

from *To What Do I Owe This Pleasure*

The medicine man told the King, who told the people: In order to save the kingdom we need a blood sacrifice, and it must be from a human. Seeing that the only volunteer was a peasant, the medicine man said, We don't need to take his life; only part of his ear. And so they did. And so the King said, From now on, you and your descendants will never be chained. You will never eat in the dark. He made the peasant nobility and gave the peasant land, which the peasant passed down to his descendants, though a few years ago my aunt called my father for help. The weather had been rough. The family's house, like many old things, fell down.

My great-great-grandfather's sacrifice is why my father refuses to meet the man I love. Tells me he will love any child we have less. He is, by his own admission, in the wrong. But he can't stop himself from saying things like, I don't want our blood to go somewhere that doesn't deserve it. I ask who he means. He pauses, says, Like the descendants of slaves.

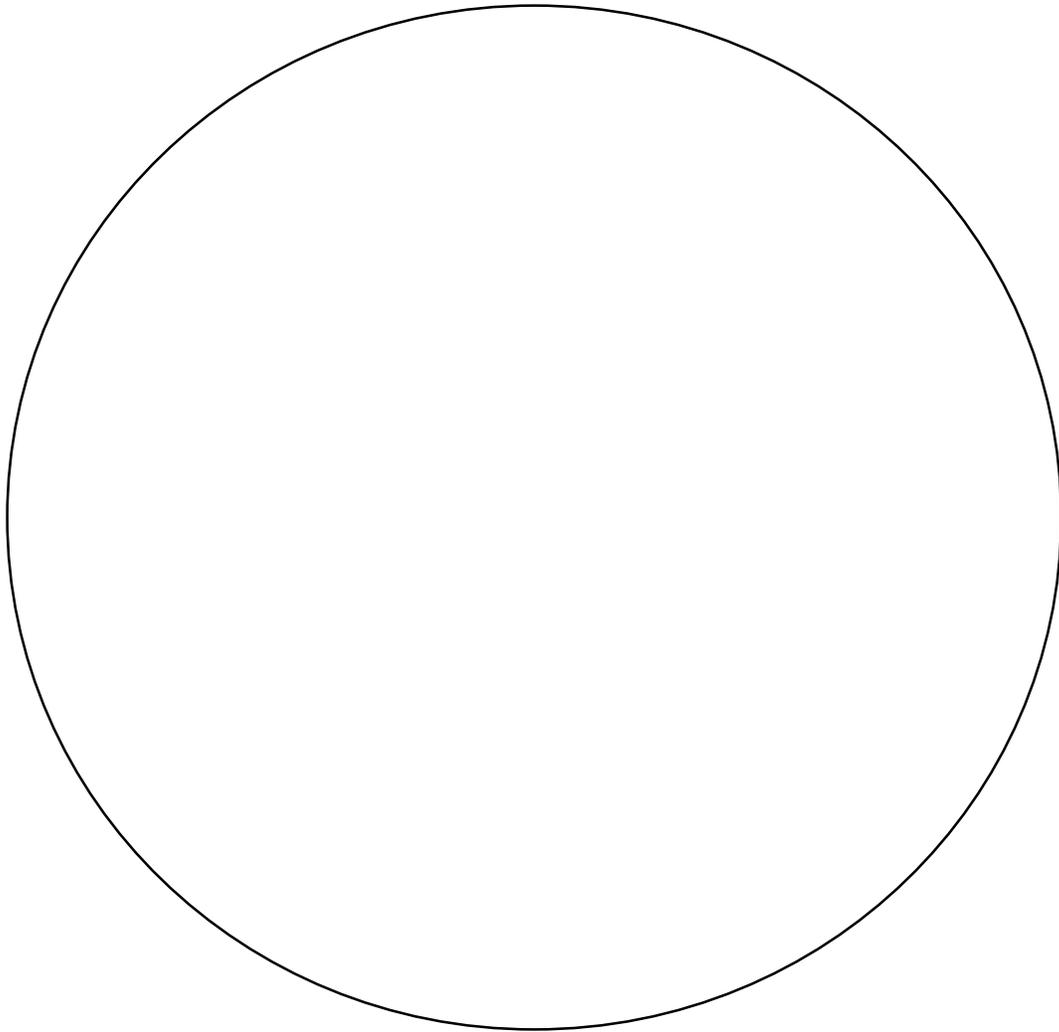
After I moved to the Midwest, everyone I met cared deeply about rivers. All I knew was the Hudson, which ran startled into the streets after the hurricane. Under photos of flooded subways, reporters wrote, This is what the apocalypse looks like. Others designed maps like the ones made by the MTA, showing how the places most affected were where poor people already lived. I think about Haiti, still recovering from an earthquake when Sandy hit. An estimated 200,000 made homeless due to ongoing rain.

When I read it's illegal in Madagascar to identify someone as descended from slaves, I call my mother, expecting her to tsk my ignorance. Instead, she tells me it's true. It's considered hate speech. You people, she mimics. You were my family's slaves! Stuff like that. When I ask if her family owned slaves, she becomes defensive and says, as far as she knows, her parents never did. I consider pressing harder, but don't.

