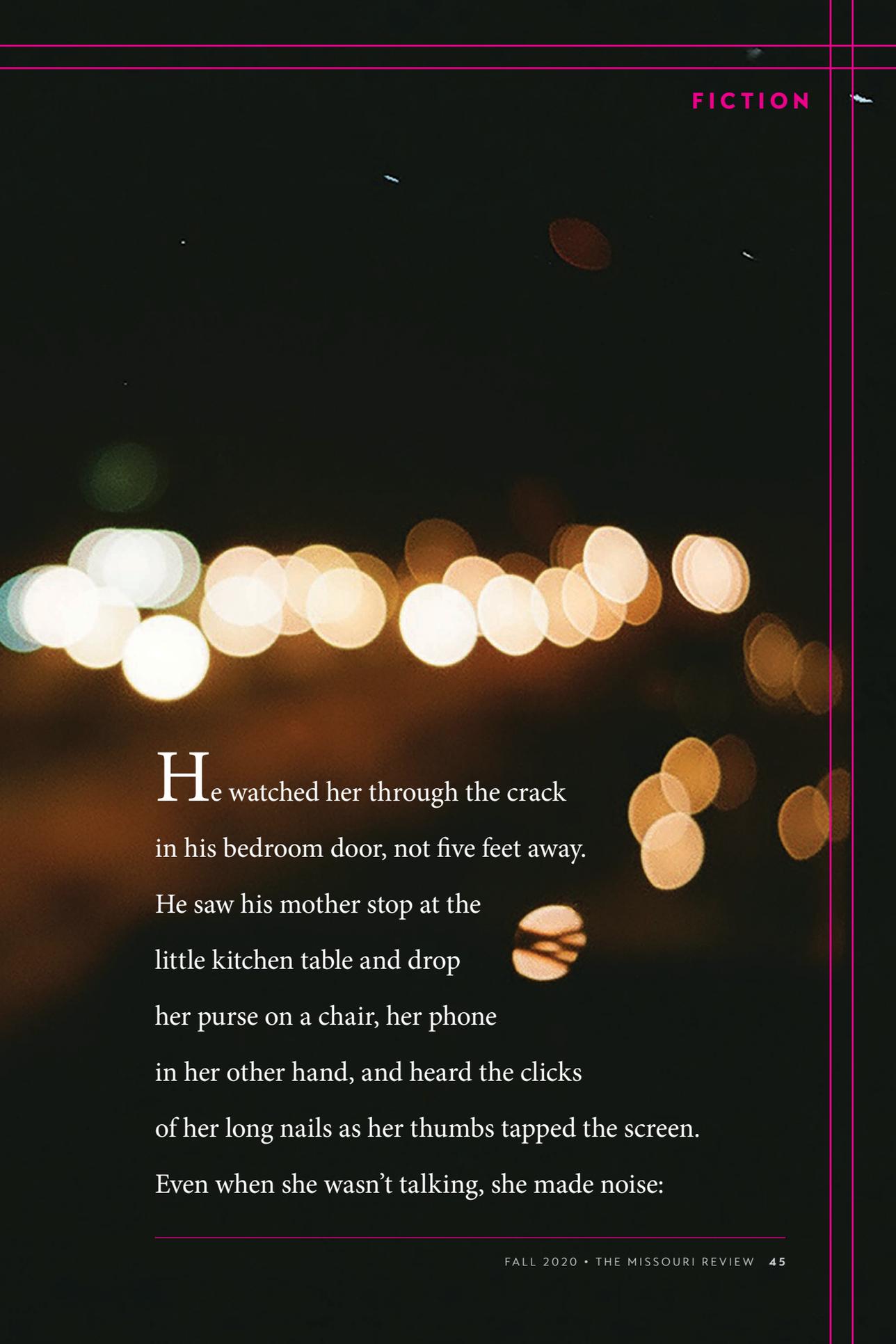


Look at You

Claire Cox

Photo by Stuart McAlpine



He watched her through the crack
in his bedroom door, not five feet away.
He saw his mother stop at the
little kitchen table and drop
her purse on a chair, her phone
in her other hand, and heard the clicks
of her long nails as her thumbs tapped the screen.
Even when she wasn't talking, she made noise:

earrings, bracelets, gum, the friction of leather jackets against imitation leather pants, the poke of her heels on the apartment's linoleum. In the overhead light, she looked insignificant, like a stranger.

