Ola finished, and took a few steps to pass through the bathroom door. Grabbing the foot ladder underneath the sink, she climbed to the third stair and reached for the ceiling cabinets overhead. She pulled down the narrow shelves and took out her face soap, toothbrush, and hygienel measurement cup before pushing the unit back into the ceiling, listening for the

fastening *click* of its closure. She stepped down, put the ladder away, and unfolded a wooden platform no bigger than the size of her hand from beneath the sink like she would a food tray on an airplane. She set the items down, and met her reflection in the mirror.

Ola frowned slightly as she noticed the length of her hair. She loved the tight coils of her hair on their own, but she especially loved how the shrinkage kept her afro short and tight to her head. She wished her dad could've seen it like this. He always said he had an afro back in the day, before he "decided" to be bald. Her mom would laugh when he said it, and she would too. Until the accident, her mom had never let Ola wear her hair short. She always blew it out with a slick brush or put it in braids that itched the back of her neck. Her mom never relaxed it though, Ola thought, like she did to her own, and like grandma's had been. He had died a year ago last Saturday, exactly 365 days before Ola's graduation. When they called and told her mom that her husband had drowned in Howard's Bay, the autopsy was already done: he'd had a freak heart attack, fallen into the water, and drowned. No one saw what happened, until a security guard spotted his body on rounds. That was it.

The week before his accident, there had been a strike at Jetson that nobody really seemed to pay attention to and most people didn't remember now. All the shore workers; builders, sanitation workers, and plant operators, organized to demand extra water parcels from the company. The immediate problem, like most immediate problems, was about water: the company provided the CDC-mandated *trios*, tri-cartridge filters, to all shore workers because of their constant exposure to toxins in the air. But *trios* required an extensive cleaning routine, one that necessitated boiling each cartridge daily. To sanitize just one cartridge took a days' worth of drinking water, meaning a person would die of dehydration if they kept the filters clean all the time. So, shore workers ended up inhaling a more concentrated amount of toxins *from* the

cartridges slowly, breath by breath, over multiple months and years. Koffi's twin brother Kwame had had bronchitis for as long as Ola could remember. Hence, why she and her parents risked becoming felons once a month to smuggle the extra water her mom received to bring to him. She didn't need it most months and they gave it to her anyway. It was sick. He was the on-site nurse for the plant, and the first person who was called over to his brother's dead body. Koffi was there that day to do interviews for a story on the strike, which at the time was still ongoing. Jetson never conceded to the strikers.

It was hard for Ola to believe it had been more than a year already. Now here she was, grounded for something he would've done too. She completely submerged the spout of the bathroom sink in her hygiene measurement cup. With the steadfast hand she'd practiced since childhood, she carefully turned the metal handle in toward her body. After a few seconds of silence, a thin stream of cold water ran into her cup. Every drop was accounted for, rising from 1 oz, to 2, until it neared the top, 6oz. Since her eleventh birthday, when she'd finally been allowed to use the sink by herself, Ola had loved listening to the water as it rose. *Plink-plop-plink-plop*. The muscles in her shoulders relaxed, and Ola was surprised at how tightly she had been holding them.

Today, her mom was pitching what would've been her dad's story as a project to archive responses to the current method of water distribution. It was off-brand for what her branch normally did—their job was to archive *methods and tactics* of fresh water preservation since The Salting. This proposal was about *responses* to one of those methods, desalination, not to mention that it included a lot of criticism of Jetson. But she was prepared for that, or so she'd said to Ola, and had the support of her co-workers to argue for its approval. Between careful drips of water onto her Black soap, Ola thought of the most positive affirmation she could

summon for her mom: this presentation would be the estuary's tail of the National Archives. She imagined sending it out to her by pigeon with a little scroll on its ankle, like people did before holostream. Hopefully the universe heard her. Ola hadn't believed in heaven in a long time, since long before high school, but she quickly prayed to God she was wrong, and apologized for calling her fake all those times. If there was any way her dad could see the project, she didn't want him to be one prayer away from getting there.

The licorice-colored suds were soft in her palms as she gently cleansed her skin. She poured the water onto her face until the weight distribution started to tip the cup toward her. Putting it down, she took her cloth off the hook on the hall and wiped her face. Ola brushed her teeth, used the remaining water to rinse, and put the items back into the ceiling cupboard.

According to Lora, 96 was the high temperature today. It was a little cool for May, so both Ola and the day went by with a quiet ease. By 3pm, she'd finished her chores, listened to her entire Calypso playlist, eaten lunch, packed her 'errands' bag, and found the perfect wall spot for her diploma. She was actually looking forward to when her job would start in a couple weeks, at least then she'd have bagels to get for people and documents to scan all day before college in the Fall. Ola laid down on her bed to take a nap before her mom would get home later. 'Errands' took a while, and she'd need to be sharp.

"Incoming Call: BESTIEEEE <3" Ola flinched a little. Was Lora's voice always this damn loud?

Picking up the phone, Ola gave a cheer of excitement. She answered the holotime and ran to put the phone directly across from her on the dresser so the camera could see her full body. Seconds later, Nadine's hologram stood in front of her. She wore a lavender sweater over her white collared shirt, and little gold earrings that dangled from her round ears. They almost

glowed against the warm, umber tones of her clear skin. Even standing, her hologram was only a little taller than Ola, who sat with her legs crossed at the edge of her bed.

“Oll-aaaa—when is your grounding over again? My life is way boring when you’re grounded.” Even complaining, Nadine’s voice was soft and patient. It was softer than normal, though, and Ola wondered where she was. It was dark, and didn’t look like her room, unless she painted it black. Ola hoped she wouldn’t paint her room without consulting her first. She needed her best friend to steer her in the right direction.

“I’ve literally been bored out of my mind for five days. I’ll be at your house at 8am sharp tomorrow morning, so say hi to your parents for me in advance.” Ola gave her a cheeky thumb’s up.

“Thank god.”

“Where are you, anyways? Why is it so dark?”

“I’m playing hide and seek with the twins, I’m in mom’s closet. Hopefully they never find me and I can just be here on the phone in peace for a while.” She shimmied down to the floor, and leaned her head against the wall.

“Doesn’t sound boring to me.” Nadine was the oldest of five siblings, which was rare. Her parents didn’t abide by the one-child suggestion, and thought the whole thing was ridiculous. They’d gotten along well with her father, with both of her parents actually. Apparently her mom had had a lot of siblings growing up too, but she didn’t ever talk about them. Three sisters, if Ola remembered correctly. They usually start the pamphlets for the ovary-removal with pregnant moms a month out from giving birth. Jean-Marc was the oldest boy at fifteen, Dimitri was the middle child, and the twins, Stephan and Michel were the babies at eight years old. Nadine always got shit from their *brainless* classmates at school for having so many siblings. Every time

there was a water shortage, because the plant was struggling with production, someone would always say it was because her family drank all the clean water. But her parents were both professors, so they could afford kids better than most. Ola always thought it would be nice to have such a big family, and Nadine's family was happy, which encouraged her. Except when she had to hide in the closet to get away from the twins.

“Is.. um... Ms. Brewer still upset about what happened, with Headmaster Sibley and all?” Nadine avoided making eye contact with Ola as she spoke. Ola wanted to talk about anything else.

“I mean, I guess. And would you just call her mom, you're over here more than you're at your own house.” She pulled at a frayed string of her sheet. “She's still not really over the whole abandon-my-pre-approved-valedictorian-speech-to-expose-racist-administrative-resource-corruption thing. You're her favorite child this month.” Ola smirked at her, but Nadine didn't laugh. Instead, she unnecessarily adjusted the smooth puff at the top of her head. Right then, Ola knew she would have to make a choice about what she would say.

“Ola, um, I just wanted to see if you're okay, you know.... with your dad and everything? I know the anniversary was that same day. And with your speech and all...” Her voice was a near whisper, and not because of the game. Ola looked down at her hands resting in her lap, and contemplated telling the truth.

“I'm fine, really.” She made a compromise. “As soon as we got home, I got into a big fight with my mom. She screamed at me for like an hour about responsibility, how I embarrassed her, she's not one of my lil friends.... Blah blah blah. But really, I'm fine now.” Two truths, and the same lie twice. Nadine stared at her with her giant brown-green eyes, and Ola knew she didn't buy it. But she also knew Nadine was too considerate to press her.

“Well... alright. I mean, I thought you did great. Since it was live-streamed, you really got the facts out there to a lot of people. And you got most of it out before they disconnected your microphone and dragged you off stage. There’s a rumor going around that Headmaster Sibley has spontaneously decided to ‘retire,’ after *fifteen years* at Excel.” The local news chose a high school graduation every year to livestream for their ‘Celebrate Education!’ segment. When the communications office told Ola they’d chosen Excel High, and her speech would be broadcast, she knew what had to be done.

