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Who are you the morning after the most beautiful man you have ever kissed tries to kill you? And the morning after that? How about the following week?

Someone from the party uploaded the pictures she had taken on New Year's Eve onto Facebook. Clicking through them one at a time, I leaned toward my computer screen like a forensic scientist. These didn't look like images from what could've been my last night alive. If I hadn't gone to the party myself, I'm not sure I would have even known that these were photos of a New Year's Eve party. Had there even been a theme, or did The Future just mean wearing more black and white than usual? I tried to read my face but its language was inscrutable. I didn't look *interesting*. I didn't look like a man who was screaming behind his smile. I just looked drunk, stoned, and sweaty.

Daniel isn't in any of those pictures. I can't tell you how

many times, in the years since, I've gone back through them, hoping and fearing that I will see him, perhaps just out of focus, staring back at me. But he's never there.

I caught myself in the days afterward wishing I had a black eye, a broken bone, or a few more cuts and scrapes, if only to confirm that what I believed had happened in Phoenix had *undeniably* happened. I wanted to look how I felt: somehow both drowned and washed up, a survivor and a whore who got exactly what he deserved.

"Deserved." I started circling that word like dirty water whirling down a drain. As I saw it, I had pursued Daniel for much of that night, hoping that he would invite me back to his place. I had seen him as a sexual object, or rather, I had built a metaphor around his body. And then, once we were alone in that room, he broke out of it, and almost broke me. Did I deserve what had happened to me? Had I been asking for it? Had I pushed too far? Or was this simply the risk I accepted, and would have to continue to accept, any time I went back to a guy's place?

AS THE DAYS went on, I did everything I could to avoid taking the time to answer these questions. Instead, I tried to write past them. I thought productivity was what survival looked like. At the time I had been applying to MFA programs; I had been trying to finish poems; I had been imagining myself as a writer and mostly failing.

The next week, sitting in the Writing Center, waiting for a student I was supposed to tutor, I opened a blank Word document on my computer and started writing what I quickly decided was a "nonfiction short story"—about a black gay

writer who goes to a New Year's Eve party in Phoenix, meets a straight guy, and goes home with him. I wrote so quickly I didn't even notice that the student hadn't bothered to show up for his appointment. I just kept writing.

When I had to go to class, I started writing in my notebook instead. I wrote in the library stacks between classes or until the librarian announced closing time on the crackling intercom. I wrote until the crescent-moon bruise Daniel's teeth had left on my thumb started to throb; I wrote until the throbbing went away.

The story was a retelling of that night's events, mostly accurate until just before the end. The writer and the straight man wrestle in that dark room until the writer's head is bashed against the floor one final time, one time too many. As he dies, the writer narrates the rest of the story while he looks down at his body, sprawled in a pool of blood. The straight man unlocks the door and leaves. He doesn't even bother to run.

I believed that I could control any story I told. If something happened, I could write about it, own it, resolve it. Simple. You could afford to be interesting if you could pin everything to the page afterward. Perhaps just to prove how tough I was, I had turned a nightmare of a near miss into a fatal one in my retelling. *See? I'm not scared or weak. I'm not afraid to push through what happened and on into what could have happened.*

I needed to turn in a piece for a creative writing workshop so I submitted the story. It had been less than two weeks since the attack. I didn't have nightmares about that dark room. I didn't cry. Instead, I wrote and insisted that each new draft multiplied the miles and days between me and that room in Phoenix. But when it was time to discuss my story in the workshop, my classmates were mostly baffled. The assignment had been to write

a nonfiction essay so how could the narrator—presumably me—die at the end? One of the workshop’s rules was that you couldn’t talk while your work was being discussed. It was just as well. While my classmates tried to make sense of the perspective or the tense, I listened without hearing them. Daniel had been wrong when he told me I was dead. I felt my classmates were wrong too. They couldn’t see what I had survived.

But then maybe I was wrong too. On one level, I knew I needed to write it out. On another, every time I saw a man on campus now who reminded me of Daniel, and damn near every man did, my hands would clench into fists. *If a man ever puts his hands on me like that again, I’d think, I will kill him. I won’t be able to stop myself.* Even as I’d leashed Daniel to the page, he wouldn’t stay there.

