AWARENESS

Anansi, your four gifts raised to Nyame grant you no power over the stories I tell, stories that build like dew, alerting you but creating no music when they drop onto the drums of our sky. Take my ‘gift’, words bound in time, directly to him and tell me if his features betray recognition or sorrow.
He was the only one who didn't laugh. She stepped onto the escalator thinking it could sweep her away, swallow and shred her at the bottom. He would watch as she jumped off like a schoolgirl, brown skirt waving in his memory, and wait to see her smile rise like morning had begun, the shine of his morning cleaning. But her slow pace meant the last he saw of her was as she turned the corner of the underground and he was carried away by the indifference of the train. One evening he decided the strain of longing for love outweighed the strain of longing for home, so in the morning, after watching her nervous dance with the escalator, he stood in the middle of the train doors, arms wide holding them open, waiting for her. Turning the corner, she saw her Samson and ran towards him. It became their rite. Until train doors became bolted doors and Chubbs in the door of a flat.

He loved her enough to turn off the lights before bed—though she could sleep with brightness, bills kept her awake. He took care of that too. She helped him become a man; let him use her calling card to speak to his mother while he pounded fufu, vigorous as he shook the stove. So maybe they kissed, maybe they laughed, maybe he did love my mum from the start.
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My mum suffocated under the pool of light called an imperial sun, so my life begins with a nose broader than the wing on which I was weighed. But blessings are missed on the ward where wails are watered down by gasps of meconium. So to breathe (my mum thought) I needed to be streamlined. Without sense, my nose was pressured by two fingers to fit the box of Europe, the centre of my face growing close, comforting the holes in my appearance. Unknown abuse, I was being moulded for progress, a model given by God on which my mother could add the finishing touches – a joint project on which to project imbibed insecurities. So now I breathe British air with airs akin to royal heirs – my mum thought she was making a dark life fair.

Watch the little boy bobbing up and down on his father's lap, no one caring if he falls or where he'll land, and you'll think the boy has no chance, no way to change what's to become his life. His father wrote his destiny on the back of a betting slip, fixing it, and now he plays roulette with his boy watching the numbers, wondering what difference it makes where the ball settles. His father smacks his hand as he reaches for a button – he's not allowed to roll the dice or send the ball spinning, only an observer, black or red, eyes closed while he's winning.
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London homes were closed to young, foreboding darkness, and so were the doors of a family letting go of the past. Once I’m in care, my mum occasionally picks me up but can’t recall how I got there. There’s six of us, three who soak their beds – me looking on thinking they’re confused as to which way their tears should flow. And two who stand with me in the bathroom, water running but clothes still on, forced hands down my trousers. I learned to clip my nails daydreaming about my foster mother trimming hers, the cutting hurt, index and thumb pressed into my lobe when I misbehaved. Or there was a raised cane, a light cracking sound, no atmospheric stomach rumble as I think back, a white hand raised to strike black skin. How can the truth and my love not begin to lose synergy? So facile, it was all so easily flammable – the jet left, and my mum’s hearty inhales, were enough to spark my curiosity, so I watched as my thumb gave rise to light, delivering the dissolving tissue to the plastic bin with our leftovers. There wasn’t enough time for ashes to be born but I stepped back in awe of the flaming wings rising to the ceiling. The fire was out with air to spare – my foster mother’s age containing a vitality that doused the flames, throwing a jug of water then taking me to the fridge. She held onto my arm while cutting a Scotch bonnet, then rubbed it into my face – to burn off that troublesome nose and the thick lips that talked back. I was in bed early and as I tried to sleep, the dripping tap taunted me with promises of solace. But I stayed where I was, and cried. In the morning, when I opened my eyes, the hot residue was gone. The bed for summer visits spoke with relief as my foster mother sat up, fully clothed, and looked at me.
Dry, I felt no pain as I watched dense balls of fluff fall to the floor and my foster friend, brother really, sweep them up, eager to be involved. He’d experienced a few cuts but now his head’s covered in scabs, suppressed hair, cultural significance dried up, so every time someone was getting a trim, there he’d be, broom in hand waiting for the 4C weeds to tumble to the floor. I once watched him put my hair in his pocket and inhale it behind a door. My scalp had some sores too, but the plump tangle of my hair kept it a secret my 1A carers had no reason to wonder about. When the cut was over and I slid off the chair, immediately forgetting my fro, there were no puffs of hair to cushion my steps, the job of sweeping them away done so well. I felt lucky only to get the snip because I’d seen the fits of the suffering girls – soft hair falling like floss, no fro to swell – white hands going into black hair but never acknowledging its curls.
I’ve never smiled again like I did on my sixth birthday, looking into the camera while my foster mother guides my hand through a symbolic slashing of years. I can feel the failing elasticity in her hand and smell the dissolving lungs on her breath. My foster dad, a quiet favourite, dozes, tired from a job I’ve never known him to have. Some kids are only here for summer. I watch them, unconsciously thumbing my singed skin, a scar from separated kin, a melding with warmth severed too late, and remember what loss feels like, deciding to stay around faces awaiting the same school as I am. I’ve crunched through several chocolate cornflake cakes before I remember I have presents to unwrap. I walk to the gifts, eager but satisfied, tonguing the soft cereal stuck to my teeth. I notice the handwriting on the first present and retreat to my foster mother’s leg. ‘All right, dear, we’ll open this one later.’
He wasn’t A’s real dad or carer, so I struggle to place him in fostered thoughts. He liked sitting with his legs crossed in our living room eating cheese sandwiches. His posture, chewing and satisfaction made me envious, made me want to bite from the same plate he did, his full stomach moans enough to make me crave cheese in the extreme, casu marzu dripping and crawling through my dreams. She always asks for a piece and is refused and told to go get ready. Both gone, my mum preoccupied with plucking pheasant, I’d eat the crusts left on his saucer, which often had teeth-marked slices of cheese between them. A day came when I was able to open the fridge and take out the cheese, which first refused my knife, knowing the rules of the house, take two pieces of bread and create what was slowly becoming a delicacy. I took a bite and the static in my jaw shuddered through my body. I bent over the bin and spat out what I had desperately sought, realising getting what you want is not what you thought.
Thin lips beneath a film of moisture, my foster mother trying to teach me how to pronounce letters of the alphabet. We flip through *Biff and Chip*, me waiting for parts with Wilma.

Turning keys was fascinating to me so I clutch one and stroll off like a schoolboy, leaving the house searching for hours to help the bathroom door speak once more. I join the family but, bored, place my hands in my pockets and feel something cold and hard – I must own it. I step towards the table where my foster mother sits, regal, smoking while the sound of her children opening and closing doors, pacing around and climbing bunk beds combines with her nicotine to heighten effects dulled by chain smoking. I took the key, I confess, and expect a cane but am freed and taught the importance of honesty.

Cursive presents as the RP of pen to paper; I envy that dexterity denied me, the first difference of ability I noticed between myself and others. My foster mum finds pages of failed attempts, notes of a voice failing speech therapy, pain, straining imprinting on paper. She forces me to look at my writing, pointing at sentence after sentence, her finger finally resting on a tear absorbed, covering my shame, and then tells me my handwriting is lovely without the fancy lines.