“Yeah, I guess. But we have more important things to discuss: are you going to Mike’s or Ava’s tomorrow? *Thank god* all the parties pushed back after the floods last week, since I’ll be freed tomorrow!” She raised her hands in the air in celebration. “Did you hear the rumor that Greg has a *pool* in his backyard? I don’t think it’s true but if it is, that’s seriously fucked up. Anyway, Ava’s will probably have cuter guys.” Ola grinned at her hopefully, and Nadine burst into a fit of laughter.

“You know I, don’t—don’t go to parties!” She barely got the words out.

“Come *on*, Nadine. It’s our graduation party. It’s Saturday night and we won’t be young forever. ”

“I don’t think so. It’s always loud and the air is thick with sweat and weed and ugh. It’s just nasty. I only ever like going with you when you have a crush on a girl and you need a wingwoman.”

“I know but pleassssseeee! We have to go. We can steal the rich-people snacks from Ava’s and then watch movies at your house.” She brought her hands together and pretended to pout.

“I... I guess. I do like chicken nuggets.”

“Exactly. We’re gonna get those expensive ass nuggets. Ooh! Do you have anything to wear—” Ola’s phone beeped, and Nadine’s hologram shrank down. Lora™ cut in.

“INCOMING CALL: MOMMA...”

“Who’s calling? Is it Nova? You guys were so cute chatting away last week before everything happened,” Nadine teased.

“My...mom?” Ola hadn’t meant for it to come out as a question, but it did.

“Oh my god, well hang up. She only ever holotimes in emergencies.” The last one being that her father had been found dead in the middle of the ocean. She’d been asleep, and her mom called from the car, racing like a maniac from work, sobbing into the phone.

“Okay....see you tomorrow morning.” Ola said, trying to keep her voice light.

“Call me if you need me...” Nadine hesitated for a moment, but she reached for her phone and hung up. Ola tugged harder at the string at the edge of her bed, and tried to exhale. Her breath was shallow. She waived her hand in front of her phone, accepting her mom’s call. At first, her hologram didn’t appear and Ola was met with her mother’s default background photo. It was an old picture of them at the park, mom holding her as they went down the slide. Dad had taken the picture by accident when mom wanted a video, but she’d liked it even more that way.

“Hi Mom. Yes, I have done all the chores, and no I did not turn on the holostream.” She hoped her mom would be annoyed at her tone. Suddenly, her hologram camera turned on. She was in a chair, but the camera was too close to her face to see much else. Her expression was hardened, but her eyelids were peeled back as far as they could go and her stare was bright and intense, like lightning. Every muscle in Ola’s body clenched with dread.

“Ola, you need to listen to me. They’re going to come back, and I don’t know when I’ll be able to call again.” Her voice was strained and extremely low. “You have to run errands by

yourself, honey, okay? Take some clothes with you, enough for a week or so, stay with Uncle Kwame until I—I can talk to you again.”

“What are you talking about? Are you okay? Are you at the doctor’s office?” Someone’s framed medical degrees were hanging on the wall behind her. She got flashbacks to seeing her father dead in a hospital bed.

“I’m fine. That’s the problem, Ola, that I’m *fine*.” Her voice cracked, and she brought her hand to her upper lip. The back of Ola’s neck was hot and she was digging her fingernails into her bedsheet.

“Are... are you being serious about the errands?” It wasn’t the thought of going alone that worried Ola. She’d gone with her parents, either both of them or just her mom, every month since she was ten. When she got her license, she started offering to go by herself. Not even her dad let her try that. The fact that her mom was now *suggesting* it that formed a pit in her stomach.

“Yes, um, this morning I went to the company clinic for my check up, got my tests done in twenty minutes, and went to give the presentation. The entire board, and my whole department were there, and in the middle of it Chairman Dillard got a call, and he went outside, then pulled me outside, then told me they’d found something, that I’ve got some kind of genetic *hysteria* that I’ve never heard of, and that they’re going to, um...” She shut her eyes hard, and looked down at the floor, like it would give her strength. Ola’s head suddenly felt like it was full of helium. This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t be. Not her mom too. “They’re going to make me an in-patient, move me into a residential facility, when they come back in here.”

“What, what does all that mean? What did they say is wrong with you?” Her voice was shaking. “Is this treatment gonna work, I mean how... how serious is it? When can you come home?”

“Ola, baby, I’m sorry I know this is a lot to take in, but I only have a few minutes so I need you to listen: it’s not real.” She shook her head against her hands, clasped together. Her elbows were propping her up on her knees. An awful, quivering smile came across her face. “They didn’t do any genetic testing at the check-up. They took my temperature and my blood pressure and tested my eyesight and hearing. There’s no way this came from any of my tests. It’s made up.” It sounded like tar was clogging her throat. All the blood drained from Ola’s face as she tried to come up with one question to ask from the sea of them clawing across each other in her mind.

“What do you mean it’s *made up*?” The air in the room was heavy and damp, but Ola’s throat felt dry.

“It was during my presentation, Chairman Dillard told me the board didn’t want the rest of the department in the meeting, then he asked me all these crazy questions about the water that didn’t make any sense, things only a fucking chemist would know, and things about your dad, things that had nothing to do with the presentation. I told the board that the project was inspired by him, that I read all his notes that weren’t lost in the water when... when he... he fell.” She was still trying to maintain her most controlled face, but she wore the same expression she had at the funeral. Ola didn’t think she’d ever heard her mom curse, and it only shocked and disoriented her more. “Then he left to get his phone, and then security took me out, like I was trespassing. The way the board was acting, it was like, like it was already a done deal, like *before* they came in, before my tests, before it all, like they’d been planning it for a while, maybe even since the

project started. All I had to do was confirm what the project really was and they pulled the trigger, on all this.” She waved her hand around her head and then out toward the room. She was clearly confused too, talking herself through it as things happened. Ola felt panic rising in her chest like lava, and her mind raced to the first possible solution.

“Mom, we have to tell someone, we have to call the police, tell them this is a crime, they can’t just falsify illnesses and get—”

“NO, Ola, do not do that. Do not call the police. Don’t call anyone, don’t talk to anyone, just go to Uncle Kwame’s and stay there, please. Until I can figure a way out of this myself, okay?”

“What?! I’m not just going to leave you there and do nothing, if, if they’re really lying, and they’re just angry about the project, I can’t just—” Her words were scattered and out of control.

“*Ola, please!*” She shouted, and Ola flinched. “Who do you think owns the police in New York? All over the East Coast?” Ola was stunned. She’d never heard her mom say anything like that before, something her dad would’ve said. She struggled to find the words to respond.

“Okay, I can run errands tonight...but I have to come home, I have to come to the facility, demand that I can see you—”

“No, no, Ola. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” Her makeup was running everywhere and the roots of her hair were damp with sweat. “You need to focus, really focus, on running errands tomorrow,” she paused, and exhaled. “Please, please be careful. Do everything just as we’ve done it every time, okay? Don’t forget anything, prep it all now so you can focus when you leave, at the set time. Uncle Kwame needs you, and you need him now. I messaged him, but he hasn’t responded yet, but they’re gonna take my phone, when they come back,” she glanced

down at what Ola assumed was her phone to check her messages, then back up, past the camera, at whatever was on the other side. A door? A window?

“You cannot get caught. You just can’t, okay?” Her voice was thick, like she was holding back tears. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to talk to you again. They said... they said they’re moving me in permanently, that my “condition” is progressive.” She made air quotes, and then put her hands on her head and pressed hard. “But Ola, you have to believe me: if I have to learn to fly, soar like some hawk, I’m going to get out of here, and come find you.” Ola’s face was dripping with tears. Her nose was running, and everything was blurry.

“Mom, no...no...please, no, you can’t...” She choked it out between harsh breaths.

“It’s gonna be okay, Ola. It will. I promise. I swear. And, and I’m sorry about everything. I’m sorry. I know I, sometimes—I discourage you from your instincts, from all the things you see and pay attention to, because I’m trying to keep you safe, but I... I failed.” Her arms were crossed, hands pulling at the skin around her shoulders incessantly. “But I need you to use those skills now. I need you to trust yourself and your decisions, okay?” Tears on each side rolled down her face. Veins were popping through her face and neck, but she maintained her gaze. “Okay, Ola?” There was a loud clunking noise. It came from off camera, and her mom looked, horrified, and steadfast, past the camera.

“They’re here, I love you Ola, I love you so much.” She stared directly into the camera, with black shadowy stains all over her brown eyes and honey skin.

“Okay...I love... love you...mom.” Her breaths were still hiccuping uncontrollably. The last thing Ola heard as her mother shoved her phone down into the darkness of her bag was the voice of who she had to assume was a doctor.

“We are very excited and optimistic about providing your care, Michelle. We would be more than glad to take your valuables off your hands, to give you time to focus on healing, and self-care as you settle into your new home with us. Doctors Tusk and Penn will escort you to your new residen—”

The holotime ended.