A YEAR LATER, I was in the MFA program at Rutgers-Newark. I had gotten in. I had kept writing. I had escaped and survived. I had proven—to myself, to others—that I could do it. Yet still, so much inside me kept roiling, half contained, like a dam waiting to burst.

I was in a coffee shop one afternoon, at my favorite corner table, with a pile of books in front of me. I had come here, as I often did, to read, take notes, and revise poems before walking to campus. The storm in my chest started the way all my storms do: I exhaled, then inhaled, but there was a little less air in my lungs than had been there before. I exhaled, inhaled again, even less air this time. Looking up from my book, I scanned the shop, hoping no one had noticed the panic attack quickly taking hold. *Exhale, inhale.* My poetry workshop was in a couple of hours. *Exhale, inhale.*

I had just highlighted a sentence in the Reginald Shepherd essay I was reading, about why he writes—or why he *had* written. “My aim is to rescue some portion of the drowned and drowning, including always myself.”

I couldn’t quite place it, but something about that sentence sent me spinning. Shepherd had died a few months before, just after turning forty-five. One thought, *exhale*, led to another, *inhale*, and another, *exhale*, and another. My heart was a bruised fist, knocking about my rib cage. I leaned forward, looking at the books and my notes again.

My notebook was a graveyard of poets: Melvin Dixon: dead, 1992. Essex Hemphill: dead, 1995. Joseph Beam: dead, 1988. Assotto Saint: dead, 1994. Reginald Shepherd: dead, 2008. The names ran together as I blinked back tears. The names became my name. It’s just too easy for a gay black man to drown amid the names of dead black gay men. Since I had started my graduate studies, it seemed that just as soon as I looked up the name of a gay black poet whose work I aspired to one day see my own work read alongside, I’d learn that the poet had died of AIDS, or poverty, or some other tragedy that left him abandoned on the margins of literature’s memory.

I stood unsteadily and walked to the restroom, biting my lip, staring at my feet as I moved, to keep from falling apart altogether in front of the baristas, the college students, and the professors cheerily chatting around me. It was like being a teenager again in the Lewisville Public Library, sitting cross-legged on the floor with my hands trembling as I paged through all the books I could find about being gay. Book after book about gay men dying of AIDS. After having put so many years and miles between the scared little boy and the young man I had fought so hard to become, here I was again: alone

in the crowd, the black kid trembling in the middle of a graveyard only he could perceive. "The drowned and the drowning, including always myself."

Alone in the restroom, I leaned toward my reflection in the mirror above the sink and sneered. *Just stop*, I thought. *Those names are not your name*. But it was too late now. Memory pulled me under and down into that dark room in Phoenix. I could feel my body pinned under Daniel's weight. My head ached as if it had just been banged against the wood floor.

I slammed my eyes shut to make him and myself disappear. How had he found me here? It had been so long since I had even thought about that night. I didn't see Daniel hiding in other men's shadows anymore. I had walked out of that room and written about it. I wrote about him, then past him—one poem, one story, one essay at a time. Pen as weapon, page as shield. But what was the point of beating him back, only to look up all this time later and feel that history itself was shouting: "You're already dead, you're already dead, you're already dead"?

I stood in front of the mirror, sobbing, unable to stop myself.

Boys like us never really got away, it seemed. We just bought ourselves time. A few more gasps of air, a few more poems, a few more years. History hurt more than any weapon inflicted on us. It hit back harder than any weapon we could wield, any weapon we could turn ourselves into.

I sunk down, I looked away, I felt that loneliness and let it settle in, heavy and final. I don't know how long I sat on the floor in that restroom, staring and seeing nothing. Eventually, I stood up again and washed my face, still avoiding my reflection. It seemed as if my life were waiting for me outside

that room, like a polite guest I'd left behind at the table. It was rude to keep him waiting. It helped to think of my life as someone separate from me, a person who didn't deserve to be abandoned.

Sitting back down in front of the pile of books, I returned to Reginald Shepherd's words: he was gone but they were still here. I thought about all the poets who had kept me going, one more minute, one more step. *Of the drowned and the drowning*. I felt the cord pull taut between us. I took a breath. I started a draft of a new poem.