I am trying to learn architectural terms. Differentiating the inside of space from what surrounds it. In a translation of *Vers une architecture*, I find the following: A house is a machine for living in. Baths, sun, hot-water, cold-water, warmth at will, conservation of food, hygiene, beauty in the sense of good proportion. An armchair is a machine for sitting in and so on. There was a skyscraper in London whose concave and glass-covered design led to cars melting and carpets being set on fire. Much later, I learned Sandy left 100 houses in Queens on fire, though nowhere near where my parents now live.

The day before one of my dad's best friends died, he called my dad. His oldest daughter had come to pay respects with her husband, a Haitian man. He wanted my dad to come get him. I can't die here. He wouldn't even shake his son-in-law's hand. He was very very very dark. You know. Black. He'd rather been dead. Then he died. Possibly out of spite, I add, whenever I retell the story.

Slavery was the weather, according to Christina Sharpe. Weather is what gives anti-Blackness its sound, makes its brutality normative, even banal. It's a climate. A Black body thrown overboard from a ship. A Black body abandoned in a superdome. What were they thinking? It was the weather.



1 A map is not the territory it represents, Alfred Korzybski wrote, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness. Rabindranath Tagore agreed: The geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one can give up his life for a map.

2 Cartography has never saved anyone from a disaster. If we can run backwards, so can the river. Richard Ciacci invented a mountain and named it after himself. An island was undiscovered when a ship sailed straight over dark waters. It doesn't take much to rewrite a map as long as you can let the landscape go.

3 In all the visible corporeal world, John Locke wrote, we see no chasms or gaps. But here is a fossil of a long-dead way of life. Here is a gravesite marking the death of property. And here is colonialism, still visible from space. In one image, a river runs red through a forest; throws itself into the ocean, bereft. Astronauts say it looks like Madagascar is bleeding. Fair enough. I imagine being civilized. Sitting at the table in my big dress and watching the marble earth spin, stopping only when I put my finger down.

4 It's true that my parents and I say we love each other in English even when at home.

The man I love washes dishes in the afternoon. At night. But never in the morning. I watch him loiter in the kitchen even when there's nothing to be done. Everyone wants to be a king, he says. But it's the slaves that survived.

What surprises me the most to learn is that ancestor worship in Madagascar isn't just about venerating the dead. It's also about wanting to become an ancestor worth worshipping.

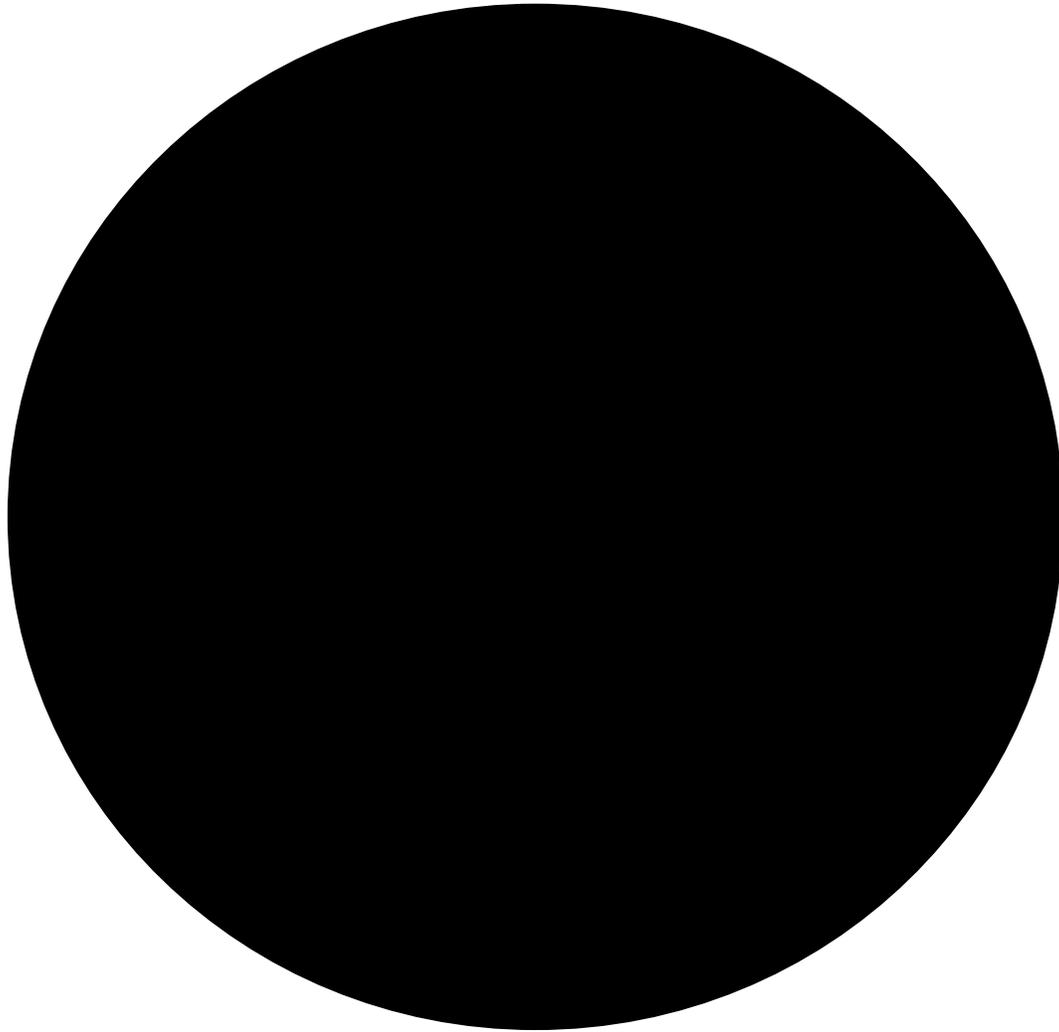
When my father tells me his ancestors owned slaves, he cries harder than I've ever seen. Says it's our biggest shame. This must have been after we got the land and built the house, though I don't say so. I listen to the sound of him. I watch dutifully as his hands rise to cover, then reveal, his face.