She pursed her lips and glared at the phone screen, scrolling, scrolling. She put her other hand on her hip. His mother was tall and fat, like him, and she dressed to emphasize it, which looked better on her. Her boyfriends were always smoothing their hands along the back pockets of her jeans.

Marlon shifted his weight, trying not to make a sound, but he had to pee. Where did she think he was? It was almost ten, a school night. He could be anywhere.

He could have cooked dinner—he'd been home for six hours. When he came in from school, he texted his friend Candice back and sank into his phone, and by the time he noticed what time it was, he was so irritated his mother wasn't home that he refused to cook dinner, just to make a point.

She wasn't wearing her work scrubs. She sucked her teeth extravagantly and tossed the phone onto the table, the charms on its case tinkling. She opened the fridge.

Marlon could slip back into the shadows, pretend he wasn't there, escape the fallout of her shitty mood. But if he made her think he was out, there would be worse hell to pay in the morning. Or not.

Hey, girl, he said, emerging from his room, faking a yawn.

She snapped her eyes to him. He still wasn't used to the dense bristles of her false eyelashes, which she'd gotten on both the bottom and top. She didn't need them—she was beautiful, still young, dark like him. The eyelashes obscured her flashing topaz eyes, took away from the power of her mouth.

Where you been? Her husky voice usually surprised people—it was intimate, like she was whispering only to you.

I was here. Asleep. His own voice sharp and high-pitched.

What you sleepin' in the middle of the day for?

It's ten o'clock.

So? You usually up till two or three. He watched her eyes, could see she was spinning, her mind on the phone, whoever was at the other end of it. She wasn't going to grill him about dinner.

Why you ain't cook dinner?

Snap.

I was sleepin', he said lamely.

Since you got home from school?

No. I don't know.

You sick? C'mere, let me feel your head.

Marlon went to her, breathed her perfume. She placed a cool hand on his forehead and looked at him skeptically. You fine, she pronounced.

Can we get Chinese? Marlon asked.

Where you think money *come* from, Marlon? She glared at him. He hoped she wouldn't launch into her get-a-job monologue. Instead, she opened a cupboard and pointed to a saucepan. Then she directed a long-nailed finger to the sink.

The phone began dancing across the table, a ringtone Marlon didn't recognize. His mother grabbed it and studied the screen. She tossed the phone into her purse and grabbed a scarf off the coat rack. She looked back at the open cupboard, then returned her eyes to Marlon.

Fix your own dinner.

Marlon watched her mutely, the fury in his chest going damp and quiet.

Where you going? he asked. She ignored him and went into the bathroom down the hall. When she came out, her weave—it was called Paris Curl, loose brown ringlets that tumbled across her shoulders—was glossier, bouncy again.

For a half second—a breath—he saw the ache in her face, the need. It reminded him of his girlfriends at school. She clacked across the floor to him and kissed him on the cheek.

Love you.

He didn't answer her.

She went out and shut the door behind her, turning the key in the lock. Marlon drifted to the door and peered with one eye through the peephole, but all he could see was yellow fuzz.

The stairwell at Jackie Robinson High School was a cage, the up stairs and down stairs twisting in a double helix separated by wire mesh, with gum wrappers and plastic bags junked up in the corners. The building was over a hundred years old, six stories high and a city block wide, one of the last big high schools in Brooklyn that hadn't been broken up into smaller schools. The city had been threatening to shut it down for years. Marlon was alone in the stairwell, an hour late. He breathed it in: old dust, plaster, pipes; bacon-egg-and-cheeses and the sharp sugar of corner-store candy; a body funk from the kids who stayed up all night

online, fell asleep late, and didn't have time to shower in the morning before coming to school. Marlon was not that type of kid. Or he was, but he showered, always.