Ola stayed as she was, leaning too far off the edge of her bed, until it was too dark to see her dresser. It hadn't occurred to her to move back, or that she might fall and hurt herself. She felt like she'd left her body and entered one that was entirely foreign, her limbs were misshapen and irreparable in these sockets that weren't her own. When she finally looked down, she'd picked at the fraying edges of her sheets so badly that her hands were buried in a sea of indigo string. It was seven thirty when she tried to rip the strands from the comforter, but together, the threads mustered more strength than she could. Her joints ached from lack of movement. Ola formed her best grip and yanked the fibers with her left hand, holding the blanket in place with her right. But they tightened around her skin, dragging her deeper and deeper into their depths as she pulled. Her breathing quickened. She groaned, and they began to suffocate her veins, the oxygen eluding her fingers until they matched the color of the string. Finally letting go, the blood rushed back to the ends of her hands, but she wasn't sure they could feel anymore. Ola left the pile at the edge of her bed to continue to unravel, to fall apart and lose themselves as she had. She set an alarm for thirty minutes, and laid down, knowing that when she woke, she would need to look like herself again, even if she wasn't. There were no other options but to sew her body back together and pretend the stitches were part of the fabric, birthmarks in their own right.

In those thirty minutes, she dreamt that her arms were wings, and she'd broken them both, and fallen out of the sky like a bomb headed for ground. When she fell, a purple wave

rushed above her, and she writhed against it, but the crash never came. It just left her there, broken and full of dread for what felt like hours, but was only a few minutes.



The sky was a dark blanket over the city lights when Ola got in her mom's car: she rolled the windows all the way down and left home for Howard's Bay. The rain had come down like a storm over the last hour, and then immediately cleared up. Fresh and cool, the air blew past her face and filled her nose with the scent of dew and fresh rubber on the sidewalk. Her *duo* hung around her neck instead of her *mono*, for the drop in air quality she'd face after passing the checkpoint. She had woken up and decided it wasn't happening. She was just going to Uncle Kwame's to sleepover, her mom was coming home, it would all get chalked up to a misunderstanding or some crossed paperwork and they'd laugh about it in a few days. She had decided, so it had to be so.

Ola almost never got to drive the car. Part of her mom's job was to go to business meetings about different archival projects, or to pick up new materials, so they leased her a minivan, with Lora™ installed (of course). As they did every time, Ola disabled the operating system before leaving, and removed the car tracker. Unfortunately, that meant she had to drive the car herself, since Lora™ was also the built in driver. But Ola liked that she was retro; most of her friends couldn't drive manual since they stopped making it a mandatory part of the driving test. It now mostly consisted of knowing how to operate Lora™.

Cruising across the bridge, Ola ran through all the things she had already done, and all the things she still needed to do.

“Took the chip out of my phone, turned it off, disabled Lora™—” She slowed down and stopped at a red light. “water parcels are...” she glanced at the seat next to her to reconfirm. “in

the shopping bag, between sweaters,” Perfect. “License, state ID, registration, and car badge,” She took her right hand off the wheel and placed it on top of the items to make sure they hadn’t vanished. “The groceries ‘that I can only get at the bodega on 129th, officer’” she practiced her most naive tone. “are hidden underneath the seat. Once I’m home, I’ll--” she caught herself. She wasn’t coming home, not this time. Even still, she glanced back at the cardboard box with the words FRESH PET in bold letters on the outside. “last, I charged the—” Her eyes instantly widened, and she glanced at the dashboard. She frantically waived her hand, and a green, glowing hologram of the gas tank appeared underneath her rearview mirror. 10%. “SHIT.” Someone honked at her from behind, and she looked at the road. The light was green, and she stepped on it.

“Dammit dammit dammit” 10% was enough to get her there, if everything went right. But with the way her day was going so far, she couldn’t trust that. Not to mention it was her first time doing it alone, which she tried to forget. Stopping at a charging station would mean a trace, so she’d have to charge it with the solar panels, which would take a few hours. She prayed she could make it all the way to her Uncle’s.

“It’s okay, it’s fine. I’ll be okay.” She repeated her mother’s words back to herself.

Thirty minutes later, Ola had counted all four signs warning of the Crown Heights checkpoint. She turned right on Dean St., and merged from six lanes to three: one for CH residents, one for official vehicles, and one for non-residents. Ola eased her foot from the gas pedal as she pulled into the middle lane, third in line behind a black pickup truck and a slipper. She noticed that the slipper was smaller than most, with only eight wheels. Probably only used internally to Port Howard, she figured, distributing water to shore workers, or “fish”— the local name for anyone who worked on the shore. Ola didn’t use the popular shorthand because in

second grade she'd heard Amelia Brandt call her Uncle Kwame a fish when he came to pick her up in his uniform after school. She asked her parents why Amelia thought her uncle had scales and could breathe underwater at dinner and they'd both turned and looked at her like they were going to scrub her tongue out with a brillo pad. They—

She stopped herself. These were exactly the kind of thoughts that were not going to be tolerated on this ride.

Jetson had to keep the slippers at an offsite facility so that when the floods came, the whole neighborhood wouldn't be electrocuted from the grates. Ola could hear the low hum of them even from her car, and remembered the *Times* article about how many thousands of gallons of water the city had saved from being stolen by installing electric grates on each side of the truck. She adjusted her hands on the wheel to accommodate her slick palms, and pulled up for her turn as it lumbered through.

The officer walked to the front of her car, saw her government license plate, and didn't scan. So far, so good.

"Okay, okay. Here we go. No problems." She smiled, and leaned just a little out of the widow.

"Good morning officer," she said as he approached. His skin was pale, even for a white man, and he walked slowly to observe what he could from the car alone.

"Good morning ma'am. License, ID and registration please."

"They're just right here next to me." She smiled again and carefully took the documents in her hand. As soon as she'd handed them over, it began.

"Ms. Ass-uh-joo," She didn't correct him. "This vehicle is leased to Michelle Brewer by the national archives. You're listed here on her registration as her daughter, 17, is that correct?"

“Yes, it is.”

“What brings you out here? If you’re gonna fish for the summer, I need written confirmation from Jetson, and a Port Howard minor’s permit.”

“No sir, I’m actually headed to a grocery store just outside Jetson, the ones out by me don’t sell the vegetables I need.” He stared at her expressionless.

“I don’t know what...*unique* foods you eat, but what’s out here that you can’t get in Harlem?” His eyes narrowed as he watched her body language.

“Cassava, Dasheen, planta” Internally, she smiled. Dad’s old trick.

“Alright,” he spat. “Can you confirm, under penalty of law, that this vehicle does not contain any contraband, including: illegal drugs, illegal or unlicensed firearms, or undocumented aliens” The officers were always more suspicious of drugs and “aliens” than the actual crime she was committing.

“I can confirm that, yes.”

“Can you also confirm that you currently do not carry any counterfeit, stolen, or otherwise illegally ascertained water allotments or water tokens?”

“I can confirm that as well.” Two truths.

“Lastly, you are required to declare any *legal* water tokens or allotments that you may currently carry.”

“I do not carry any water tokens or allotments.” And a lie.

“Alright ma’am, you’re all clear one more thing, real quick, how old is your cat?” Ola blinked. The most critical officers always asked a question about the Fresh Pet box, but not at the end of the check.

“She’s an old lady, 12 years old. Her name is Sarah.” Rocks started to build in her stomach. His lips dipped into a subtle frown.

“Got it. Well it’s good you have the green box, then. That’s the good one for their age group. My wife’s cat is going on 15, and that’s what we use.”

“Great minds think alike.” Ola smiled and forced a laugh.

“Have a nice day ma’am.” He patted the side of the car and went on to the next one. The moment she was out of sight, Ola celebrated the tiny victory.

“WHOOOO! Oh my god, I did that shittttt. Thank god, thank god thank god.” She laughed at herself, and for almost a full second, the tension rolled out of her shoulders.

Turning the corner onto her uncle’s street, Ola spotted a pair of old ladies cooling themselves with bright yellow fans as they walked down the block. They were heading for the nighttime service at the Spiritual Baptist church, no doubt. When her father died, family members Ola had never met came all the way in from Tobago, and still they were excited to see her. That was the last time she’d been inside the church, for mourning. She didn’t take part in all of the ceremony, but she remembered listening to her ‘new’ aunts and uncles explain things to her when they were done. It made the day about more than just loss.

The two women were laughing the way you only do when you’re trading secrets with your best friend, and she briefly wished Nadine was there. Ola felt her fingers tap to the rhythm of the drums, faint but strong in the distance. She hadn’t played since before they moved from Queens to Harlem, but her hands remembered it all; the prayers and the dancing; the way the women at the drums guided the spirit; her father’s hands atop hers on the skins; the very last time she played, show and tell; the monkey jokes; mom’s voice, if she doesn’t want to go, she doesn’t have to; dad’s hardened expression; her first memory of shame.

