

# **CURIO**

text by **Juliana Staveley-O'Carroll**

## **Africans on Bicycles**

montgomery at the end of 1955 was a place like many places that have existed before it and still exist today, a place balanced precariously on this lie: some people are worth more than others. like all lies, it was told as long as anyone could remember, and it was everywhere you looked. they said science had proved it; wise men in long robes confirmed it; history books assented. but something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.\* something there is without voice or expression, that knows a lie to be a lie and the truth to be the truth, so when yet another woman was bullied and harrassed and finally arrested because she wouldn't follow the rules, it found a voice. riding the bus home from work after another long day on her feet, rosa parks was too tired to give up her seat to a white passenger, wouldn't let herself be bullied by the bus driver or controlled by a damn lie, so she found herself in jail, because that's where they'd put you when you told the truth. but the thing about lies is they collapse in a single gesture, and like dominoes, they'll fall, until the powerless realize they're not powerless at all. the montgomery bus boycott lasted over a year, just wouldn't go away, like the simple truth it was, continued despite protestors being threatened, harrassed, and imprisoned, continued even after the houses of martin luther king and ralph abernathy were firebombed and four black churches were burnt to the ground. they walked, biked, carpooled, rode in taxis, but there was nothing that could make the black community endorse the bus system or that lying, thieving value system behind it. indeed, the boycott finally ended like a waterfall, what reverend king would later call a miracle, proving segregation to be unconstitutional, beginning something even bigger. africans on bicycles were changing the world.

\*robert frost

## **An American Family Portrait**

An American Family Portrait, without parallel. m.g.

### **Ball and Jacks**

three babies, no higher than your knee, are playing in the sunshine on the porch of the house their father built. one's humming to herself a made-up melody, while someone tunes a guitar. there's a church across the street. this moment will last them a lifetime.

### **Bookends**

a frog crossing a pond will jump from one lily pad to the next, green bookends to each journey, and sometimes the distance is too great and he'll have to dip below the surface, and swim, but he always reaches the next lily pad.

### **Bracelet**

(from exile)

the story i wanted to tell had nothing to do with you or me or this sorry existence in a self-imposed exile. it had something to do with snakes and was written in the stars, but it left me like any other dream, and all i have left is a pack of cigarettes, nothing and everything, too many days and not enough nights. the clouds passed over and left us with that unbearable light, the light that finds you in the morning, behind the curtains and under your blankets, and wakes your tired ass up. i miss you.

### **Bronze Letters**

what good are words? they'll lie to you. they'll say whatever you want. you could still be blind, like the bored or the unloved, your life laid out on the table like a two-handed game of bridge, no mystery, nothing to guess or finesse, just fifty-two calculable cards. enough with words. let the veil fall.

### **Caduceus**

i saw this healing symbol, and it followed me to bed and stalked me in my sleep. in my dream an ancient apothecary is winding a worm out of a man's flesh with his staff, extracting illness with great care, casting out this abomination forever and forever and forever, now only a moment stuck in stone.

## **Camera**

(elegy of a moment)

the moment's in utero, almost arrived, inhibitions all but gone;

you can feel a kiss coming on.

we're not in our heads, not in our thoughts, we're not even here;

we're in this moment

when the shutter snaps

and kills it.

## **Cherokee Love Birds**

more wisdom is latent in things as they are than in all the words  
men use. (antoine de saint-exupéry)

if the wise will find wisdom anywhere, i'll take mine from this  
bag of tea. it tells me: "you are unlimited,"\* and like a fool,  
i'll agree. if men will search all over creation for a cup,  
losing whole lives looking for a holy vessel, i'll find it right  
here, when two love birds meet. they say love will blind you to  
the world, but that's because all you'll see is its beauty. so  
give me blindness, lord, take away my sins, for this holy union,  
this ace of cups in the cards, you cannot cut it with a knife, or  
kill it with cruelty. "who dreamed that Beauty passes like a  
dream?"\*\* she came here before us and will stay long after. for  
now two fowl will walk down a long road, crossing paths when they  
can, and fanning their feathers.

