

Final Version February 2020

I Just Can't, I Just Can't, White Workshop This Poem

1. The Poem

A puppy's vinyl choke chain: yellow, frayed, wrapped tight
around an antique door knob on a two hundred fifty
year old oak door, balancing three hundred pounds of misery
and flesh between eternity and expensive fifth of single malt.

"Okay, let's wrap this. No matter they're colored, I got a night
planned – mussels with the old lady – then some blues.
We know him. It's what it looks like, that leash, that good booze,
Wrap it! She's a damn CPA, he was a doctor worked for the city."

deep breath / last long swig / suck gut hard until ribs hurt
shake / shake head / so yellow vinyl / slips tight / right under chin
nod head / nod head / to clinch collar / into darkness / into sweat

Her, home from hospital, over the pool of shit and urine
a body leaves as final gesture under the leash on that door
sponge one hand, old boxers the other, knees bloodying the floor.

2. The Problem

I just can't white workshop this poem.
They will like the opening way too much.
The first reading will earn that awkward
workshop moment of silence surrounding
the visual hammer blow from the over-the-top
opening stanza. But isn't that's a problem?
White workshop loves it when you drop a sanitary
semi-exotic urban image. Especially one
where most of the chunks of flesh
are scrapped away, leaving just a little
skin and some body fluids. But that worn
collar, that brass lock, that good whiskey
was there, so that opening is just a photograph
dressed up in lyric and line breaks.

The problem is the lie. What I don't say.
What I can't read for all those earnest faces
around the table. I don't say how his grandfather
was Chickasaw. That his daddy died
with a needle in one arm, the other cradling
a bottle in a cinder block house on the poorest
part of the res. What I don't say

is how her great-grandparents were island slaves twenty-five years after Lincoln set everyone free. That after running, after the rickety boat ride, sharecropping Georgia dirt was a blessing in a brutal life that made sense in a world of hunger and hurt. What I can't say, what I can't subject to the vicious tyranny of metaphor is the scene of that first time. When they saw each other floating in all those white faces in a high school hallway. When their eyes finally drilled into each other, and they saw enough - enough color, enough need, enough escape, to lose themselves for two decades in a strange and familiar pain.

I just can't white workshop this poem because the truth is there was just this door cut from a tree growing before the Mayflower, there was just this barely empty bottle of scotch, there was just this leash, one end cut by paramedics, the other still wrapped around that brass. I can't white workshop this poem because I won't share the image in that classroom, around that table of his hands some nights on her throat squeezing harder and harder each time in meter, her head slamming against the wall in a slow steady rhythm. What I will never read in white workshop is the first thing she saw that morning: the coffee table moved to the center of the kitchen and cleared off no ash trays, no beer bottles, no rolling papers; everything except the one-way ticket back to Georgia for that day he must have found while she slept looking for rolling papers, weed or another cigarette in her purse.

I can't white workshop this poem because I can't listen to the discussion about if race is really necessary in this text. I can't act appropriately interested during the casual scan of the lines to inquire whether they are iambic or trochaic. I just can't, because there was just this kitchen, this door, this empty bottle, this leash. And I can't face what I left out to get that elegant dismount, what I must ignore

to pretend the poem can reach way
past that leash, that door, that blood and piss
stained floor. What I had to not see
to earn lyrical closure, what struggled
and struggled to stay the hell out of the final
stanza. Next to her bloody knees, next
to the torn boxers dripping piss and shit
was a small plate with three white lines,
and a big tumbler of vodka without ice.
She would snort one then sip, snort one
then sip, snort one then sip, tight braids
framing the face, framing the swollen eyes,
the tear streaked, coal-colored skin
with perfect teeth in a small firm smile.