She made it to the house.

Ola pulled up and parked the car in the tall, dead grass behind the shed where she always did. His house was only near the homes of the other on-site workers for the plant, but they were all relatively spaced out, so no one was around. The house was almost invisible against the sky even when you came close; it was painted sky-gray. She took the bag from the passenger's seat beside her, slammed the door, and made her way over. It felt good to smile as she approached the back porch. Ola's stride was wide and urgent. After making her way through the grass, she came up to the bamboo door and knocked seven times slow so he would know it was her. She waited for a few moments, but all she heard was the buzz of the cicadas behind her. Maybe he was in the shower, she thought, and tried the door herself. To her surprise, it was open, but the latch was broken. It dangled from a nail post like it had been busted open. She stepped through the door and tried to ignore the hairs standing up on her arms.

"Uncle K, it's me, I'm here, I'm not a robber," she listened for him to joke back, but it was quiet. Looking around, Ola gasped, and felt her stomach start to churn in on itself. The couch was upside down, with its frothy white insides spilled all over the floor. On each and every wall, even the ceiling, holes were punched into the drywall like polka dots. Exposed pipes and wires stuck out from every angle and the floor was covered in dust and wooly insulation. She took a step, and heard a deafening *crunch*. She quickly picked her foot up, and pulled a piece of broken glass from her shoe. She looked up at the windows, and crossed her arms over her stomach, trying to soothe herself. They were all broken. Where the ceiling fan had been, there was a hole in the ceiling, and the ceiling fan lay bare on the kitchen floor, upside down and cracked open. Ola's breaths were heavy now, and she had the urge to run, but she forced her legs to carry her over to his bedroom, and peeked inside.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

The room was completely bare: his bed, his nightstand, his closet, all usually a mess of clothes, food, and papers, were stripped down to the bone. There wasn't so much as a scrap of paper on the ground. Ola sat down on the floor and tried to make sense of what was happening. It looked like her uncle had packed up and left, without a word, and someone had come looking for him with a vengeance. Against her will, she thought about her mom, and considered the unthinkable, that maybe he'd done something to piss off Jetson too. If they came after him, it was clear that he knew they were coming. Why didn't he say anything, if he was in danger? *What could he have possibly done?*

A rustle coming from the back door interrupted her thoughts. She darted her head toward the door, and scrambled off the ground. The rustling intensified, and there was a scratching sound, coming from the door, like someone was trying to get in. Her eyes darted around for the nearest thing to grab to defend herself, but then the noise changed.

A bark made its way to her ears. Ola crept around to the door with a broken fan wing in her hand, and approached it slowly. If there was a dog, it could be with someone. She peered through the blinds, and her heart lifted with a relief she had never felt. Ola flung the door open as fast as she could.

“Atlanta!” she screamed, and her uncle's charcoal-colored dog barked wildly upon seeing her. She threw herself down and put her arms around her uncle's dog, and Atlanta wriggled happily in her arms, just as relieved to see Ola as she was to see her.

Kwame had found Atlanta in a highway ditch on his way back from a wedding in Georgia, right beneath the city sign, “Now Leaving: Atlanta.” He'd never been very creative, Ola thought, and her mouth started to curl at the ends. Atlanta was a Cormida, (CORE-ME-DUH), an

oft-abandoned breed: they were extremely popular in the 30s and 40s because they were bred to seek out sources of freshwater, which became all but useless after The Salting. The name itself was a remix of the Latin word for heart, “cor” and “Midas,” the mythological Greek King. According to her grandparents, people used to say that having a Cormida was like having a “golden heart”; the freshwater they sought out could cure anything, even heart failure, which was an increasingly common occurrence from dehydration. All of that, of course, was ironic now. All the puppies that were over-bred were almost immediately abandoned, and since they weren’t spayed or neutered, wild packs of the slick-coated dogs started forming all over, especially in big cities.

“Lanta, what are you doing here, what happened?” Ola was crying the best kind of tears. She’d never been so happy to see her uncle’s best friend— but that was what worried her. He would die before he left Atlanta to fend for herself alone, no matter how capable she was. He’d trained her from his first day taking her home, and he’d taught Ola most of her commands over the course of their visits. She rubbed behind her ears, and suddenly realized she didn’t have her filter on. Before Ola could try to fashion a cloth mask for her, she started running for the shed. She barked back at Ola, and Ola cut across the grass, following her, and praying she was taking Ola to her uncle.

Atlanta trotted through the doggie door of the room-sized shed. Ola tried to open the human door but it was bolted shut, and there were no windows, so she got down on her knees and squeezed her way in after Atlanta.

“Uncle K, are you here?” Ola called out desperately, coming to her hands and knees on the other side. She stood up, and dusted herself off. She’d scraped her knee a little on the way, but she didn’t care, her eyes were busy searching the room. As far she could tell, there was

nothing and no one inside but Atlanta, an enormous bag of dog food, a tub of water, and a few blankets on the floor. Her heart sank, and Ola put her face in her hands. She took a shaky breath, and heard a clear *bark!* From Atlanta. She looked up, and Atlanta was staring at the wall next to her. Ola looked, and there, hanging, were her canine filters. She exhaled, and reached to take one down. She bent down to strap it behind Atlanta's ears, but she noticed something taped to the inside. It was a scrap of fabric, like it was torn from a shirt. She unfolded it, and her heart jumped. It was from her uncle. She read feverishly.

Ola, Michelle, if you're reading this, it means I'm gone. Not dead! They can't catch me. That was a joke, by the way, to try and make you feel better. Cause if you're seeing this, it's probably been a shit day. O, I bet you smiled, and Michelle I bet you didn't. If I was right, you owe Atlanta a treat. There's really only one thing I can tell you that he won't: get the hell out of your house. I'm not coming back to mine. They've probably destroyed it anyway by now looking for the cloth underneath Atlanta's collar. Don't come looking for me. They're going to come for all of us, and it's too dangerous for us to be together. Take Atlanta, and go to the ocean at the junkyard strip a mile out from the plant. I left her for you two. I told her to take good care of my O, and my sister-in-law. Read the cloth ONLY when you get to the ocean, and once you're sure you're alone together. Read it ALOUD when you get there. Then, if you know what's good for you, you'll destroy it. Don't let him convince you otherwise. You need to stay safe. He's waiting for you. I hope he tells you where you can go. Maybe, Michelle, it's time to call your sister. I heard she's in Tampa now. She still loves you, you know. I'm sorry if I ever made you think otherwise. Her number: (813)-268-0775.

Ps., I love you, too.

- Kwame, Uncle K

A rush of different feelings overcame Ola all at once. Her face was hot and her head was spinning again. Everything became real to her in the way that you wake up, dazed and pleased with a night's sleep, and realize you're late for something important. She was at once relieved that her uncle was okay, wherever he was, and horrified that in this awful note, even *he* didn't know what had happened to her mom. She didn't know who "he" was, or why her uncle would tell her to go to the ocean. Her mom had told her to come out here, to stay with her uncle, and now he was nowhere to be found, with a ransacked house presumably destroyed by the people

who owned the whole damn city. She didn't have anywhere to go but home, and now her uncle was telling her not to go back. Judging by the state of his house, it was good advice, but Ola didn't know where else she could live. Nadine's, probably, but what would she even tell her? What would she tell her parents? That they were being hunted by Jetson, something she couldn't even prove and didn't have a clue about?

There were too many questions, and the answers she was getting were that someone she loved was either dead, locked up, or forced to disappear. It all felt like a cruel joke someone was playing on her, even as the fact that it wasn't was pushing its way up from the depths of her mind.

"What am I gonna do, 'Lanta?" she was sitting now, elbows propped up on her legs, and note in hand. Atlanta quietly came over and sat between her knees, with her tongue hanging out of her mouth. Remembering the note, Ola reluctantly reached beneath her collar and felt around to see if it was there, the cloth she was supposed to find. Sure enough, her fingers grasped a cloth that felt entirely different from the first. She pulled her hand away, and turned her collar over. The fabric was so thin you'd think it was meant to be tissue paper, even as it was folded over multiple times, long-ways, to disappear beneath Atlanta's collar. It was attached by two tiny stitches on either side. Ola gently broke them with her teeth, and put the cloth in her shorts' pocket without opening it.

The two of them sat there in silence for some time. Atlanta didn't whine or beg, she just sat there, with her head on Ola's knee, while she sorted through her thoughts. Ola didn't know what time it was, but she guessed around 9:30. About the time she would usually be going home. Finally, she decided to get up, to and to trust her uncle: she was going to Howard's Bay.