\* yogi tea

\*\* w b yeats

## **Cherry Pitter**

there's a small place next to the heart where we keep things to  
remind us of something, before the world takes it from us: a  
lullaby someone sang to us once, an illustration in a book, a  
cherry orchard in the spring.

## **Doll Forms**

we watch you when you're sleeping.

## **End Table**

on the fourth of july, a man named william blake went into a bank and handed this note to the teller: i have a bomb. (in actuality, he'd wired himself with firecrackers. but who's keeping score?) the teller was already chain-smoking, because this was raleigh-durham, and anyone wielding that kind of cash needs a cigarette, or twenty. so, being mid-light when this missive was received, her hands weren't quick with the emergency button, which blake later appreciated and would've thanked her for, had he not been stuffing his pockets full of money. maybe it was the bank's own fault. after all, what kind of unpatriotic bank stays open on the fourth? and what kind of sadistic manager leaves a bank in the charge of a single (chain-smoking) teller and a security guard who takes a two-hour lunch? but we are not here to pass judgment on a bank. we are here to pass judgment on a bank robber. william blake never got a break in his life, and why should he now? let me remind you: there is no such thing as a free lunch, and certainly not for honest banks that are just trying to keep their doors open and their rates low. but now william blake felt what some people wait their whole lives to feel: adrenaline, the magic stuff that resuscitates the soul, opens the eyes, clears the senses. he finally had what every man in america wants, and you cannot ask for more: hope in his pocket. it was good to be alive, at least for the twenty-eight minutes he had left, for this story ends in a car chase and the stray bullet that he caught with his heart.

## **Fruit Bowl**

(because i'm tired of watching the moon)  
i'm thinking of you. when time slows down at the close of day, regret lies on my neck like a weight, and i'm still thinking of you. sometime, when we've made our escape, after the last errands are run and we're not missed, we'll come here, and eat the finest fruits of the earth to our heart's content. i'll say my piece, and you'll say yours, for we're all fools sometime. (that's how god made us.) and i won't have to watch the moon and sigh.

### **Hand Bag**

all she left was an air mattress and love letters.

### **Hooked Rug**

(still hooked)

the heart is a fragile thing, taped up and sewn back together for the upteenth time, hidden from view, but there all the same, catching every knife that runs deep; a nonsensical thing, it keeps beating, without rhyme or reason, feels the pain of a thousand swords but hasn't sense enough to stop. when martin luther king died, he was thirty-nine years old, but his heart had the wear of a man of sixty. so hide it away, keep it under wraps, for if you let it, the heart will be a fool, will take your words whole and weave you a tapestry, will fix you breakfast in the morning and bring you coffee in bed.

### **Industrial Form**

an elderly gentleman and his wife walked through the hall to the restaurant five minutes before their reservation time. he combed his sparse white hair and returned the comb to his shirt pocket. in that gesture she fell in love with him all over again.

## **Industrial Form**

(for those who live in boxes)  
it's a strange but common thing to see a sixty year-old woman - a stewardess, secretary, a waitress, perhaps - take orders from men her junior in every way, big careless men, all suit and stomach and small brain, men who take two-hour lunch breaks and complain when she leaves her desk for a moment to grab what passes for her lunch, men who roll their eyes and wonder aloud where she is, because they need to know what they're supposed to be doing right now, where their car keys are, what day it is, where to sign. but she's a happy woman, happy to have a job, who lives her life under fluorescent lights in a refrigerated box with no windows. she's an older lady in heels, a slave to outdated software: spends her day patiently coaxing a flawed, defunct system to run the payroll to keep this flawed, defunct system around her running. (she makes the world run.) she squeezes water from a stone every day and still goes thirsty, for she's just another unassuming, unacknowledged queen bee, the beating heart of another frigid hive. sure, her boss means well, if he thought about it, but he wouldn't know his ass from his elbow and certainly wouldn't know his soul if it slapped him in the face. but that's the way it goes in this refrigerated box, and every day her back gets worse.

