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[Forgive Me My Eyeballs]

You have cleared out your airy office in Bloomsbury, your exceptional office with the view of dreams, overlooking a leafy square. Before you, the office belonged to a professor, not a professor in the casual American way, a full professor in the British tradition. The professor's retirement meant there was room to hire a new member of staff at the lowest level; you weren't necessarily meant to inherit the professor's incredibly spacious office. For four years, you worked in the uncertainty of his departure, four years as the most junior academic among the non-precarious faculty of your department. You counted yourself lucky to be safe, the last full-time permanent lecturer to take up post before the onset of a hiring freeze. You still feel you were, lucky, for the most part.

Some months before you joined, possibly while you were filling out application forms, the bookshelves were taken down from the walls, as the foundation was crumbling. Over four years you accumulated stacks of books in the space anyway, along with oddities, such as a salt lamp from your students.

The salt lamp is shaped and weighted like a bowling ball. It teeters you as you maneuver into an open seat on the train, the first leg of your commute home. Your students didn't even know that the novel you started as an MA student yourself, the novel that got you your first agent, the novel you couldn't finish on the job, the novel you're not sure you'll ever finish, had been called *SALT*. You actually have very little idea why your students got you a salt lamp, exactly, but it is pink and can fill a small room with a warm glow

and you love it and you must remember to turn it on frequently at home, just as you did in your office, so that the salt doesn't melt. Your novel has been melting away from you for some time now. Your novel is about ice cream, ghosts, and race relations, you would sometimes singsong the words "race relations" with jazz hands, and in it, a little Black boy is found dead in a salt barrel. You thought the strange detail was conjured by you, but during your Ph.D. you traced it back to Komunyakaa and grew unsettled that you were undoing his work.

> Lena, Lois? I feel her
> Strain not to see me.
> Lines are now etched
> At the corners of her thin,
> Pale mouth. Does she know
> I know her grandfather
> Rode a white horse
> Through Poplas Quarters
> Searching for black women,
> How he killed Indians
> & stole land with bribes
> & fake deeds?

Once, there was a not overtly racist but rather explicitly homophobic teacher who tried to instill in you that everything in life would forevermore trace back to Gilgamesh. You haven't thought about Gilgamesh nearly as much as you've thought about how much of your literary education was shaped by women who held in their hearts wealth, Jesus & the Lost Cause; for you, it's *Neon Vernacular*.

Komunyakaa writes in "Salt,"

What the children of housekeepers
& handymen knew was enough
To stop biological clocks,
& its hard now not to walk over
& mention how her grandmother
Killed her idiot son
& salted him down
In a wooden barrel.

For four years, you tried to teach your students: What you do matters. Hold yourself accountable; protect your work, keep yourself safe. You tried your best, even if you could barely model such ideas yourself. You are shifting the weight of the salt lamp and your books and feel so overburdened, it takes a moment to register that the person in the seat next to you is asking you something.

This is not the first time you encounter a girl alone and crying in a public place. This is the first time it strikes you that she must be just about half your age. She is asking if she is on the right train; she isn't.

You shift through your books to offer her a pack of tissues. She starts, then, stares down at your extended hand; she begins to cry harder and embraces you, resting her head where your heart is.

You feel yourself flinch and hope she doesn't notice. It has been no more than a handful of days since you stopped wearing a mask on public transport; you forgot once, then it was easy to keep forgetting. The discomfort of the pandemic is constant, masked or unmasked. The unease of eyes on you, the sense of sickening others—you have been navigating such violences for most of your life.

You flinched because your body forgot the weight of a stranger's wholehearted trust. There are things you think you will never forget, things that feel formative at the time of learning, but you do—you forget kindness all the time.

She holds on to you as you get off at the next stop. She doesn't want to call anyone. She is certain she just wants to go home. You move through the crowds together to find the line that can take her home. You move slowly because you both need to. You wonder why these things happen on days you happen to be toting bags of books and a bowling ball of salt. You have to shift her away to stand in front of you on the escalator; she keeps looking back to make sure it's you and you're still there.

You get on the right train and find two empty seats. You catch your breath and remember to hold her back as you reiterate important questions.

Are you hurt?

Do you need medical attention?

Would you like to tell me what happened?

Is there someone you can talk to waiting for you at home?

You believe her when she says no. You believe her when she says yes. You accept that you know only what she tells you. You accept that your fear of not knowing is not needed here. You refuse to let your fear take the space she needs from you. You note the stops for her, counting down to hers. You hold her close and measure out your questions with further refrains:

You have nothing to apologize for.

You are safe now.

You will be home soon.

You wish there was more of you to enclose around her; you wish you could extend yourself to be an airy, warmly lit room. The thought is fleeting, as it must be; it holds as you exit onto the platform with her and walk her to the turnstiles; it holds, barely, as she looks right into your eyes, then, releases you, passing beyond the barrier, looking back just once before merging with the crowd.

A friend from home is visiting the city and invites you for oysters and caviar. Home, in this context, is the nation of America. The city is London, and you have been an academic here for less than a year. In some ways, you know this friend well; in other ways, you do not; you have thought of them often. They say they found your university profile, and you are touched. You are about to say so, to thank them for looking you up.

There's something I've always wanted to tell you, they say.

I often feel guilty when I think about you. You told me once about the work you do, and I didn't get it. I should have guessed what happened to you.

They take your silence to mean that you don't remember and/or that you don't understand. They start to speak louder over your silence.

Those calls you took from women? Staying up all night? I get it now that women do that kind of work because it happened to them, too. I know that now, but I didn't then. I was just a kid.

I wish I had asked you about it, back then. I want you to know I'm ready now to hear what happened.

Everything tastes of salt.

You feel you may be salt.

You have read the story about the woman who

about that man.

You go home and edit your university profile.