

Firsts

Michael Gills

Against Beulah's advice, Kepler teaches class on his first evening of fatherhood. Mother and child are still in Regional, bonding in a private room. It was a troublesome birth. Forty involute hours on *Pitocin* before Beul ever dilated an inch. Finally, they listened to John Coltrane—a regular party, narcotic laughter—*A Love Supreme* in the sick air. Backgammon, Dominoes, five card stud, day went to night went to day. Outside beside the frozen fountain, big seagulls flew knurls above an old man chunking bread. The sky looked blank—neither here nor there. They craved pizza, Beula chomping ice cubes, laughing then crying then laughing. All while the room subtly accelerated, blood bags drawn, Caesarian talk dismissed, then an epiduralist, a white-masked shaman, shone an eight-inch needle into Beul's seventh vertebrae.

A little corn snow falls out of the dark, thumping his coatsleeves and book satchel under the nightlight where the smoke feels like flint in his lungs. Students wander down from McIver toward Psych. Latter Day Saints and otherwise, hungover, some high on killer weed—a pierced generation—they slump inside and disappear. What could they possibly want, out in the cold snow on a January night in Utah? Fifteen years of this, Kep can't say. For him, first of his people to get out, it'd been college or laying brick, humping it under the Lonoke, Arkansas sun. Pinto beans and potatoes, pour concrete, drive a truck, bust your nuts—Beulah'd saved his ass. Still, lines snap chalky-tight from that life to this one. *Piled higher and deeper, Mister Ph.D.*, what they'd say back in Sardis. Run or hide, you never get away. Below the nightlight, it doesn't matter. Phil Kepler's a father, a *daddy*, and that's a strange thing to find oneself being on any day.

The last of them look at the floor and unzip backpacks. Long tables make the room into a big square. The white tile is Coke-sticky in spots. A few shake snow pellets from their hair, strip fleece and gloves. Shitty light—these fluorescents and the room smells like people trying not to smell like people. Two weeks into spring semester, gentile Kepler's rapport is already stretched thin. He's been defensive, felt like people are after his ass.

Now, nearly every face resembles the other, down to the flesh-shade of tear ducts. Seventeen, twenty, the room is quiet like church. *Save the planet, kill yourself*, one has written on his backpack. Another's ballcap says *I'm a fucking genius*. Beulah says Kep's going paranoid.

A swimmer named Jarr, a green-eyed narcoleptic, says to his backpack, "Come out, come out, wherever you are." Two nights a week, Kep's World Lit. Seminar runs an hour and twenty minutes—three credit hours for juniors and seniors. Kepler breaks the class into movements—analytical writing, group dialogue, and, finally, general class engagement where he has, of late, become an *esoteric daddy*, a Cultural Studies girl named Kira complained, in the writing journal where she's sketched herself in various stages of pregnant nakedness—an exaggerated belly spilling out in each.

"Mister Jarr? Can you tell us where we are, Mister Jarr?"

"Here," he said. "I need to talk to you."

"What's going on in the world today?"

Jarr goes to sleep, lids fluttering. Wakes up, that look like he's just come from a place where light is alien.

Kep says, "After," clears his throat, opens the reader to tonight's offering, a Du Bois' text—*The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter 14: "The Sorrow Songs." More than anything, he wants to connect. Phil Kepler wants to be one of them tonight. Seeing his mother in the face of his daughter, how she's followed him here from the beyond. Kep needs to ring bells.

“We’ve been talking,” he says loudly, peppering this first oratory with a breath-long pause, “about *double consciousness*.”

Kira, a close-pored Utah blonde with a violet braid spilling down on the dull table, moans. To her left, Thomas, her intimate partner. Out here, people can’t fuck unless they’re married. Thomas and Kira are not married—solemnized, these folk say.

“About how Dr. Du Bois defines the African-American condition as an *irreconcilable duality*.”

A dark woman in nurse blues, Iraqi, maybe, nods, copies down every word, as she has every night of every class. They meet eyes for a second, which is maybe a punishable offense where she’s from.

“Irreconcilable. Can we define irreconcilable?” Kepler writes the word on the board, taps its root. “Will you please write. In your journal. On the following. Number one.”

The fucking genius raises his hand. “Malcolm says ‘kill the white people,’” he says, the first words out of his mouth all term. The voice is down home, Alabama maybe, strange as hell in Utah.

The Persian woman nods, writes *kill the white people* down in her notebook, doesn’t miss a beat. *Irreconcilable = kill the white people*. Kepler sees, that’s what her paper says.