## **Lantern**

i've been to hell and come back to tell the tale, saw the grisly workings of the system and escaped before they crushed me, too. i met the witch and saw what made her that way. it's a sick beast, this place for the sick and ailing, a machine gone awry, a veritable clockwork orange, tied up in its own paperwork, staff more defeated than its patients (because they can never leave). this place is riddled with fear (it spreads like a rash), and even if you can find a window, it won't open. you'll be admitted to unit 5: crisis, because everything here is a crisis, but don't worry, soon you'll be transferred to unit 7: addiction, where you'll be acclimated to the right drugs, and the first one is fear. you know it well already. but when they let you escape with your life, the world is before you, until you have to escape with your life again.  
for now, let there be light.

## **Medical Cabinets**

some people are like drugs. when you're under their influence, you shouldn't operate heavy machinery. and, contrary to popular belief, mixing with alcohol is not always advisable. remember: drugs are only a paltry rip-off of the real thing. the company you keep could be a veritable pharmacopia in flesh form, so ration out your doses. overdose could be disastrous, withdrawal's a bitch, and when in doubt, deny, deny, deny you have a problem. most importantly, no matter what you do, Don't Wind Up Here.

## **Pipe Forms**

the shit hit the fan. the risk we were unwittingly willing to take showed up and made us weep. the bottom fell out of the market; the teachers were on strike; two subway lines stopped running; even the garbage collectors threatened to walk out. the intestines of this machine were on display; the joints had given out. paralysis was in the pipelines. the pressure in the air was almost palpable, building like water against a dam. you could almost hear the sun on the pavement - or was that the static of a radio? time was shriveling up like a raisin.

## **Portrait of a Woman**

he put me in a box, but i don't fit. i told the man, make it bigger. give me room, but he doesn't listen, says "be quiet, woman," thinks he owns me, thinks i'll be quiet forever in this box, have to talk with my damn eyes, the fool, thinks he knows every inch of my face, every hair on my head, thinks i'm a piteous creature the lord made.  
he don't know shit.

## **Quilt**

in our story, passed down through every age

like a baby's laugh,  
the warrior heals the sick,  
the beggar is a prince,  
the witch is a princess,  
the good are bad, and the bad are good,  
nothing is nothing,  
and everything is right here.

## **Santa Claus**

his name is hercules, and he may be weak now, sitting under these fluorescent lights that never turn off, but his shoulders aren't stooped yet, and his eyes are sad, but not hollow. doesn't matter if he's stuck in this place with the closed-up windows they call the depression ward (because that's where they make you depressed): he may still keep his job, if they let him out when they say they will. medication time is over, so all the other defeated ones will sit around on the couches and play a word game. this is the mandatory group led by hope, the saddest counselor here, exhausted from working two jobs, whose word game is more about making fun of people than anything, because she's tired and cruel without noticing or caring. she needs the paycheck. so sometime later, when all words have been exhausted, they'll make him talk about his son, who died in the gulf war, the first one. he'll play their game to get out of here. he always has. this is how white people make sense of things, how they get to sleep at night, believing their system works. more importantly, he'll still have his job at the department store for the season, if they let him out when they say they will. the suit still fits, and he needs the paycheck.

## **Self Portrait**

when they came for the old man in the park, he was talking to the pigeons. he never had much to say for himself, but by the time they got through with him, he was wandering the grounds and belting out god bless america to anyone who would listen.

### **Sundial / Birdbath**

he left oklahoma as soon as he was old enough, tooling down the road with a dilapidated fifteen-foot dory he'd bought off a man at the only lake outside of vinita, a lake some people called a pond. you might say he was looking for something. he'd make the vessel seaworthy - the mast was still in tact, the hull solid, though you'd never know it to look at it - and then all he'd need would be water. his parents were immigrants in this country; he didn't belong here. he knew where he came from, and he was going back, back to where he was born. his people had been sea captains, warriors and poets, he was sure, didn't need anyone to tell him that. so he'd sail across the ocean and navigate by the stars, and sometimes he'd laugh like a crazy man in the moonlight, might even get kicked out of bars.

### **The First Black Baby Born in the Yukon**

the strange lies we live in could swallow you whole. maybe they already have. but some people still look for treasure anyway, in a book or with a metal detector or with a pick-axe and compass in the loneliest corners of the world.