In what felt like no time, Ola and Atlanta were at the edge of the field, looking out at what had once been called a 'beach'. It was pitch black out, but Ola's eyes had adjusted from the long walk, and she surveyed the area. Endless clumps of trash pushed their way out of the sand, which was permanently stained dust-bunny gray from the plant's run-off. The trash included giant tin barrels of green-brown sludge Ola couldn't identify and didn't care to become familiar with. The 'beach' stretched along the water for about a mile, leading up to the enormous Jetson buildings on the right, and the docks on the left. She was somewhere in between, and the air was foul. Even through the filter, salt, petroleum, and feces were the most prominent smells in the area. Ola didn't know exactly where or how far she was supposed to go or how far she *should* go. The neon-orange DANGER! PELIGRO! signs she passed on her way up made sure she knew that even her *duo* wouldn't do much good out here.

Atlanta strolled closely at Ola's side as they made their way through the sand to the edge of the water. The breeze coming off the ocean cooled the sweat on the back of Ola's neck, which she indulged. She stopped about ten feet from where the waves lapped, and sat cross-legged on the most clear patch of sand she could find. Ola had seen the ocean from a distance, but never this close. She didn't know water could sound like this, like *tumble* and *crash*, but then like *smoooooth*, altogether. She'd expected it to be ugly and scary, like in all the books she'd read in class as a kid. But it was almost nice, almost peaceful. When the waves hit, they left soft white bubbles on the sand before returning back to the ocean. She could see how people might have enjoyed this, before The Salting.

She took out the piece of fabric from her pocket, and unfolded it gently. It was bigger than she'd expected, a cheesecloth about the size of her face. The handwriting was cursive and

difficult to read, and looked to be in *real* ink. It was faint, but still there enough so that she could make out the words.

At the top of the fabric were four words: *Water soup: english translation*. Ola thought all of her expectations for the day had been obliterated, but she found herself surprised: she wasn't expecting a recipe for whatever 'water soup' was. She looked at Atlanta, and Atlanta looked at her, as if to say, *what are you looking at me for?* There weren't many words on the page, especially for a recipe. Only a few lines of text, with simple instructions for making 'water soup.' She felt ridiculous. She was going to have to crash at Nadine's house tonight and probably the next several nights, and here she was by herself, reading an old recipe to an audience of no one.

But she had nothing else to go off of. This was it, all she had left. Her throat burned with fear; of not knowing what had happened to her mother in the last six hours, of not knowing if anything would be left of either of them after today. The burning, though, spurred her forward. What was the worst that could happen, that hadn't already happened today?

She looked around to make sure she was alone, like her uncle had said. The strip of land she'd walked through to get here had long ago been written off as a communal waste deposit for residents and the company alike, so she wasn't shocked that no one else was out here, by the toxic water, in the middle of the night. Like she was, like her dad had been. She swallowed, and tried not to pull at the edges of the cloth. Ola was grateful she had Atlanta.

"Here goes nothing." She took a breath, and began reading. She was sure to pronounce each word thoroughly and carefully, and to re-pronounce words she missed or had trouble deciphering. She finished in less than sixty seconds, and when she had, she looked up.

The air was still, save for the sound of lapping waves. She waited, but still nothing. It wasn't until she looked out at the water, exhausted and desperate and confused, that she noticed some of the water was moving against the current. Like something was trying to get out. Curious, but unsure, she came closer, but her nerves stopped her about six feet from the edge. More and more water started moving toward the beach, fighting the current that was pushing it back into the ocean. Ola's mind raced with possibilities. Was this just coincidental? Or did the— the *water soup*, do this? The water pushed harder and harder, until it finally broke free, and a panicked scream inadvertently left Ola's body. She grabbed for Atlanta, and tried to make sense of what was happening in front of her.

A stream of water shot up from the ocean, taking a shape all its own. It was hovering midair, circling around itself, like a worm chasing its own tail. The tip was glowing bright yellow, while the rest took on a deep, vivid blue that showed even against the night sky. Ola fought the urge to pick up Atlanta and book it back to the car. Her hands were tight around Atlanta's ribs, whose tail wagging was brushing sand back and forth behind them. Ola stared at the ring of water in disbelief. She could see every detail: the frothy white foam curling at its edges, the churning of each drop traveling from tip to bottom to top again, the flow of its movement.

The glowing tip turned toward Ola and Atlanta— she barely had time to close her eyes and tuck her head between her arms before it reached them.

A few moments passed before she decided to look up. She slowly unfolded her head from the darkness between her arms and Atlanta's fur to find the glowing tip of the stream inches from her face. She quickly sucked in the air, but didn't flinch. Her heart rate had quickened again.

Then, before her eyes, the stream backed away and started to change. It collected in some places and stretched out in others, making an entirely new shape.

“What the hell,” Ola stared unblinkingly as the stream took the form of a—a person? It collected itself vertically, maybe about six feet long. She was intrigued by how detailed the droplets were becoming as they slowly contributed to the solidifying figure. The person looked had on shorts, sandals, and a tank top, all differing shades of blue, obviously. Atlanta barked at the figure.

“Ola,” a quiet, familiar voice called to her. She squinted in the figure’s face as the last details became concrete.

“Ohh my god.” Ola brought both hands to her face, feeling to make sure she was still there.

“I missed you, Ola-Bola.” It spoke just like him. Ola jumped up to standing, and backed away. She felt the tears climbing to her face, but she kept her composure.

“No. No. You’re not real.” Her tone was more accusatory than she’d intended. The problem was that it was impossibly real. It had everything: his posture, his voice, his clothes, even his nickname for her. She tried to remember if she’d hit her head at any point today. Clearly she wasn’t doing great, but she didn’t expect to hallucinate visions of her dead father.

“Ola, we don’t have a lot of time, but I am real, honey. You probably think I’m a hallucination, that you got sick from being out here too long or something, and now you’re seeing things.” That was a good theory, too. “And that’s okay, as long as you’ll still listen. But I really am here, I’ll show you.” It clapped. “Atlanta! Who’s a good girl?” Atlanta barked happily and walked right up to it. Ola shook her head and looked again.

“That’s my good girl ‘Lanta. Atlanta came out here with Kwame a few days ago.” It rubbed her head and her body, and she tried to lick its face.

“Atlanta!” She came forward, and pulled Atlanta off of him. If the water was *real*, it came from an ocean of salt and toxins. Atlanta was all wet, so her hands were wet now too.

“It’s okay honey, it won’t hurt you, or her. It’ll probably put a few months on her life, actually. I know it sounds crazy, but I’m not toxic.” His voice was always so reassuring.

“Remember the first time we gave her a bath, and we had to teach her not to drink the bathwater?” He smiled, and the water even showed his crooked bottom teeth. She had the same crooked ones.

Ola couldn’t help but smile.

“Oh yeah,” it started to come back to her. “She peed in the tub and tried to drink her own pee.” She’d forgotten about that. It was hilarious. “So daddy, it’s really you?” Ola felt silly saying it, but she couldn’t contain her hopefulness. She needed him more than ever today, and here he was, here for her, like he was out of a dream.

“Really, really. The one and only.” He choked out the joke between sniffs. It was hard to tell since he was made of water, but Ola was almost sure he was crying. He took his hand and put it on her face, absorbing the saltwater of her own making into his hand. She hadn’t realized that she was, too. She jumped right into his indigo arms, and held on for as long as she could. He was entirely made of water, so it was more like floating than hugging; she was less dense than he was. There was nothing she had wanted more in the last year than this, this impossible thing that was happening. She felt like she could stay there forever and never leave, earth and air and water be damned.

He let go of her, and his tone became serious.

“Ola, there’s only so much time, okay? I have to show you how to clean the water.”

“What do you mean? I’m not going anywhere. I already know how to boil water, daddy.”

She still couldn’t believe he was really there. Her soul was warm, and her smile incurable. “So, are you, like... a ghost? You—you really *passed* right? I missed you so much.” She didn’t know if it was disrespectful to bring up a person’s death to them.

“No, not a ghost. A spirit, a water spirit. Part of *Oshun*,” his voice was expectant, with a twang of disappointment. Ola’s cheeks felt hot. There were so many parts of the faith she’d forgotten. “I think I was always a water spirit, even before I ‘died.’ ” he made air quotes, then turned over his arm. There, on his forearm, was the tattoo he’d gotten after she was born. It was designed after her name, her *whole* name, and glowed the same bright yellow as the tip of the stream had earlier. “I know it’s going to sound confusing to you now, but all the spirits are free in the future, not like now. That’s how I got here. The same water that you have here is there, too.” She didn’t understand, and he was talking fast. “And I missed you more than you know. But Ola, there’s a lot I have to tell you.” He motioned for her to sit down, and she did. He sat down next to her, the water still moving throughout his body. “I know they told you when I died, that I had a heart attack down here, I fell into the water, and a wave took me under.” She nodded solemnly. “Those were lies. When I came down here to do the interviews, I found this, ” he took the hand she was holding the cloth in, and gently raised it up. “Howard’s Bay used to be a slave port, you know. I know it’s not taught in school, but it was. I found this, carefully hidden between planks of wood, down by the dock, and then”

“Wait, no, dad, but you did have a heart attack. They did an autopsy, and we came to... *identify* you at the hospital.” She shuddered.