He stopped on the fourth-floor landing and looked down, wincing when he saw two damp circles blooming under his big arms. His belt bit into his gut, but he looked good: new yellow T-shirt, new yellow belt from St. Marks, spotless yellow Nike Court Forces you could eat off of. He flexed his hand and waved the air around his face, smoothing his eyebrows with a knuckle. He wore his hair in neat Carrot Cremed waves like the other boys, brushing them down all day; he was saving the Mohawk for later in the semester.

Below him, a door slammed. He listened as someone dragged themselves up the stairs, knowing the gait: a boy walking like his feet were in blocks of cement, trying not to crease his new sneakers. It looked retarded, but it worked. Marlon stopped fanning himself, hunched his shoulders, and put on his bus-riding face.

It was Derrell, the mopey acne kid in his grade who got taller every year without gaining any weight. He smiled at Marlon, corner-store bag dangling from his wrist. Marlon ignored him and waited, wanting the stairwell to himself before he made his entrance.

He would be late for US History again, but it was early in the year; he could still pass. Most of these teachers wanted you to pass, were flattered you even bothered. Plus, it looked bad to the city when all your students failed, or this was his guess.

Marlon listened as Derrell got off on the fifth floor and resumed his own climb up the stairs. At the sixth floor, he pulled the door open, entering the hush of the hallway, the bright boiled light, the tiled echoes.

Here came Candice barreling toward him. She must have been late too, or on a bathroom break.

Hey, girl. Marlon bent down and they hugged, tight and quick like boxers. Candice was cute, not pretty: dense, compact, light-skinned, with big cheeks and round eyes and little pigeon-toed legs. She had a fresh weave, an immaculate glossy bob like the Supremes, which did not flatter her at all. He wouldn't tell her.

You see Tee at the corner store?

No, why? Marlon laughed meanly and covered his mouth like a girl, scanning the hall for school safety.

I heard she wanna fight you.

Tee like three feet tall.

I'm just tellin' you what I heard.

Marlon snorted.

The mile-long hall was deserted, but it felt alive. A flicker of movement danced in the distance, and Marlon turned toward it. Way down at the end, silhouetted against a window: Rafael, a transfer. Rafael was eighteen, but he looked younger: sinewy, dark-skinned, pretty. His eyelashes were stupid long, beautiful, real.

Candice followed his gaze.

Marlon, Rafael *straight*. There was pity in her voice.

How do you know, stupid? You fuck him already?

Excuse you? Candice snapped, exploding the hall's quiet.

Marlon put his hands up, rolled his eyes.

Naw, for real, Ashley Brown really did fuck him, Candice said, dropping it. She dug for something in her purse.

When?

I don't know! I just heard; I wasn't there.

So, Marlon sniffed. I fucked girls, doesn't mean I'm straight.

Boy, ain't nobody think you straight.

He'd fucked one girl. Her name was Fa'tasia—not *Fantasia*, like the singer, *Fa'tasia*, Lord help you if you got it wrong twice—and she was supremely weird. She talked too much, but she had an indifferent sexiness, a long half-moon jaw and high cheekbones, and she was lean, like a boy. Afterward, he couldn't say he liked it, but he couldn't say it was the horror he'd imagined, either.

Marlon's face tightened as he watched Rafael drift down the hall and turn a corner. He knew Rafael's schedule and knew he was cutting. Where did he go? Who were his friends? He seemed to sit with a different group at lunch every day.

That boy ain't payin' you no mind, Candice informed him.

Marlon sucked his teeth.

From around another corner, behind them, a set of heels approached. The rhythm stopped, and she was standing dead in front of them, face of a sphinx, a Black AP, he couldn't remember her name. She was a classic bitch, but he allowed that she could dress: pencil skirts, crisp blouses, permed hair high on her head in flat twists, balanced like a cruise ship cutting the water.

What? Marlon said, brave.

She sighed, immortal. Marlon didn't blink.

Really? she finally said.

