

TERRANCE HAYES
MJ FAN LETTER #782

Dear K.O.P., for the first dozen years of my life I never looked at myself. I believed mirrors bore no true social significance partly because they hung on walls. Convinced, then, in the last thin quarter of the century, that I was a colorless American boy, without detail perhaps I should confess my very first brush with love involved a white girl and empty dryer box. I smelled, if I recall, the scent of damp cardboard, which was a scent not altogether unlike my father's olive green Army-issue boot socks, and so it was that as I and my little cob-webbed nymph (as I have thought of her ever since) attempted to make a singular glistening smile, I thought again and again that my father was walking barefoot nearby with a boot in each fist. I felt the ominous pre-tingling a soldier feels when he waits in a trench at the start of a great war though that was not a year of war, if you recall, but a year of myriad insignificant misdemeanors and dumb disputes. I thought too, that the girl had dropped down into my arms from a nest of the July, late afternoon darkness blooming in the upper corner of the box because her hair danced and dangled across my brown wobbling head like something made in the belly of a spider, and I half wondered then when I would learn what magic it was that gave some creatures the power to spit a thread almost thinner than light. I decided

I'd ask my father later when I sat on his chest
full of sprawling powder-white women,
and removed his boots and then his socks,
but of course I didn't, having been struck dumb
by *something* (the color or length of his toes,
the tiny grid pattern the socks left on his ankles?).
It doesn't matter what, since any boy who spends
an afternoon with a girl in a box is prone to forget
his questions. I too had a bizarre über-hunger
for companionship as a boy and have gone on having it,
as I presume you have, ever since. When I pressed
my palm against the girl's back, I felt first
the impression of her skin inside the white blouse,
and then the bones of her spine
and I thought of the tiny, tiny spines
in all the animals inside and around the box
when we found it there at the edge of the park.
The stray dogs had spines shaped like my father's
belt, the squirrels and field mice had spines
shaped like the smallest limbs of the saplings;
I thought briefly of grasshopper and ant spines
before considering the spinelessness of the earth-
worms uncoiling in the mud beneath the box.
Mostly I learned what I know of myself
by holding my tongue still and I'm wondering
how it was with you? Anyone can go back
to Fayetteville, where the summers were clear
as water, and I'm assuming you too sat
at half open windows and listened to the world?
Perhaps I shouldn't say yet what it was you and I were
waiting for, Cousin, but I'll say it never arrived.

RSVP

~~Dear Michael, I have never had to look
 in mirrors. Or rather everything I look into
 (magazines, screens, walls, doors, glass)
 is a kind of mirror. Everywhere I look
 I see my face. Thank you for sending
 the autographed photograph. And thank you too
 for the sequined glove! Your hand
 must be so small and naked now without it.
 The interior reminds me vaguely of fresh wood,
 or maybe the inside of a cardboard dryer box
 circa 1975, the year I kissed a black boy
 named Clarence or Terrance or Tyrone.
 He was a skinny moth-boy as shy as you.
 Sometimes I wonder what would have happened
 if I'd let that black boy stay inside
 my mouth . . .~~

Dear K.O.P., this is not a letter
 from one of the white girls you met
 backstage in Columbus or Lincoln, but from me—
 your friend, pretending to be a white girl
 in the hope that this time, you might reply.
 O to be in the head of a pretty white girl!
 It's nearly impossible even for a black boy
 raised late in the era of integrated cafeterias,
 MTV and soap operas. By now your experiment
 must be nearing its sad inevitable conclusion as well . . .
 Are you asking yourself: Am I the beginning
 of beauty or am I the end? I'm fairly sure
 that's not something white girls ask themselves,

though it's something everyone thinks about them. Africans, Asians, Martians, Apes— they love them some white girls and you have to wonder: is it all the PR (from Helen of Troy to Mary Christ to your Elizabeth Taylor)?

~~PS thank you for the egg sized diamonds.~~

~~PS thank you for the cashmere panties.~~

~~PS thanks you for the box of 12th-century BE~~

~~Mayan chocolates. PS thank you~~

~~for the Ming chamber pot. Yours, Beth.~~

What's the deal with you and Elizabeth?

What's the deal with you and Diana, the Butch Diva, for that matter?

Once you could have had anyone.

I can still remember your hyper-glow socks and fly tuxedo. Sometimes my thoughts drift to Billie Jean, that condemned anonymous woman . . .

What ever happened to her and that baby?

~~(Dear Michael, finally the cameras look in~~

~~another direction. Our child grows~~

~~in a big nosed quiet. He sang to himself~~

~~in the womb like you. I tell him~~

~~he has a bevy of uncles who once loved~~

~~synchronized dancing, who live now~~

~~somewhere nose to nose in a crowded mansion.~~

~~Baby, I don't believe in music anymore.-)~~

What's a brother got to do to get an answer,

Brother? If, by chance, this is the first of my letters

you are reading (I've written dozens

over the years), let me say again

that I understand a man's hunger for company.

When I moved North and phoned home

to tell my momma I'd fallen in love,

she asked me if the girl was white and I snapped,

"No Ma, she looks like you!"

That's got to be one of the most outrageous
questions my mother has ever asked me
(or maybe the most reasonable).

Take love where you find it; water is the color
of what it holds and all that.

What's your mother think of your hair
and lipstick? Of all the girls' noses
pressed at your limo window in 1982,
which did she most adore?