### **The Little League**

the ball has left the field. i don't know where it went. now the soul has left the body, and i don't know where it went.

### **Two Ducks**

#### Ingredients:

2 ducks  
salt and pepper to taste  
water  
3 onions, halved  
2-3 cups rice

#### Directions

1. preheat oven to 375
2. salt and pepper ducks.
3. put in roasting pan with cover.
4. add one inch of water and onions.
5. cover and cook until tender.
6. remove ducks, add rice to juice, stir. put duck back in over the rice and cook about 30 minutes until rice is tender.

## Two Geese

they're stationed by the window, peering out behind the lace compulsively, sipping endless cups of earl grey, and passing judgment on the weather that would put king solomon himself to shame. when the topic is sufficiently exhausted, they'll reach a verdict, dismal prospects decreed for the morrow, now onto the state of their health, a subject of infinite potential: hip replacements, surgery, medications, more clucking on the incompetence of the national health service, and now they fall on their favorite topic like a delicious bit of meat: those delinquent ingrates and their various exploits (referring of course to their respective broods, each issue more perfectly useless than the other's), or, more importantly, why those ungrateful wretches never visit. they have their own children now, and this one's only seen pictures of her grandchildren; they never visit. but wait: don't pour the tea yet. let it sit a minute. it's still too weak, see? there, now. have a chocolate biscuit, won't you? well you must have heard this thing about the neighbor, mrs. jones, with five children and a heart condition, mixed up in some kind of scandal involving the butcher and her husband's cancelled business trip to morocco. (no wonder she always had meat on the table.) she wasn't their kind of people anyway; never took the trash out on the right day; always loud music playing at every godforesaken hour; even when the police came 'round, they never did a thing; never says "hello" in the park; no one cares much for an old woman, do they? she's still waiting for an appointment with the eye doctor, been half-blind three weeks now, and nobody cares; there aren't any appointments to be had for months, when she's sure to be blind completely! nobody cares; nobody cares for an old woman; they just look at her on the bus like she's taking up space; will you have another cup of tea?

## Typeset Drawer

(noah's arc for letters)  
everything has a place here.

## **Untitled**

in an alternate universe somewhere, shadows are dancing around impersonating us. our alternate plans, forgotten intentions, the night's possibilities have escaped and, completely full of themselves, are masquerading around in our absence. they're imposters, thieves, demons in the piece. my foiled plans have assembled, decided they don't need me, and travelled around the world in my place. but shadows are flimsy. they're not exactly known for their mental prowess (how else would they make it around the world except by getting lost at every turn?) so don't expect much in the way of conversation. sure, they want to hear about your trials and tribulations, the directions home, the meaning of life, the secret to eternal youth, who killed jfk (they're really not listening anymore), but wouldn't it be so much better to just make love on the beach in maui?

## **Wire Swift**

in this factory, no one cares. life is cheap, and human hearts are cold. this girl works long, tireless hours, her eyes giving out over the years, bones feeble and stooping, made old before her time, before the next girl works long, tireless hours, her eyes giving out over the years, bones feeble and stooping, made old before her time, before the next girl works long, tireless hours, her eyes giving out over the years, bones feeble and stooping, made old before her time...but they follow my rhythm faithfully, and i make this iron world run.

## **Wood Carving**

dead souls walk around every day the same as living ones. most of the time you can't even tell the difference. maybe the heart's heavier, the eyes emptier, but everyone gets tired some time. this is a dead season, when even the living are under wraps. maybe there's no difference really, only chance. sometimes, waiting in the dark, dead or not, you may stumble onto chance, inexplicable, sweet-talking coincidence, which is as sure a way to navigate as by the stars. after all, it's almost the midnight hour, the street outside is cold and empty, the night is colder than death, but inside there's music and voices, two cups, and a little flame.

### **Wood Pitch Fork**

wooden claw, banished now, without hay or barn or moonlight.

### **Wood Rake**

when the clocks stopped, i was still here. when the paint chipped  
and the mattress sagged and rotted, i was still here. now the  
house is gone, everyone gone away, all the leaves have fallen.  
everything is dead, and i am still here.