Marlon grinned. I'm sorry, *our* bad, he said, waving his hand with a quick little flourish, tilting his head like a majorette. Ta-ta! he cried, and he and Candice skittered down the hall to the girls' room in a hail of giggles. The heels clicked away, indifferent.

The girls' room was empty, and Marlon and Candice fell on themselves in front of the mirror, their laughter shattering in the echoes.

It smell like tampons in here. Marlon wrinkled his nose.

Then get the fuck out, Candice retorted.

But Marlon liked the girls' room, its muted morning light. He walked to the window and eased himself up on the ledge. He felt his stomach over the waist of his pants.

Don't you have somewhere to be? Candice tried to get him to laugh again, hitting her consonants with a white person's thud.

Don't *you* have somewhere to be? Marlon's voice had gone listless. He drew his face to the light through the frosted window.

Candice fussed with her eyelashes in the mirror. Fix this for me? She held out a tube of glue, eyeing him in her reflection, ignoring his mood. Marlon stayed where he was, making Candice come to his window with it, where he performed the task with casual skill.

If he so *straight*, Marlon said finally, then why does he look at me all the time? He sat back, assessing his handiwork.

Who?

Marlon stared at Candice.

When do he look at you? She returned to the sinks.

At lunch.

I ain't never seen him eat lunch in that cafeteria. Then she snapped her fingers, remembering. She turned to him, her voice a warning. He be in the gym playing *ball*. He on the *basketball* team, Marlon.

He is not on the basketball team.

Marlon.

He like five-three. Marlon smiled.

He friends with Kadeem and them. Candice's eyes were fearful.

I ain't scared of that nigga, Marlon sniffed, flinging his chin toward the pebbly glass in defiance.

What you need a boyfriend from Jackie Robinson for *anyway*? Candice muttered, squeezing a worm of glue onto her finger. Dumb-ass fools in this school. Get you a boy from the pier.

I don't want some faggot from the pier, Marlon said disdainfully.

Boy, you *is* a faggot from the pier, Candice shot back. Marlon was silent.

Candice applied the glue delicately to one eyelid, fluttering it, her eyes rolling back into her head. She could only do the left one herself, never the right.

Marlon checked his phone and dragged himself away from the window, hiking his backpack up, avoiding his own reflection.

Don't be mad, Candice said.

I'm not mad. He kissed her on the cheek and faded out the door and down the hall.

Marlon paused in the hallway outside his history classroom, preparing himself. He took a deep, asthmatic breath, lifted his chin, and smirked, pushing the door open with such force that it slammed the wall behind it. The students had been silently hunched over a quiz, and now they looked up at him in alarm.

My bad, Marlon stage-whispered with a fake gasp, putting his hand over his mouth. The teacher, a disheveled white woman, glared at him from her desk, where she had been absorbed in her early-model iPhone. He stared back, daring her to react. She returned her attention to the screen in her hand.

Marlon picked his way through the rows of desks to his seat near the back, turning sideways to squeeze through, holding his backpack over his head, exposing his damp underarms. In a spasm of mortification, he made sure to brush his butt along one desk, one arm, in particular, which belonged to one of the basketball-player sadists, a closeted boy named Kadeem.

Yo, what the fuck, man? Kadeem cried, unfolding his long frame, half standing up.

Excuse me, the teacher intoned.

Marlon kept walking.

Batty motherfucker, Kadeem murmured as he eased himself back into his seat, deepening his Jamaican accent. *Bah-tee*. Marlon heard it a hundred times an afternoon on Nostrand Avenue, rope-armed West Indian men cutting their glassy eyes at him as he passed. Kadeem had turned it into a ritual, whispering it during class, turning in his seat and mouthing it silently, "accidentally" shoving him as they crowded the doorway at dismissal.

Excuse you? Marlon retorted, turning around. He'd never confronted Kadeem like this before. Other boys, girls, yes—but not one of the basketball players.

Kadeem didn't move, didn't turn his head. You heard me, batty boy, Kadeem muttered, evading detection as usual.