White-toothed Kira says something into the backside of an exquisitely naked backhand. Thomas, the one African American in class besides Kep, is a husky blue with good handwriting.

“Do what?”

Genius McNair says it again.

“Do we need to go there?”

Nobody says. A stomach growls. The wall clock sometimes goes whacky—both hands turning in opposite directions—cartoon time. Tonight, it seems right.

“Number One.” Kep chalks words on the blackboard while he speaks. “Du Bois writes about children of disappointment, an ‘unvoiced longing toward a truer world.’ How does music or how do these songs reveal this?”

On the board, *child/disappoint, t-world, song*.

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Beul ripped. After midnight. Yesterday? Today? The full Wolf Moon. A ruddy midwife shared a clove cigarette with him outside the downstairs lobby. Just outside the double-glass doors, she said, “You watch and see. Lookout.” A wisp of smoke seeped through the sliver-gap in her front teeth. Like Lauren Hutton, or Bacall, Kepler thought—or Alison of Bath. “All these spring-bred babies? They wild to be born. Little wild things,” she said, a grin turning her lips.

This was Kepler and Beulah’s first, and they were coming in on the tail-end. Kep was thirty-eight, and Beulah’d gone thirty-nine in December. Like flipping a coin, both sides spinning, Kep and Beul were going though with it this time—*time’s winged chariot*, all that shit. Life reeling, it had caught up with them. So they read the books, and attended birthing classes where young Mormon couples were red-faced that everyone knew they’d made nookie, nookie. This was Salt Lake. Take ten people off the street, seven were LDS.

Mostly, during the birthing classes, Kepler and his wife had felt awkward, but in a superior way; they were both teachers, and this gave them legs up as group leaders during the three day seminar. They were the best breathers in the E-wing, the nuns at Regional proclaimed. Heavy-breasted Beulah's sweater showed big-nipped wet spots. *High beams*, one midwife said. Everything'd be fine. They'd roll. Only, Beul went *toxemic* mid-way through the third trimester. Blue ankles, chills, feeling like her eyes were about to burst out of her head. "No problemo," Beul told her father over the phone. "I'm having a baby. People do it all the time."

Still, it was the first time they'd gone through with it. And the birthing ward, with its rooms furnished like a Jane Austen novel, each disguised end table or wardrobe opening into a monitor, or a rack with stirrups, rubber-handled forceps in five sizes, and worse. They were encouraged to "move in," to "take up residence."

Kep and Beul brought meaningful items from their daily lives. *Anger Management for Couples*, a ceramic medicine wheel, cliff sage, Beul's purple feather boa. Kepler had brought a framed photo of himself and Beulah on the Great Wall of China. Here were the pillows from their bed, a flute with a broken valve, a frayed fishing rig, rusted hook and all, from years back. They had hand lotion, lip balm, some Mardi Gras beads. Beul had the great good sense to pack music, jazz, Cuban mambo, Stones—their lives in shorthand. Later, the place blared out into the full-moon night, flesh and blood, bodies breaking out of bodies. Shrieks tore up through the walls and halls. Somebody kept screaming *Damn this world to hell, damn this world to hell*.

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For every minute, the wall clock's metallic click.

It is 6:15 p.m., Mountain Standard Time. Thursday night, January 15, 1998. Visible to the naked eye—seven planets wheeling east to west—Saturn, Jupiter, Neptune, Uranus, towering Venus, pumpkin colored Mars, and Mercury skimming the western horizon. Twenty-six light years away, crisp Vega, Lyra's tight-stringed harp. Time is holy, prodigal, a gift. Mommy and Daddy, *Jesus*.

Kep says, "Anybody need more time?" Two hands go up. "Go ahead. Finish," he says.

The little girl came squalling at 2:52 A.M. Kep counting *one, two, five, seven, ten* on Beul's belly, her pushing, determined, real. A black piece of head the size of a nickel, a quarter, a fist, *one, two, three, and good and good*. The silence of many midwives' hands ministering. His heart thumping in his ears. The girl, her wide fine nose, the sweet earth-tone of her skin just like Kepler's mother. The eyes were Beul's. The wailing voice eased. Kepler'd rocked her on his lap and hummed while the midwife cut and reseeded his wife's wound.

"I like that humming," she said. "Most people just watch t.v. Any old thing. What a way to come into the world. Barnaby Jones the first man you hear."

Beul was still high, crying, the whites of her eyes rolled way back.

