

is a choice? Think of farm subsidies, the recent suicide of Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae in Cancún, México, in protest of the World Trade Organization summit. Bong Ok's husband is a farmer, hires himself out with his tractor to work people's fields. Then there are "free" trade "agreements," offshore sweatshops, tariff-free zones.) And, recently, I heard a radio announcement about a proposal to bury nuclear waste on a fishing island off of, but a part of, the Korean peninsula. The Korean fisherpeople are afraid that it will wreck business: "Who will want to eat raw fish when you have radioactive waste buried right next to where it was harvested?" asked one man. The person narrating the report added, "It will take 35,000 years for the nuclear waste to lose its radioactivity." Yes, some of these subatomic particles have half-lives that are more than 1000 times our short lives. Some have half-lives of over millions of years. I ask, if the 37,000 US troops refused to engage in imperial occupation 50 years ago, would there be a need to bury 35,000 years' worth of radioactivity?

Between bitterness, sadness, longing, and white supremacy; between misogyny and the mental illness industry, classism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism; missionaries and Christianity, Taoism and Buddhism, neo-Confucianism and Shamanism; murder, repression, and oppression; between adoption and the ocean, *entre la espada y la pared*, between the devil and the deep blue sea, between therapist's words of advice, imbibed pills, anticonvulsants, injections in the fleshy part of the butt, we have these words.

It's not romantic. This is not an elegy for a working-class struggle survival story. But it is survival. And I am not going to turn this into "Evita"-style cinematics. There is nothing beautiful about this. There is nothing histrionic about the stories and memories of people. This cannot be appropriated. This cannot be aggrandized.

I need garlic and salt.  
 Yes garlic and salt  
 Salt for my wounds  
 Garlic for to make the ugliness palatable.  
 Yes garlic and salt.

## 2

## LOVE IS COLORBLIND

## REFLECTIONS OF A MIXED GIRL

Jeni C. Wright

## memory #1

I'm nine years old and have just finished taking one of my first showers by myself. I am going to look for Q-tips for my itchy ears when it happens: I catch a glimpse of myself in the foggy medicine cabinet mirror. It happens suddenly, the way you run over a small animal. I move closer, wiping the steam away with the edge of my towel, and start to weep.

My face looks like it belongs in the National Geographic movie on Africa we watched in social studies last week, the one Mrs. Dunbar had to turn off in the middle—she hadn't known there would be bare-breasted women in it. The boys I play kickball with at recess didn't talk about anything else all week.

I lean over the sink so my nose is almost touching the glass and mouth to the ugly girl staring back, *you look like an ugly African bush girl*, over and over until my breath clouds over my face. I start to write "jungle bunny" in the steam but I am crying too hard to finish. Why hadn't anyone told me I was so ugly? I don't even look like a real girl. Opening the medicine cabinet, I reach past the Q-tips for my father's little black comb. My quest to comb my curly short afro flat to my scalp keeps me in the bathroom for close to an hour. It feels like forever, especially because in the end I fail. That night I write in my diary until my fingers ache as bad as my scalp. The first sentence of my entry is, "It's a good thing I'm smart because no one is ever going to marry me."

## memory #2

Ten years later, I come home from college and find my little sister Mary with three matted dreadlocks where her long curls had been. They are true locks, the kind you cannot get rid of unless they are cut out at the root. I discover all this while kneeling over the side of my parents' bathtub, ready to wash Mary's hair so my mother can "do something with it" for church the next day. As soon as I unravel her bun, I see the damage. I am furious. Fingers entangled in the tangled growth, I yell for my mother. By the time she arrives,

her cheeks red with concern and the exertion of stair-climbing, I have a chorus of accusations waiting.

Accusations are easy to make when you were adopted by white parents and you yourself did not come into the world with white skin. For a long time I was angry. Angry that people stared at my family, angry that my parents had never experienced racism, angry that I had to struggle with the intricacies of racial discrimination by myself. Angry that no one looked like me—not my parents, not my Vietnamese brother, not my white sister, not my classmates, not the kids in my neighborhood.



I hid a children's book catalogue in my room for two years because there was a picture of a child model who had my exact features, down to the curly hair, light brown skin, and pink lips. When *The Cosby Show* came on the air, I watched it religiously, trying to pick up clues about black people. *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Invisible Man* were on my bookshelf by the time I was thirteen. I wanted to know about "my people."

### memory #3

What I had been told about race by my parents could be summed up in three words—Love Is Colorblind. My mom hand-stitched that ideal into the quilt hanging in my childhood bedroom. It is a beautiful ideal but one I had learned the limits of by first grade.

A little girl stands in the aisle of the school bus and declares that she cannot sit next to me because of my skin color. I don't tell anyone when I get home but apparently the bus driver does, because the girl's mother shows up with her daughter at my house that afternoon to offer an apology. And here's what I recall most strongly: the door closing behind the contrite woman and her daughter and my mother turning to me and saying "you should have told her, *well I don't want to sit next to fat girls!*"

My mother starts crying and I end up sitting in her lap with my arms around her, trying to be comforting. Even as I do it I know that this is not the way it is supposed to be. My mother's anger at seeing her daughter hurt has overtaken her ability to make things right. She arms me with a petty remark and weepy wishes that the world was a different place.