The teacher stood up. Excuse me, she said again, flustered. The students swiveled their heads from her to Marlon and Kadeem.

Why don't you say it again, *faggot*? Marlon challenged, his voice rising, everything in the room going brighter. Kadeem whirled back around.

Gentlemen, the teacher warned. She reached behind her for the wall-mounted phone that connected to the main office.

What the fuck you just say to me, boy? Kadeem's accent gave the question a sing-song quality. *Bwoy*.

Yo, another tall kid said softly, putting a hand on Kadeem's arm. Kadeem shook him off. Coach be suspending people, the boy warned out the side of his mouth.

Coach be a batty-man, Kadeem spat.

Keep talking, Marlon dared, taking a step toward him. He shook his backpack onto the floor. Kadeem was only slightly taller than Marlon, halfway to full grown from the beanpole he'd been the year before. When they grew fast, they were cocky about it, whereas Marlon had always been big.

The bell rang, a shrill, mangled sound. A circle widened around them. Kadeem lunged at Marlon, but he didn't throw a punch, probably expecting his friend to pull him back. Marlon lunged at Kadeem for real, hit him for real, in the chest. They locked arms, pushing into the hallway, and Marlon discovered that Kadeem was weaker than he looked. Then three or four tall boys materialized in Kadeem's defense, and it was mayhem. Marlon was on the floor when the industrial-strength arms of the school's brawniest aides yanked them all apart, and Marlon saw the towering fence of students looking down on them, his right eye going murky. Shaking heads, laughter. School safety slapped actual handcuffs on them, pulled them to their feet, marched them down the long hall to the main office. In all the fights he'd had at that school, they'd never made him wear handcuffs.

An eternity later, as the blue Brooklyn sky shed sunlight through the horizontal blinds of the office windows, Marlon shifted in a waiting-

room chair, his eyes climbing the walls to avoid Kadeem's hot stare from across the office. He really is a homo, Marlon thought. The other boys were sent to the in-school suspension room when it became clear who the instigators were. Though Marlon was the superior fighter, Kadeem looked better: just a shiner under his eye. It made him look tough.

Marlon looked like hell. An aide had escorted him to the restroom, and he caught his puffy face in the mirror, his golf-ball cheek, his right eye bloodshot crimson. He always wanted to see his mother's catlike amber eyes when he looked in the mirror but saw, instead, his own smallish ink-brown eyes staring back; the red eye was an interesting change. His waves were fuzzed and raggedy, but when he tried to brush them down, the aide yelled that it wasn't a beauty salon.

In the chair next to Marlon, a heavysset Black woman in a headscarf and a long dress sat in grave silence, waiting, like him, for the principal to grant her entrance to his chamber.

He couldn't text anyone or post anything because if they saw you use your phone, they confiscated it and made your mother come get it back. They let Kadeem use the restroom unaccompanied for some reason, and Marlon figured he posted threats and false boasts from a stall; he heard Kadeem's pocket buzzing with alerts all afternoon. He wondered if this was going to get bigger, if there would be a whole crew waiting for him after school.

Rafael came to the office door. His knife-blade figure suggested itself under his jeans and polo shirt, a narrow trapezoid of green boxer briefs visible between them. His sneakers were Mentos-bright, even the laces. His brown skin reflected a rich almost lavender glow, and Marlon could smell the boy's cocoa butter lotion as he entered the office, passing Marlon without looking his way.

Marlon's cheeks were hot with shame and desire. He was not an attractive person; he knew this, but he felt hideous right then, swollen, disfigured.

Rafael walked up to Kadeem and nodded at him. So they were friends. Rafael said something so low Marlon couldn't hear them, and Kadeem grew animated. Rafael turned around briefly, scanned Marlon's face without reacting, and turned back. Marlon itched all over.

The Black AP marched in. She saw Rafael talking to Kadeem and asked him, as they always did, Where are you supposed to be? Rafael didn't answer, just turned and levitated to the door.

I catch you later, he said softly over his shoulder to Kadeem. The AP swished into the office's inner sanctum through a swinging half door like they had in court, disappearing around the corner. Behind her, as Rafael reached the office's threshold, one sneakered foot in the hallway, he turned around and looked straight at Marlon.