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"Fine. Okay. Let's roll. Number two."

"What page we on?" Jarr's awake, rifling the text, thumbing the *Enlightenment through the present*.

Beul'd said he was crazy to be here. After all that. Why would anyone walk into a classroom after forty hours in a maternity ward?

Kepler doesn't say *goddamn* or *jesus-fucking-christ*. He doesn't ask Kira to moan that way again. No thought of the seven planets, their moons and rings, the whole shebang. "We are not," he says "on a page number. We're on *irreconcilable*."

“How can you let him say that?” Red-haired Nikki has a beautiful scar that shows through from her past life. She plays drums, bongos, kettles, has calluses on her thumbs. She smells of blue sage from foothill hikes. “You can’t let him say *kill the white people*.”

*Suture*. Doctor Cynthia, she said “I’ll *suture* her now,” and Kep kept hearing the word—the hiss and throaty vowel, cut by the hard T, a literary word for joining two unlike things, the artifice of connecting unlike things. “Suture her now,” Doc Cynthia had said.

“Honky must die.” The fucking genius, Louisiana or Alabama, down home West Helena, his second sentence tonight.

Once, a non-traditional student just back from submarine duty had thrown a chairdesk that grazed Kepler’s head and shoulders before crashing into the black board. 6:17—Kep brackets off *concil* from irreconcilable; when he writes, the board lets fly a wicked screech. He’s always feared a heart attack in front of class, the embarrassment. His old man crawled out of a truck-wreck, fractured neck and all, and changed his shirt, so the ambulance driver’s wouldn’t see his blood—O negative, rare.

“Number Two. ‘The shadow of fear. Farewell, farewell, my only child.’ Tell me what you make of that. What’s Du Bois about here? Say?”

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Thirty-some hours they waited. The maternity room’s sofa hard under his back. Beulah, she looked invaded, colonized, she wouldn’t remember a goddamn thing.

Beulah? A distant *Pump-pump-hum. Pump-pump-hum*. Kep cried for a while, couldn’t quit thinking of mountain goats—their green slit eyes in pairs. He dreamed of the Outer Banks, Cape Lookout, out under a night sky alive with October meteors. High tide’s coming in, and every fourteen seconds the lighthouse’s bright flash swoops the breakers out beyond the first slough. Up behind the dunes, Beulah’s asleep under the dome tent and the air smells like the skin of fishes scorching still in the foiled sand pit. Alive with the Orionids, the silver water shines fluorescent—every step, the sand lights up green plankton. His twelve-foot surf-rod is bent double, bouncing violently—whatever’s on the other end has made the slough, ripped line down to reel’s core, so that Kep’s thumb feels the delicate knot beneath wraps of twenty pound test. A live throbbing comes down from the rod tip. *Goddamnit, Beul. Get your ass down here, Goddamnit*, he keeps saying. There is nothing between him and Africa but water, the gaudy sky shining up over the earth’s curve. Toward that dark place, a great dragging outward on line soon to snap. *Please Beulah, please*. But she’s not coming and this will happen without her and he will remember to remember the singing line makes, the Orionids pop and dizzy furl on the Outer Banks, when Beul, not two days outside of the Baltimore *right thing to do now* clinic. *Right thing to do?* Line singing out, an inviolate will slashing the blue water. The knot snaps and it’s free.

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“This fellow,” Kepler says, “he says ‘honky must die.’ What does that mean? What does it have to do with irreconcilable duality?”

The class runs six to 7:20. Barely 6:30 now. Somebody smells like chicken pot pie.

A pocket Webster hurky-jerks on the window side where the brains sit with their backsides to the outside world. Nikki smirks, lifts her chin to speak.

“Shoot, Nikki.” Kep says, “Tell us.”

“Impossible to reconcile. That which opposes compromise or collaboration. Killing white people would be impossible to reconcile. Killing is wrong. No matter what. Do you understand? Say it’s wrong.”

Maybe this’s the break Kepler’s waited for—the still before a violent swirl. He turns on the southern boy, puts both hands flat on the wobbly-ass table in front of him. Silence is good as anything. And laughter. Laughter’ll drive’em ape-shit.

“Who *are* you?”

“Who am I?”

“You. Who are you?”

“McNair. Charles L. McNair. I’m on your roll.”

“No. Who *are* you?”

“McNair.”

“Who *are* you?”

“McNair.”

“Define yourself.”

“McNair.”

“Who?”

“McNair.”

“Tell me who you goddamn are.”

“You. How bout you, teach?”