In the illustration, two rats lie beside blood bags. The article beneath details a study into whether the blood of younger people can help older people with Alzheimer's. When Paul Bert performed the first parabiosis experiment in 1864, he stripped the skin off two rats, then stitched the animals together. As he hoped, their circulatory systems joined as their blood vessels regrew. They began to pump each other's blood.

A woman in Belgium slept beside her husband's rotting body for a year before the police realized he was dead. A different woman managed several years in Brooklyn, dragging a chair into her kitchen each night so she could sleep next to her mother's corpse. In Indiana, a college girl falls down the stairs, dies two days after arriving on campus. I can't look too long at the photo of her mother, glancing sideways and wearing her clothes.

In 2012, physicists confirmed the discovery of the Higgs boson, the particle crucial for explaining why other elementary particles have mass even when their conditions dictate they shouldn't.

After the shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, Rice's older sister lost more than 50 pounds and about 100 days of school. Sandra Bland's nine-year-old nephew went back to sleeping in his mother's room, afraid of being alone. But what kept me in bed was Oscar Grant's five-year-old daughter telling friends to duck whenever they saw police.



1        A man got beat on the street while I wiped the screen where he got beat, past tense, dead man play dead. Wondered bout lunch as people jumped out of windows, collapsing buildings, camera turning away so we knew this was in real time. Real recognize real. Recognize reel. Back to what I ain't afraid of:

2        So argued James Flint in an anecdote from Letter XIV (1819): A negro man and a white woman came before the squire of a neighbouring township, for the purpose of being married. The squire objected to the union as contrary to a law of the State, that prohibits all sexual intercourse between white and coloured people, under a penalty for each offence, but suggested, that if the woman could be qualified to swear that there was black blood in her, the law would not apply. The hint was taken, and the lancet was immediately applied to the Negro's arm. The loving bride drank the blood, made the necessary oath, and his honour joined their hands, to the great satisfaction of all parties.

3        I've been a white man's secret I laid hands / on his face / like a woman does a mic / eyes closed / ready to corrupt I've done secret things

4        I got big hoop earrings now too. I been tryna look real real free.

Stephen Hawking believes the Higgs boson could trigger the creation of a vacuum bubble that would expand through space and destroy the known universe. But even the physicists who agree with him don't think it'll happen any time soon. That or the bubble has already been created and we won't know about its existence until it's too late. Still, they advise, we shouldn't sell our houses, should continue paying taxes.

The day Darren Wilson was acquitted, I bought a plane ticket to St. Louis.

I once thought we were the only creatures who could be helped out of dying but it turns out dolphins can be trained to lead trapped whales back out to sea. As human beliefs about suicide change, so does our interpretation of animal behavior. Even scientists who don't think animals can commit suicide believe they can suffer from stress, from PTSD, from depression. Perhaps it's soothing to claim to understand the dogs who fling themselves into water and hold their legs still, refusing to swim. Whales beaching themselves. Penguins who intentionally walk further and further away from water, toward the mountains, until they starve.

When my dad first came to the U.S., he was so lonely he'd call up anyone in the phonebook whose name looked like his. I've called a suicide hotline only once. Oh my god, I said before the volunteer could ask for my name. This is so stupid. I'm just so lonely.

Though the Standard Model accurately predicted the existence of the Higgs boson, it doesn't account for the existence of dark matter, which we now know makes up nearly 85% of the universe's mass. Physicists believe this explains why astronomers keep discovering new wispy galaxies that, by all of our current understandings, shouldn't have survived.

We cannot read the darkness, Maggie Nelson warns. We cannot read it. It is a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try. In the dark, I lose all sense of scale. A room with fixed coordinates becomes impossible to reimagine. I am, standing in the room, larger than the room. In a less dark darkness, I can make out outlines and faded colors. But in a room whose darkness is truly dark—in a black room masquerading as intimacy—everything known is swallowed.

To a dog, I have lived hundreds of years. Who am I to fight the animal body. I am not an alien, slouching meaningfully across my planet.