Marlon stared at him, birds thumping in his chest.

Rafael held his eyes. No expression but quiet interest.

Marlon wanted to look at Kadeem, see the fire in his face, but Rafael fixed him there, froze his head in place. Then he was gone. Marlon thought he might have imagined it.

He stole a glance at Kadeem: no. That was real.

The principal talked to Kadeem first, then made him leave. Marlon pictured the army of tall boys Kadeem could summon, three deep, pounding their fists into their hands, blocking Marlon's way to the subway entrance. He shivered. There were enough eyes on him in the office that he couldn't do anything but sit there, couldn't start texting for his own crew. Not that anyone would come but Candice, who popped her head in after the last bell and told him she was waiting for him.

He shook his head and waved her off. If those boys were going to get him, fuck it, he'd seen worse.

He pictured himself in a hospital bed, mummied legs and arms suspended in traction, his mother crying next to him, vowing to kill whoever did this.

He pictured being home and eating a frozen pizza.

Marlon Fuller, one of the secretaries ordered, gesturing him into the principal's office. The principal was an old hard-ass, a white guy who'd gone to Jackie Robinson back in the day, when they still had a few Irish and Italian kids. Basketball trophies all over his office, Mr. Hanson's face easy to pick out among the darker faces in the faded team photos.

Marlon had a headache. He couldn't focus on what the man was saying, could only read his voice, which sounded bored. Then he said something odd.

Using your belt—that's a new one for you.

Excuse me? Marlon said, attentive now.

There were statements from several students that you took off your belt and used it as a weapon.

What? Marlon was aghast. Had he taken off his belt? His fingers brushed the cheap buckle, which couldn't have hurt anyone if he'd tried.

This will probably be a superintendent's suspension.

What does that mean?

Well, first of all, it means you need to think a little harder about the choices you're making. It's only October, for God's sake. It also means you could be sent to an off-site suspension center to finish your classes.

Like juvie? Marlon's eyes grew wide.

Sort of. The man examined his own nails. His accent was old-school Brooklyn.

Marlon leaned forward. I did not take my belt off to hit anyone, he said, unsure, now, whether this was true. He didn't remember taking it off, but he also didn't remember how he ended up on the floor.

That boy hit me, and I hit him back. I can't help that his dumb friends jumped in. Marlon folded his arms over his chest. This is a hate crime.

I'm sorry? Mr. Hanson squinted at Marlon through his glasses.

I already said in my statement that he called me a "batty boy." Which he does all the time.

He called you a what?

It's a Caribbean word. It means faggot. Marlon set his mouth into a thin line, his cheeks growing hot.

Mr. Hanson leaned back in his chair. Why didn't you tell someone you were being bullied?

Marlon squirmed. I wasn't being *bullied*.

If it's a slur, like you say, that counts as—

Ain't like you people was gonna *do* nothing about it, Marlon shot back.

Mr. Hanson set to gathering the papers on his desk, leaving Marlon to fume. He took out a pen and signed something. He turned to his computer, squinting into its greenish glow. Finally, he returned his attention to Marlon.

You'll get a letter about the suspension hearing; it'll tell you where to go. Do not be late. They stared at each other. Go home, Marlon, the man told him.

You know they're gonna be out there waiting for me, don't you?

Who?

That boy and all his thug friends.

I can call the police. Is that what you want me to do?

Fuck you, Marlon said and stood up, knocking his chair over. He didn't mean to. But he was glad.

Mr. Hanson returned to his computer. No wonder they bully you, son, he said softly.

Marlon slammed the principal's door, and the secretaries glared at him. I hate this fuckin' school, Marlon announced, but no one stirred. He stalked out of the office, pulling his phone out of his backpack. He pressed the button to light up the screen, but it was dead.

The endless building felt empty, and Marlon went up to a science classroom on the third floor where you could see all the way down the block: there were a few cops, some old heads gathered near a storefront, an old lady pushing a grandma cart, elementary kids in school uniforms bounding out of the corner store. That was it.