“No problem, son. *Un autre.*”

“O-tra?”

“*Autre.*”

“What’s at?”

“What do you think?”

His right hand balls into a fist, shoots up in the air between them. “Power to the people,” McNair says.

“What’s it mean to call yourself X? What’s that say about who you are? McNair? Say?”

Deep blue Thomas beats him to the punch. “That means,” he says, the luxurious earth-woman red-faced beside him, “that you’re not Y or Z. You’re X.”

Kepler's avoided Thomas's eyes since day one. They're strangers, the cells in their body's revolt against each other. And the woman—Kira, the moaner. She's pregnant, Kep's sure of that.

“So?”

“Not Smith or Jones or Doc Kepler. You're X.”

“What's reconciled by that?”

Kira looks at Kepler, turns to Thomas. Her eyes—pieces of blue sky. She says, “May I go to the restroom, please.”

In her journal, she's practiced writing *Thomas*—a name for a mixed-raced baby. “Don't ask me. Just go.”

Thomas stands. The two walk out.

In Kira's *Thomas* the *t* and *b* link, are tall and articulate, but lose faith with the *om*, and fade completely with the tiny cursive *s*. What were they thinking, Thomas and Kira?

“I have a confession,” Kep says. He lets the line settle, levitate between them. “My wife, Beulah, and I,” he says. “We had a baby this morning. A little girl. It was tough, but that's over now. I probably shouldn't be here. Not tonight.”

Outside the classroom door, Kira's feet shuffle, make cornstalk sounds in January wind.

“Congratulations professor,” Nikki offers. She stands, claps for a few seconds. Another joins, someone laughs a high cackle and the moment fills with ragtag applause.

Out in the hall, Thomas and Kira leave the building.

Kepler says, “Stand up. Everybody. Please. Stand up.”

It takes a while. To get the whole bunch up. He asks three times, and they're all on their feet, stretched this way and that in the unsure light.

Here's how Kepler has it pictured, how his mind works: tomorrow, the day after, he collects his family. In Regional, pictures of nuns line white-lit corridors, their glassy eyes on the brown man and his cream-colored wife. All this medicine, the smell of it has got into his teeth. Time aches. They face the outer doors. Hospital doors—heavy-duty, the emergency entrance. They react to underfoot sensors, swing methodically open. Through these, lately, the infirmed and sick, the lacerated, and vomiting and pregnant and and those who accompanied them. And, alive, leaping like like horned toads, the joyous exits of the saved, those others who've tiptoed around open graves. Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens, they've named their girl for a star. They're free now, going home, they are three.

*Home.*

In January, afraid and jubilate, light charcoal sky with small snow passing. The doors signify him, swing outward so that fresh air flies in their faces. Outside, now, under cloud in Utah—Salt Lake City, nearly a mile above the sea. He wheels them out into the good air. Their breaths big feathers rising, converging.

“Wait.” Kepler keeps saying to *wait*. He wants to go slow, to remember. No rushing, not now, not this time.

Beulah, clear-headed, she'll say, “Come on, pops. Get the truck? Just go on. What's the matter with you?”

They'll look into each other, see their strange faces and laugh and laugh and be afraid.

A front skirts the lake.

The air is wet air, it carries the odor of salty shallows, where the wind has blown water away from rotting vegetation—it smells to high heaven. Just faint snow falling. The truck's running in the circle.

Their baby, nearly invisible beneath blankets, the white cap covering her misshapen head and coal-black hair. Just a few more hours, tomorrow or the next day.

Shouldn't they have this?

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"Last question. Let me ask you this. I just want you to think about it, and then let's go on home."

Standing around the table, the imperfect square, Kepler's audience.

"It's late," Kepler says. "And the snow. Just one thing."

Then, in a paper-soft voice, he poses the question. Several do not expect to hear such a thing, and laugh out loud, the way some people laugh when they see car wrecks. A few are ashamed, and that's okay. Kepler says goodnight, and that's how they leave. "Just go on home," Kepler says. And they leave that way, with Thomas and Kira's belongings yet to be retrieved. Just go on home and things will be alright. Laugh your ass off because that's something you can do. Be lightheaded and free, see the seagulls drift and flutter.

On his way out to the truck, Kep walks hard under the lamppost's crooked light. A man and woman—Kira and Thomas, maybe—sit silent in a parked car, the cold of the door handle, the way the dashboard lights glow, the dream-grain of consciousness coming and going. A life for dream-questions. And tomorrow—the new day coming.