“Ola, none of that was true. I—” he paused, like he was contemplating whether or not it was a good idea to keep going. “I didn’t just *die*, honey. They, Jetson, they sent guys to get rid of me.”

“What?” Ola’s body was frozen stiff. Every memory of closure she had: reading reports, the funeral, talking to doctors, talking to the staff, it all felt poisonous.

“And it was because of *this*.” He pointed again to the cheesecloth. “I found it, and I read it aloud, just like you just did, and they came to me, Ola. Our ancestors, who were enslaved, but are free now in—well, in *your* future. Just like this, as the water, as I am now.” His voice was somehow both soothing and full of awe at the same time. She tried to relax, and make sense of it all. “They wanted me to find it. It was a gift, and I thought it was for me, but I was just the messenger. It’s for you.” He paused, and put his hand on her head.

“For me? What-what do I have to do with anything? I don’t know anything about ‘water soup,’ not even if it tastes good.” By the list of ingredients, it didn’t sound like it would.

“But they *think* that you do. Your speech last Saturday, which, by the way, was amazing-- it set them off.” He put his hand on her shoulder, but it was preemptive. Ola didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. She opened her mouth to say *what?* yet again. But before she could, it hit her like a mallet to the stomach. She unfolded the cloth.

“Last Saturday,” she uttered. “*I knew last Saturday that they were going to come.*” Uncle Kwame knew after the graduation. Her eyebrows knitted together. “It was me?” She looked to her father with an expression like steel.

“No, no, it’s not your fault, Ola. It could never be your fault. There was no way you could have known.” Creases, like little waves, formed in his forehead. “Headmaster Sibley was being paid off by *Jetson*, not customers, to illegally sell water parcels meant for students on the

school's lunch plan as "extra," to the ultra-wealthy." Ola knew about the customers, the illegal activity, the crazy high premium they put on the water 'so clean, it's for kids.' She'd exposed all that. But Jetson had never been part of the picture.

"So.. so when I exposed Headmaster Sibley--" Shock and guilt were driving the truckload of her emotions, but curiosity and anger started calling up from the backseat.

"You nearly took down the whole damn company. Only about an inch from the truth, really. You did a good thing, honey." Ola's stomach felt sour. "Even if they weren't sure you knew about the recipe then, I'll bet they thought it would only be a matter of time. You're smart. They know that." There was admiration, pride, love in his eyes, all the things she'd craved each day for the last year. But she couldn't meet his gaze. Behind it all, there was fear, too: for her, for their family. It was all she could do not to hide her face.

"What does the recipe have to do with any of this?" She was exasperated.

"Let me show you."

He got up, and walked toward the water. In the wet sand, well close enough to get sucked in, he kneeled down. Ola watched from where she was, as a wave started to push the water forward. It looked big enough to breach and then trickle up towards them. And sure enough, it did. Ola tried to stifle the horror she felt at watching her father do exactly what she had imagined him doing when he died. Thankfully, when the water crept toward them, it was just barely deep enough for her father to cup his hands, reach down, and hold some of the water between them. The contrast between the water from the ocean and the water her father was made of was startling, like night and day. He was a rich, deep blue, and the ocean water was gray, with particles of god knows what floating around inside of it.

Without looking at the cloth, he started repeating the recipe, word for word. Ola watched, startled, as her father continued to speak. She got up, and walked a little closer, leaning forward over his shoulder to see the water in his hands. She couldn't believe her eyes. Seeping out from between his fingers was black and green sludge, like the stuff in the barrels all over the beach. It was hot and sticky like syrup on the stove, and bubbled when it made contact with the sand. The stench was so concentrated and unbearable that Ola had to back away to be further from it. As it percolated through his interlaced fingers, the water in his hands started to clear. He kept speaking, but his voice was a whisper now. His head was bowed, and his lips were almost touching the water, like they were trading secrets. He looked how he used to when they used to go to church together; concentrated, but blissful. When the last of the sludge had oozed out, the water looked like she'd never seen. It was clear, with a crisp white undertone. Then, the white started to drip out; tiny grains of white salt fell bit by bit onto the sand, leaving the water to become increasingly clear and less white. He finished speaking, but then immediately turned to Ola.

“Ola, can you take the canister out of your bag, and bring it here, please?” Ola noticed how shaky his voice was, and did as he asked. “I know it sounds crazy, but I need you to pour out the water.” She hesitated.

“Okay okay.” Ola physically struggled to spill the water. She couldn't watch as she did it, and had to turn away. It was her last portion for the day. He turned toward her, and carefully poured all the water from his hands into the canister. His shoulders relaxed once it was done, but she was shaken.

“Dad what—what’s going on? How did you just do that?” She felt the hairs on the ends of her arms stand up again. The questions in her mind all bled into one another, making it difficult to choose just one.

“It’s the recipe, honey. ‘Water Soup.’ It came first from the hold: when salt water was always there, even when freshwater was kept away by enslavers and captains and crews. It was used again in the salt islands near Haiti and Antigua, where our ancestors were forced to mine for salt without enough to drink fresh. Then, it made its way all the way here, passed from person, but somewhere along the way, during the Salting, it became lost, when pollution made it difficult to come to the water at all. It was forgotten, until now.” He pushed his hands down in the air, as if settling them on the earth. “The ‘recipe,’ — it’s code, for a spell.” Suddenly, and without warning, Ola smiled the most genuine smile she’d ever felt, not just with her mouth, but with her whole body. She cried like she was seeing it for the first time. Her whole life was built around this thing, or lack of this thing, this clean, fresh water. And there it was, this thing the whole world needed, like it had always been there.

“I know. Isn’t it beautiful,” her dad kissed her on the head, and held her around her shoulders.

“Yeah, yeah, it is.” Ola sniffed and laughed at herself without judgement.

“After they showed me, and I did it myself, I was stupid. The first thing I did was pick up the phone, and call my editor. I told him I had a new story, to call all the major news outlets, this was going to change everything,” He shook his head. “And I forgot about Lora™. The first people who heard about it weren’t people who needed it, whose lives would be saved with this *gift*. Not a discovery, a gift.” He stared out into the ocean, and even with his face made of water, it was sedimented with regret. “The first people to hear were at Jetson Inc. And the first thing

they did was send people after me. Because if we could clean the water ourselves, produce it for ourselves, their hold on us would be obsolete.” Ola thought for a moment, and then it came to her.

“The rise in prices,” she said, putting it together as she went. Her dad looked at her. “On the news this morning, the rise in prices. It was never about struggling to produce *more* for the population. They’re intentionally producing *less*, to drive up the cost of extra parcels.” She almost didn’t believe it, but it made too much sense for her not to.

“And to scare you, Ola. To make you think that you need them, to remind you that you survive by the grace of their generosity.” Ola stared up at the sky. She didn’t know if her world was crumbling or just becoming more clear, but she had never wondered so much about what else was possible that she didn’t know about.

“Population, my Black ass.” He said, and smiled wryly. Ola chuckled to herself. She’d been right earlier. So had her mom.

“What about mom, dad?” Ola turned to him. “What do they want with mom, and Uncle Kwame? They don’t know anything.” His face turned grim.

“On that day, I realized what I had done before they came for me. I buried the cloth in the sand. I just had to hope he would find it after they—they did what they did,” the fear in Ola’s eyes must’ve been apparent, because he didn’t recount how they killed him. It wasn’t important, in all fairness. “It took him almost a year to come out here with Atlanta, for her to sniff it out, and for him to read it aloud so we could talk.” His expression turned somber. “And um, your mom,” he smiled, but it was pained. “She doesn’t know about the recipe. They just think that she does, or that she would’ve figured it out if she went through with the proposed research. She’s smart. They know that.” His eyes were full of longing.

“Daddy, I don’t know what to do. Uncle Kwame told me to destroy the cloth, but—”

“He said *what?*” His eyes were intense, but his voice had started to shake.

“No, Ola, why would you do that, when you could do so much good, so much—”

“Because how could that be my responsibility, daddy.” Her voice was strong, but she wasn’t yelling. The wind was blowing harder now, and she almost thought she felt cold for a moment. His expression softened, and it took a moment for him to respond.

“You’re right, Ola. I’m sorry.” He looked ashamed that he had just told his seventeen year old child she had to save the whole world, after all this.

“I just don’t know what else to do—” Ola started, but her father started hacking, coughing, and Ola jerked back.

“Dad? Are you okay?”

“I’m—I’m okay, Ola. We’re out of time, I’m sorry I’m sorry. I have to go back.” He was still coughing, but he had gained temporary control of it.