He wanted to call his mother. He didn't know her new number by heart; he just had it in his phone under *Mommy*. He didn't know anyone's number by heart.

As he made his way out of the building and down Fulton Street, down the smelly steps to the subway station, he felt ugly and vulnerable, like easy prey. He hoped he looked scary. The thunk of the turnstile felt ominous; on the platform, he kept glancing down the tracks, expecting a formation of basketball dudes to come marching toward him.

That Friday, Candice texted him.

y u still home nga

The suspension hearing was the following Monday. Until then, he was stuck at home, and he was on punishment. His mother had changed the Wi-Fi password and forbidden him to leave the apartment, not that Marlon wanted to walk the streets and get jumped by a bunch of basketball goons.

Lying on his back on the couch, suicidal with boredom, Marlon held his phone above him, letting the blood drain from his hands and arms.

y u aint come ova bitch, he typed. *u dont luv me no more*

come to mariah party 2nite, Candice texted.

who mariah

ill pick u up @ 9

ok, Marlon texted airily.

It was a rooftop party. The season was early, it wasn't cold yet; it had drizzled all day Friday, but the night sky was clear with a high moon, and a half-warm breeze blew down the street, fluttering the yellow leaves.

Marlon's mother was working a double and wouldn't be home until dawn, so he and Candice went late to Mariah's party. The swelling in his

face had gone down—he looked less like Frankenstein and more like a thug, which he didn't mind. He decided to go butch, baggy jeans and a big Yankees cap, white Nikes toothbrushed clean. When they arrived, he and Candice emerged from the building's stairwell and breathed in the view.

Yo, Marlon whispered.

It was a random crowd, girls and beautiful boys Marlon had seen doing pull-ups on the scaffolding below. A few of them could have been basketball players, but it was hard to tell—Jackie Robinson had a varsity team, a JV team, and a freshman team, and Marlon never kept track. He didn't see Kadeem or any of his friends.

Except Rafael.

He was leaning against another stairwell door in a hoodie, bringing a glowing ember to his lips. Marlon squeezed Candice's arm.

Ow! she yelped. She looked to where Marlon was staring, bug-eyed. Let it go, Marlon, she hissed. Fuck is the matter with you.

He dropped her elbow and sailed away from her, filling his chest with October air and confidence. He walked to the edge of Rafael's small crowd and took the blunt someone passed him. A girl he recognized from his history class offered him a bottle of Mike's Hard Lemonade, and Marlon drank it quickly, swallowing his self-consciousness, taking another long hit from the blunt when it came around again. Someone started rapping and singing, a dumb song you heard out the windows of every single car on Fulton Street, and they all joined in, Marlon cackling, knowing all the words.

Yo, a girl said, looking at Marlon in the weak light. You that boy—
Marlon studied her.

Who fought Kadeem.

Marlon said nothing. There were fights every week at their school.

Kadeem a little punk, the girl said, laughing. I heard he gonna transfer.

Marlon was quiet, his ears burning as the conversation drifted to something else. Rafael stood in the shadows like a monk.

The night burned on, the crowd thinning and swelling, laughing, shit-talking, singing. More blunts, a bottle of Alizé, a bottle of Hennessy. Neighbors yelled at them; loud-mouthed boys yelled back. Two girls passed out, their faces angelic as they slumped against a skylight that glowed from the stairwell below. More people came and left. They were

surrounded by voices, shadows, and faces in the Brooklyn nightglow, and then they weren't. Then Rafael was standing next to him, alone.

Marlon and Rafael stood at the roof's edge and watched the lights of a J train as it shuddered between the rooftops. They looked down to the sidewalk and got dizzy at the same time, laughing a little.

Marlon flew up outside himself and watched it happen, matching the scene to the infinite loop he'd played in his head: in his fantasies, it happened at the pier, at school, on an island somewhere, not on a scummy Brooklyn rooftop humming with giant air vents. But the roof was weirdly pretty, too: the soft light coming up from the stairwells through the ancient skylights, the fuzzed amber haloes from the streetlamps, the distant windows flickering like fireflies. In this light, Rafael's skin was velvet.