My wish is that instead she had given me the gift of a simple acknowledgment: that our home may be colorblind but outside sometimes wasn't. And that was unfair. And it was OK to feel sad or mad about that. But no matter what, she would always love me, and so would everyone else in our wonderful, multicolored family.

I was teetering on the edge of adolescence when my sister Mary was adopted as an infant. Even though I was barely twelve when she came home,

the neighbors at first wondered if I had given birth to her, because we looked like "real sisters."

I found out a few years later that she was biracial like myself, though her white mother was Greek, not Polish-German like mine, and her father was from Haiti, not New Haven. The only thing I really cared about though was that I had a family member who looked like me.

I promised myself she would not suffer the way I had.

At the very least they would learn how to do her hair.

### memory #4

That day when I discover Mary's three matted dreadlocks, my heart hardens against the years of love my parents have provided. What matters shrinks to the space of that cramped bathroom where my accusations overflow all the way up to the damp ceiling.

When my mother enters the bathroom, I turn and yell like it is my knotty hair being pulled apart.

*Why didn't you take care of her hair?! Why didn't you comb her hair? Why didn't you take care of her hair, she's gonna have to cut it all off, start over, cut it off, she's gonna have to cut it all off!*

What happens next: My mother becomes frightened. I start sobbing breathlessly. And Mary screams for all of us.

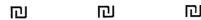
She sits in the tub howling, shaking her head so violently her three stiff bundles of hair tremble. She starts yelling, *I don't want to cut it off, I'm gonna be ugly, I'll have no friends, no one's gonna like me, I'LL BE UGLY!*

Water splashes over the side of the tub and I know I have to leave. My knees ache and everything else aches and I know that if I stay there with shampoo in my eyes and my snot dripping into the tub and my mother pressed up against the sink... I will drown, and not in water either.

I get up off my knees and run to my room. And even after I leave I can still hear my sister's voice, only this time it's screaming, *I hate my hair!*

Afterwards in my room, I remember my campaign to convince my mother that my sister's hairstyle mattered. I thought I was protecting my sister when I hounded my mother to grow Mary's hair out: Did she want Mary to be mistaken for a little boy the way I had been? Did she want her to be teased?

I assumed the victory was mine when Mary's afro was long enough to be put into ponytails. Then I went away to school and left my mother to carry the torch. She dropped it without knowing what it was.



During vacations I hauled my sister off to the bathtub to attend to hair that hadn't been properly combed in months. My mother claimed she

couldn't handle all the crying, a line that made me grit my teeth and turn away.

When Mary got older, I told her, with anger in my voice, *you're not white, you don't have straight hair like your friends, you can't just leave it alone and it'll be fine. It gets tangled, you have to take care of it.* She resented me and my words, but she resented her hair even more.

I could see her desire every time a shampoo commercial came on. The glistening long straight hair, flowing across the screen, rippling like sunshine, was too much for me to see reflected in my sister's eyes. I looked away instead. The pain in her eyes made her eyes look too much like mine.

It was hard to explain this pain to my parents. It took a long time, longer than it did to realize how terrified I was of seeing myself in my little sister. That happened about three years ago, around the time I took a pair of scissors to my head and cut off most of the hair I had spent ten years growing. The hairdresser I went to afterwards to even it out gave me a cut so short I couldn't look in the mirror for a full week.

The person I saw when I finally looked was not the little girl who believed herself to be too ugly to marry anyone.

I saw a woman who knew what it was like to be on the outside, a beautiful woman who had developed the love to tell the people who loved her how that felt.

## 3

## POWER OF THE PERIPHERY

*Kim Diehl*

Being a transracial adoptee may be the most radicalizing force in my life, one that has coursed through me with an intense and raw power. I see parts of myself in so many humans. I share the pain and victories of other displaced, abandoned, and re-birthed people. We on the periphery, learning and watching from the outside, have a particular power with revolutionary roots.

"Solidarity" is more often spoken than practiced. But as a mixed-race transracial adoptee, I simply can't afford to mess around with something so essential to my well-being, to squander a relationship because it no longer serves a strategic purpose or the person has different values than me. Without a birth family or ancestral roots to show me who I came from, I have looked to other marginalized and displaced people for guidance and wisdom.

My thirst for solidarity is directly connected to living on the margins as a not-quite black, raised by white people, bisexual Christian. I am accustomed to living on the outside of identities, cultures, and communities. I have had to create my own communities and, as fun and lighthearted as this creating was at times, I have also been compelled to seriously confront the heaviness of isolation.

About 10 years ago, on a cold winter day, I knelt on my bed and asked the Creator to please give me a community of women, preferably black women. That was my prayer. I needed to feel whole and I needed a cadre of kick-ass women to help me get there. My loneliness was 20 years old and I was starving for community.

My desperate prayer was answered that summer and the following year as I became more involved in community organizing. My longtime feelings about justice came together with women with similar concerns who made me comfortable and encouraged me to be my quirky self. No one called my humor, sexuality, and speech "white." Prayer life and spirituality became central in my life and a community of strong Yoruba, pagan, and Christian healers embraced me. My fascinating journey of loving and healing myself began. I was no longer starving.