“Go back where?”

“Back to the time after all this,” he gestured toward the sludge, and the sand. “I can’t take this in for too long. The longer I stay, the more toxins I ingest, the harder it is for me to stay.” He started coughing again, spewing water into his elbow. Ola’s eyebrow was twitching. “There was a time before this world and *trust me*, there’s a time after.” He struggled to stand up, and Ola supported his arm as he rose. “*We*,” he said, and Ola knew what he meant, “*we’re* free.” He brought one hand to his side. “There are trees taller than any skyscraper, *green* grass, bushes, bison, whales, all those legends we told you as a kid. Hell, we thought they were legends ourselves.” He laughed, but it turned to more hacking. His muscles were tense and he put his hands on his knees.

“Daddy, you, you can’t leave, not yet, we just got here, I can’t do this alone.” Her already cloudy eyes were watery again, and she was talking with her hands as much as with her voice.

“Ola, it’s not that I’m not here, it’s that I’m not here, *yet*.” He kneeled down like he used to when she was little, but she was taller than him now. Things weren’t the same. Sobs were choking their way out of Ola’s mouth, and Atlanta rushed over to support her.

“When—when will I see you again?” She forced the words out.

“I don’t know if you will, honey. I’m new at this, and it’ll take me some time to recover from being out here for so long. And I don’t know if you *should* stay.” His voice wavered so heavily, it took Ola an extra few seconds to understand him. “I don’t have all the answers, Ola-Bola. Trust yourself, trust your instincts. Talk to them, to our ancestors. They’re here too, all up and down the ocean, if you try to reach—” He made a choking noise like there was tar in his throat, and Ola was overwhelmed with the sight of him and the memory of her mother earlier. Ola could barely understand him, but she read his lips through the storm in her eyes, “I love you.”

Ola watched her father dissolve, his kind eyes and warm arms breaking down into the stream they had come from, leaving only the tattoo on his forearm, before that too reverted into the glowing tip it had once been. The stream danced through the air for mere seconds before it plunged back into the ocean without a sound, and Ola’s heart broke worse than it had the first time. She didn’t get to say I love you back.

She screamed as she cried, not because she had to, but because she wanted to feel her lungs again. Her body felt exposed the way a wound does that first moment the bandages come off. The skin, hot and scarred from weeks and months and years beneath a cover, has to face the

air and feel itself for the first time again. She had held it for as long as she could; her breath. So as not to exhale too hard and pop the stitches. So as not to get the staples next time.

It would be hours before Ola left to go back to the car, charge its solar panels, pack Atlanta's things, and leave New York for Florida with the recipe to keep living after the end of the world. Before then, somewhere between midnight and dawn, a bird soared across the sky. It was dark, and seemed fragile, but it flew over the water like it was not rare, like it was at home, and unthreatened, and Ola knew it had to be real. The dawn broke, and the first streams of sunlight rose to her eyes. They sat there, she and Atlanta, and watched the waves come in and out, cutting across the horizon one after the next. She smiled, and laughed, and bathed in the sunshine, and let the tears roll, proud and soft, with her head thrown back and her hands in the wet sand behind her. They were all there, her mother, her father, her uncle, her ancestors, even if it wasn't *yet*. They were, and she was too.

On the second day of summer in the year 2103, something happened for the first time in Ola Brewer-Asaju's life: she saw the future, and tasted the water. It was the freshest there had ever been, fresher than even from the estuary's tail.

A Critical Companion to “The Recipe for Water”

As a whole, it could be said that this story is about a teenage girl who loses her family, her whole family, in a single day. The worst day of her life. It could also be said that this story is about a teenage girl who learns that her family is immortal: already living after the end of the world¹, in the soil, the clouds, and especially in the water.

I wish I could say something classic, or at least aesthetically pleasing here, that ‘this story started with a simple idea,’ or that ‘this story comes from a question I’ve always had.’ But it did not. This story came out of the kinds of ideas that kept me up at night with anxiety, jumped out at me in dreams, made me cry in public, made it easier to breathe, made it harder, made me laugh uncontrollably, helped me to dance in the infinite space-time² of Blackness. It was confusing and difficult often for the right reasons, to know myself in/and the world a little better, and just as often for the wrong reasons, to grease the engine of that particular evil called whiteness. I say whiteness and not white supremacy because whiteness is, by definition, a reproduction of its own supremacy, one that runs on systemic murder. There is no whiteness without supremacy, no whiteness without violence. Therein “white supremacy” or “white violence” in this context are redundant³. I am repeating centuries of Black women on this front because, even here, in this thesis that is supposedly “mine,” I feel compelled to cater to whiteness.

This brings me to reflexivity. This story is situated among gender, class, race, spirituality, political, and family dynamics, among other things. And because we know that there is no such thing as divorcing oneself, privilege or disprivilege, from the things we produce, my experiences

¹ This concept and phrase come Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the end of the world* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)

² This idea stems from Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On blackness and being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)

³ Thinking with ari Ziyad & Kevin Rigby, Jr., “White People Have No Place In Black Liberation”

as an upper-class light-skinned Black American are entirely pertinent, and will be discussed especially where I feel privilege, and therein harm, is informing this story and on my own understanding of my positionality.

What I knew for sure, almost from the very beginning, was that I was going to write a story about three things: Blackness, the ocean, and the relationship between them. Black feminist theory, specifically in and around Black Atlantic studies, provide the fundamental sources of inquiry for this work. I cannot overemphasize the importance of authors and scholars Marlene NourbeSe Philip and Christina Sharpe to my approach to *The Recipe for Water*, and I am confident that I will be active with their work for as far into the future as I can see.

More narrowly, this story began with my interest in Philip's 2012 collection of poetry, *Zong!*, as told to her by Setaey Adamu Boateng⁴. This collection explicitly attempts to "not-tell" (196) the story of the Zong massacre, in which an estimate of 150 enslaved African people were intentionally drowned by the captain and crew of the Zong ship. These murders were conducted in order to falsify an insurance claim of "lost" property, the claim being that a freshwater shortage forced the crew to discharge "cargo" during the trip. The Zong ship (British in ownership, Dutch in name) traveled from the west coast of Africa to Jamaica in 1781. Upon returning to Liverpool months later, the captain filed this insurance claim, which led to the Gregson v. Gilbert trial and resulting legal document. This document is the only record that remains of the passage, and the atrocities committed onboard. It goes without saying they are not termed as such in the document.

⁴ Setaey Adamu Boateng is an amalgamation of the enslaved Africans who were murdered (intentionally drowned) on board the Zong slave ship, created by Philip. Philip and Boateng are recorded as co-authors in all published scholarship.

⁵ Thank you to Professor Solomon for my first introduction to this work in her 2019 "African American Literature: Representations of American Slavery" course.

Philip's choice to "not-tell" this story was what I was most interested in. All of the poetry in the collection is re-constructed from the Gregson v. Gilbert legal document and much of the work is intentionally made to be illegible: letters are shredded apart, words overlap one another, entire pages fade into the background. Even the sections and poems that can be read and understood are intentionally devoid of (the legal) narrative, as is the broader collection. Philip explicitly recognizes the colonial and racist violence that tailors western constructions of language, law, and literature, and refuses to reproduce the violence of this legal narrative or narrative broadly.

I am thinking specifically here of Hortense Spillers' 1987 essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: American Grammar Book*, which is the groundbreaking work that laid bare for me this way of thinking. She identifies that in her work of "retrieving mutilated female bodies" (68) that the rupture, tears, and slashes inflicted upon the captive body in/during trans-atlantic slavery are/were written (in medical journals, in literature, in *English*) to be "indecipherable" in society as violence-- that the invisibility of this violence as such marks a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" and reproducible process of "branding" that she argues "transfers from one generation to another" by way of endless "symbolic substitutions" (67). This violence against the flesh-- as opposed to the Black body-- continues, "as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise." Spillers' explanation of this shifting and ever-cloaked practice of branding identifies language, American language, as violence against " 'liberated' and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter," "flesh/body" subjects (68). American language is formulated by a grammar of slavery, a concept I regard as factual in approach to my own work. I continue to be struck by the near

unfathomable importance of this work, and her explanation that, “we might concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us” (68).

While the dissolution of language does not manifest as literally in *The Recipe for Water* as it once did in previous drafts, I can not imagine how the story would have been possible without Spillers’ framework. The brief mention of derogatory language toward shore workers that does make it into this ‘final’ product is in this line of thinking. Moreover, this conversation is necessary for me to bring up as I discuss *Zong!*, as this text so importantly does the work of *dissolving* the American grammar Spillers describes, in the Gregson v. Gilbert legal document.

