

Ivy Schweitzer

Manchester

I. Colin 1972

I'm centrifugal and love the color  
burgundy, loved it before it became  
the new black. I've never met a rule I don't want  
to break. Breakage was the rule back then  
when black had only just become  
beautiful. Remember?  
In the gray-toned photo, now  
a half-century old, you are  
beautiful. You saturate the center,  
your high, pointed Afro defiant  
against bare Lowland trees. Lips parted,  
you must be tripping that West Indian lilt  
tinged with Cockney thrilling to my raw American ears. We were  
twenty, and I was far from home. I became beautiful  
when Barbra Streisand rocked the Johnny Carson show  
crooning *any place I hang my hat*. Here, I am captured  
at the edge in beaded bell bottoms  
and a burgundy evening jacket lined with seal. I often  
kept myself from what I wanted, fearing being  
thought too forward. Entitled. But  
my eyes body whole being yearn towards you. Did we  
share a bed? I cannot remember  
your last name. The photo shows distant  
buildings stark and dumb.  
Not your long slender hands always in motion  
like a maestro or magician.  
Your swagger and banter  
in the rain-slicked freezing mud.

## II. The Mother

Large, forbidding, commanding  
the tiny kitchen of the dim flat  
in Brixton or was it Kensington.  
My kid sister Michelle visiting from the States,

we hitchhiked from Manchester.  
Did she cook for us? Where did we  
sleep? I remember her fussing over  
Mich, it was me she resented,

sucking her teeth, clicking her tongue, me un-  
comprehending when I asked why,  
you replied, as if it were obvious,  
“she hates that I have

a white girlfriend.” I stopped  
you, then, with a fierce kiss,  
the lions of Trafalgar Square cyrptic  
in the endless drizzle.

### III. Do-Over

You are long gone.

I am stranded in the third decade  
of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, post-racial by some accounts,

mortified by my fifty-year failure of interest in  
Who You Were.

When your only shining son appeared at your Brixton flat  
with a hippy white girl, American no less, you

sucked your teeth, gave me the stink eye.  
A lumbering obstacle to my seventies study abroad

*Jouissance.* Can we have a do-over?  
Meet at some Soho pop-up and sift through

racks searching for the perfect useless (what you call) *frock*.  
Or stroll into the Shoreditch Facebar redolent with

aspiration, where you could achieve the best you and  
I could achieve the best me, perceiving each other

through the grift of newness, sipping mineral water laced with ache.  
Who would serve us? Edgy artists of the articulate brow

or immigrants from yet another wave, doing mani-pedis  
clutching blurry photos of distant loved ones.

Would you be willing to  
Forgive my obtuseness? Could we untangle the scripts

we played into and played out. Is it naïve to think I could  
select a rich shade of coral lipstick to complement

your skin tone and it would mean only that.  
And you could steer me away from the black leather miniskirt

with zippers askew and it would mean only that.  
And we could embrace the striving artists and immigrants,

and our prior and present and  
made-up selves.

#### IV. It Means

Mashed tatties crowned with a layer of heavy cream  
browned under the broiler, when sliced into with a fork  
oozed out rich white lava. Taste unforgettable  
though I cannot remember your last name.  
Back then this felt decadent and delicious, but now  
it means you cooked for me in the pokey back kitchen  
of the Levenshulme flat I rented with Sally and Fran,  
two English girls I met at university.  
Means we cooked and ate together,  
were not just a randy study abroad hook-up  
counter culture's *love-the-one-you're-with* thing.

Your supple hands washing up in the sink's pink plastic tub,  
you didn't rinse the dishes off,  
saving the 10 p coins we needed to feed the water heater  
next to the WC. Quaint to an American but  
it means your West Indian mama  
trained you well in domestic arts, in economy,  
didn't feel her boy was above cooking  
for himself, washing up, being independent  
as Guyana became in 1966, making his way  
in a world where  
your skin meant something I still couldn't fathom.

## V. Study Abroad

Mashed tatties crowned with heavy cream, browned under the broiler—

Butcher's knives, iron bars, and Teddy Boys muscling into West Indian neighborhoods—

You cooking in the pokey kitchen of the Levenshulme's flat I shared with Sally and Fran—

Oswald Mosely, founder of the British Union of Fascists, braying "Keep Britain White"—

Your supple hands soapy in the sink's pink plastic tub, though I cannot recall your family name—

Guyana finally cutting the strings to Britain in 1966—

You didn't rinse the dishes, rocked a camel-hair overcoat from the high street's charity shop—

Notting Hill Carnival lively-ups with natty dreads every August, drawing millions—

Singed cream oozing, scalding milky tea and touches, your charring lips—

Tang of jerk chicken and curried goat, soca and reggae blasting from every speaker—

Your Guyanese mama stink-eyed my white ass but trained you well—

Everyone grooving and mingling together in the soggy London heat—

Your skin a secret memo, privy paper tangled up in my budding yearnings—

"Windrush" West Indians brought over post-war to rebuild Britain, deported in 2018—

## VI. The Photo

taken as the gaggle of university friends tumbled out and posed in a line against the van. In memory it glows red and merry like the Merry Pranksters, but we jolted along rutted back roads in the frozen mud and horizontal rain of a Scottish winter. Shivering. Loads of herbal refreshment. Celebrating winter birthdays—those who achieved twenty. Buildings in the background loom farm-industrial with only a fringe of bare trees against a blank sky. On the left, two Americans. Judy, open like a spring day. A tiny girl whose huge breasts got badly singed by the sun camping in a cave above *Mylopotas* on *Ios* over spring break. And Deb, head tilted slyly, which she was. We hitched across England harmonizing on “Norwegian Wood” and “Yesterday” for randy truckers. Maxine from Germany laughing, snugged up to Finn, a lanky handsome Dane in a fisherman’s sweater and slouch hat. Sally, from Birmingham, glamorous in a full-length fox coat, delicate granny glasses on her fine-boned face, pale skin set off by raven hair, head thrown back flirtatiously. A Carnaby Street siren. Behind her, you saturate the center. The only one turned away, your Afro high and pointed against the barren trees. I stand off to the right with Anne. In beaded bell bottoms and an evening jacket lined in seal. Though we talk, I furtively look past Anne, cutting my eyes away from her friendly face, my smiling forced, trying to focus on her words, be in the now of the then, impossible in the primal pull of your orbit.