He couldn't not touch it. His head swam.

Marlon had big hands. He wished they were clever and swift, but most of the time they felt padded, clumsy, imprecise. He thought his fingers might flatten Rafael's forearm on contact, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

There it was. Rafael's arm. His muscles, tendons, blood, and bone underneath. He smelled like Axe spray and Carrot Creme. It was all Marlon could do to keep his fingers there, the tips burning. He thought something would spring back on them like a mousetrap.

Rafael didn't move. He stared out at the city.

Marlon crept his other fingers around Rafael's arm. He slid his hand down, approaching Rafael's wrist, hesitating. A lightning flash, this was how Marlon would remember it, a momentary blinding: Rafael turning his palm to meet Marlon's. Their fingers touched, laced together, and clasped shut, their hands hiding in the shadow between them.

Marlon breathed. Neither of them spoke, but it felt like they were screaming, singing, like everyone in New York was screaming, singing.

Marlon breathed him in deeper: blunt smoke, sweat, and a smell like—Marlon didn't know where he got this—a redwood forest: sharp cedar, metallic dirt. He felt himself swell in his jeans and was mortified. *I don't care*, he told himself.

His palms were damp. He was squeezing Rafael's hand too hard. He almost ran down the stairs, he almost jumped over the edge.

Rafael's ears were cool. He didn't make a sound, but Marlon could feel his heartbeat, a clamor, a panic. His kisses were quick, darting in and out like little birds.

There was no one else up there but the two sleeping girls. No sounds but the humming vents, distant shouts from other rooftops, balconies, people in the street. The night buses wheezed; the J train going the other way clattered past, mournful, lit from within like a ghost ship.

Rafael shifted his hips a little, inching out of the waist of his pants. Maybe he'd loosened his belt and Marlon had missed it; maybe it was easy to do when you were so thin. Fumbling in fear, Marlon fingered the belt buckle, found the zipper, began pulling it, tooth by tiny tooth. For the first time, he looked straight at Rafael, swimming in the boy's eyes. He couldn't read Rafael's expression. Was this what he wanted?

Marlon felt chilly suddenly, alone.

Holding Marlon's gaze with cold onyx eyes, Rafael guided him down. Marlon got on his knees. It didn't take long.

The joy had gone out of him.

He didn't know Rafael, where he came from, how many times he'd done it before, what he would do with the knowledge that Marlon gave it up this easy.

He guessed they should have used a condom, but he couldn't imagine saying so. When he stood up, Rafael leaned into him, adjusting his jeans. Marlon pictured Rafael at school ignoring him, or worse. He pictured Kadeem and his sneering face, everyone in their history class turning around to stare at him. He found himself remembering the worst fights of middle school, fourth grade, third. His mother. His father. *They wouldn't call you a faggot if you didn't act like no faggot.*

Rafael put his hand at the small of Marlon's back and gently turned him toward the lights of the city. Marlon flared his nostrils to breathe in Rafael's smell, memorizing it, mourning it.

You like the city? Rafael whispered, like they were sharing a blanket fort.

I hate Brooklyn, Marlon muttered.

Word?

It's ghetto.

Word. Rafael nodded. He sounded younger when he spoke.

I'm leavin' here.

When? Rafael reared back and looked at Marlon.

After I graduate.

Oh. Rafael nodded again.

Tentatively, Marlon put his arm around Rafael's shoulders, straight as a crossbow. His fingers crept toward his neck, and Rafael didn't flinch.

Behind them, a stairwell door slammed. Marlon dropped his hand and turned around, stepping away, like he didn't know him.

This story is dedicated to E. F.

John David Becker



Claire Cox

Claire Cox earned her MFA at Hunter College, and this is her first published story. Her novel *Silver Beach* won the 2020 Juniper Prize for Fiction and will be published next spring by the University of Massachusetts Press. She lives with her husband and young son in New York City, where she has been teaching high school English since 2005.