Ultimately, in getting into the work of *Zong!*, I came to two questions: without narrative, does *Zong!* lead “us,” those who engage with it, to *do* work rather than *consume* work? And could that work, of Black liberation, of freedom by any means necessary, be brought to life through the Atlantic ocean, as the environment of the text suggests? I wrote an essay sophomore year trying to explain my response to these questions. In the process of that research, I came upon one of Philip’s more recent works, *Wor(l)ds interrupted*, a lyric essay in which she briefly reflects on *Zong!*, contemplating whether, “zong is a ritual work masquerading as a conceptual work... the work masquerading as something else while doing another kind of work this is how african spiritual and cultural practices have survived the hostile societies of the afrospora” (Philip, *Wor(l)ds interrupted*, 2013). I was fascinated by this idea of *Zong!* as ritual, as something you come back to and *practice*. Thinking about language as practice, especially in Black cultures and histories, it occurred to me that *Zong!* is as much a collection of poetry as it is a book of spells⁶-- spells for confronting slavery as it continues to organize Black death, for reconciling the ways in which “we” are complicit in this violence, for refusing this world that has been built on

⁶ This terminology is largely influenced by Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3-30.

Black death, for getting free. I have been thinking about this ever since. *The Recipe for Water* attempts to put those thoughts into action, to do the work that *Zong!* compels me to keep coming back to, to practice.

The sleight of hand that Philip describes heavily influences the story's plot, and attempts to bring together different kinds of "masquerading." The recipe itself geographically marks a cultural, spiritual, and physical survival of Black people and traditions. The recipe being written as a 'recipe,' and not the spell that it is, reflects an attempt to think about the rich and severely undervalued importance of oral histories and storytelling. Oral tradition is crucial in so many cultures, but has developed uniquely in Black diasporic communities for the purpose of survival, not leaving a trace. It was important to me not to actually write out the recipe as text-- just to have it spoken between the characters. I wanted the importance of the recipe as code to be respected and reflected in the writing.

This practice of coded language, whether in speech or in writing, is well-documented as a method of survival and communication between enslaved Black people in attempts to escape plantations, discuss organized rebellion, or secure resources. 248 years after the end of trans-atlantic slavery-- and 82 into our future-- Ola's family smuggles water parcels to Kwame, a response to the mutation of slavery and anti-Black violence that has taken place in *their* world. The very first thought that ever existed about this thesis, before I had even officially declared the English major, was to write about being Black at a PWI as an experience of fugitivity. This was a year before I declared the creative writing concentration, before I realized there was such a thing as Black Atlantic studies. This is to say, by the time I actually got to creating this piece, I thought I had abandoned these themes. But through the drafts, Lora™, police, security guards, government officials, and private, monopolizing companies— contemporary overseers— became

inseparable from the work. It scares me, to say the least, that in writing about Blackness, I subconsciously always write about surveillance, and hiding, and indetection. It scares me that this is what I think of when I think of myself— even as there is agency and brilliancy in how Black folks communicate, build community, and love and grow together as a result.

In the opening to his essay, *The Prison Slave as Hegemony's Final Scandal*, Frank B.

Wilderson III asserts that,

“There is something organic to black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society. there is nothing willful or speculative in this statement, for one could just as well state the claim the other way around: there is something organic to civil society that makes *it* essential to the destruction of the black body” (18).

Wilderson explains here that ‘civil’ society itself necessitates and pursues Black death, and thus that Blackness is positionally antagonistic to its continued existence. Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* generates a critical framework for thinking through the “something organic” that Wilderson describes. Sharpe’s work conceptualizes “the wake,” as the this environment in which trans-atlantic slavery continues to reproduce and necessitate Black death, and offers the wake as a critical approach to understanding antiblackness as “total climate” (21). She asserts that because black life in the wake is also “the afterlife of property” (quoting Saidiya Hartman’s explanation of the ‘afterlife of slavery’) Black existence “in the wake” is “lived near death, as deathliness.” While her concept of the wake describes the reproductions of slavery that maintain Black un/death, the wake is also a state of conscious time. Sharpe ultimately discusses the urgency and importance of “wake work,” which she explains “[stays] in this wake time toward inhabiting a blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death” (22). She cites *Zong!* as an important example of wake work that is already in action. To understand antiblackness as the “total climate,” of the United States, as its weather, food, air,

water, and soil, can be further extended to Wilderson's discussion of civil society, especially in regard to what is increasingly referred to as "the global plantation." As Wilderson and Sharpe both in some form address, civil society rests on Black subjugation, violence, and death, and that "organic"-ness that Wilderson speaks to is literal. Civil society is intolerant to Black life that is not proximal to death, to the very idea of *Black people*. That organicness, then, might be conceptualized by understanding as whiteness a toxin to the Black body⁷, (which is in no way an original thought.)

Water is the primary way through which health and illness are discussed in *The Recipe for Water*. It is an easy connective for obvious reasons, but what I did not expect in writing was how much I would end up talking about salt. I came into this work with the intention to write about pollution, and to think about what interdependency might exist between Black life and planetary ecological health. With this in mind, it made sense for me to establish the connection between making/distilling clean water, an urgent issue in *Ola's* time, to Blackness, and Black methods of survival during trans-Atlantic slavery. I was specifically thinking about Nathan Hare's 1970 essay "Black Ecology" in which he explains that "The real solution to the environmental crisis is the decolonization of the black race" (8), as well as the Combahee River Collective Statement, which delineated that "if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (3). Salt, however, became entirely central to the way I was thinking about survival, remains, and health.

One of the major events (though not fully expanded upon) that I position between our contemporary moment and the time of the story is The Salting. I wanted to solidify the

⁷ This idea came from conversation with Haverford senior Camille Samuels, who is an independent major in Health, Science, and Societies.

acidification of the ocean as a historic event, and felt strongly about it being something that was overwhelmingly in the consciousness of (Ola's) contemporary society. However, I think there is lots of room for growth, criticism, further thinking-- all of these things at once-- in the fact that I do not further explain the importance of salt in *supporting* Black health. Ola's father says to her, "the same water that you have here is there," in reference to the future, but I think there was a lot more to be done with the fact that salt, like water, remains and carries the "past" along with it.

Sharpe explains of remnants,

"But even if those Africans who were in the holds, who left some- thing of their prior selves in those rooms as a trace to be discovered, and who passed through the doors of no return did not survive the holding and the sea, they, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; in sodium and chlorine. This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time" (19).

It sounds contradictory, but Black Atlantic scholars have time and time again demonstrated that it is in fact a necessary coupling: the relationship between Blackness and remains is both chemical and spiritual. Toni Cade Bambara's 1980 novel *The Salt Eaters* is but one example of how salt is at the center of this relationship, and remains especially important to Black healing. I wonder now how this story might have been different if the salt that Koffi distills out of the water might have played a more important role in *Ola's* interaction with it. I imagine that perhaps it does, that Ola, with a newfound growth and despair and connection to her ancestors, might build on what was left for her when she gets to Florida.

This brings me to the future. One of the first questions I asked myself in writing *The Recipe for Water* comes directly from my advisor, Professor Solomon. In her "Advanced Fiction" course, she consistently challenged those of us writing speculative fiction and science fiction to consider a very basic question of craft: what is the occasion for this new world? It's funny to me now that I doubled down on the importance of this question— what is the occasion for

establishing a new world from the perspective of an *already* new world? My answer is that I did not have the courage to say that the future is one of Black freedom, of a total and complete liberation for all, until reading Alexis Pauline Gumbs' short story, *Evidence*. The epigraphic quote that opens this thesis is taken from one of her other works, *M Archive*, which was also very influential to my thinking. *Evidence* is composed of five exhibits, A, B, C, D, and E, all of which contain materials from some point in the future, but are collected and being looked *back upon* from a future utopia. The conclusiveness of this positioning, which Gumbs employs as form, is crucial to the work of Black feminist theory. Popular media often insists upon Black death and antiblack violence as an inescapable future, but resisting this narrative is transformative work. It importantly refuses to feed into the fetishized consumption of Black suffering that is so prevalent and constantly circulated across news and media. One of the things that I think warrants critical, reflexive attention in *The Recipe for Water* is that I have written a story about the grief and trauma that Ola experiences as a dark-skinned Black girl. Dark-skinned Black women and girls are constantly used as channels through which to depict suffering, as much by light-skinned Black folks as anyone else. It should go without saying that this story is not magically absolved of harm, and that there is no separating it from conversations about colorism and violence.

This work, though created under the circumstances of Covid-19, constant antiblack violence, and enormous stress, did something I never thought I could do: tell a story about this world, our world, as complicated and complex as it may be. Finally, I'll say what I hope this story might share about itself with anyone who comes across it: *The Recipe for Water* is about a girl, a seventeen year old girl, a seventeen year old Black girl, who, even on the most difficult day of her life, is strong enough, kind enough, soft enough, worthy enough, gentle enough, delicate enough, powerful enough to create the future.

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