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Alas, Poor Fhoul

I. BEFORE

Two summers ago, Otterbein University, my undergrad, gave me five hundred dollars to travel to Alabama to visit the Richard Hail Research Center for African American Studies. Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and the bones of James Baldwin had co-written a new book titled *Fine Already, You Lazy Muthafuckas: Here's the Hope, You Happy?* The book was literally just the word "Hope" repeated thousands of times in different fonts and sizes, but it was still a *New York Times* Best Seller. The Hail Center was one of the last stops on an international book tour. I had seen videos online of a few of the talkbacks and Q&As they had hosted after reading from the book at various bookstores and conferences and university auditoriums, rooms mostly full of white allies nodding solemnly while Coates answered yet another question about the N-word and a well-meaning grad student worked a series of ropes and pullies to get Baldwin's bones to sign half scribbles on pristine books, *Weekend at Bernie's* style, as the line for autographs wrapped around the block.

I had seen this kind of thing before. The real reason I was going was that, apparently, the book had also been co-written by Sebastian Fhoul, probably my favorite author of all time, someone more akin to a racial philosopher or warrior poet than a traditional writer. Coates and Morrison and Baldwin had all, at different times prior to the books release, spoken about how much of an honor it was to work with him, how much his work had influenced them and how strange it was to finally meet him. This was met with much confusion from the literary world and many a conspiratorial video rant and Twitter thread from neo-nazi trolls, since everyone knows the Fhoul died shortly after the release of his only novel, *PRANK*.

The first draft of this essay was a summary of Fhoul's biography, going through the cliffs notes everyone (should) know well enough, the extracurricular bits of his life story you hear about in African American

Studies classes. During workshop, my professors are always talking about vulnerability; one of the keys to writing good nonfiction, nonfiction that not only speaks to people but has something worth saying, is to be frank and blunt and unafraid in your personal experiences and truths, or else frank and blunt and unafraid in your resistance to being those things, in your curation of those truths. The whole thing can get pretty recursive and tiring, hitting a certain pattern of self-reflection that ends up turning into a sort of never-ending persona ouroboros, but there is real value in it: there is an explosion with this kind of connection, a real breakthrough with this kind of intimacy, if you're willing to work for it, get in there, dig deep. Fhoul's work means a lot to me, and I guess I didn't trust myself to write about the way his work has affected me at first. I wanted to stick to just the facts of the situation: how he grew up with seven other siblings in Dayton and become OSU's first and only Octuple major. How he published his first book, the expansive and deeply controversial *A Segregated History of the World* at the age of twenty-five. How his first book of poetry garnered starred reviews and a food network docuseries. Other things, too; His deal with DC Comics, his scrapped script of *Do the Right Thing*, and *PRANK*.

I've attached the meat of my research as attenuated footnotes, in order to provide context for the uninitiated (i.e. white) reader.¹

¹ Biographical notes, in the order they are mentioned:

1. He majored in Creative Writing, History, Philosophy, Race and Ethnic studies, Education, Psychology, Phrenology, and what he called "The White Man's Mind Control," a result of OSU's Design Your Own Degree program that ended up being mainly a fusion of sociology and economics.
2. The full title of his textbook is *A Segregated History of the World at Large as Well as the Various Social Climates of the Civilizations that Have and*

Continue to Make it Up that those White Muthafuckas Don't Want You to Know About Because After All We Know that Truth is Power and Ain't Nothing More Powerful in this World than Black Folks Knowing Shit am I Right Which Might Explain Why this Book was So Goddamn Hard to Publish but I be Dammed if We Ain't Made it Oh Also Fuck You Kevin Yeah that's Right You Thought I'd Forget Huh Nah Nigga We in Here Now Fuck Kevin Allen Rogers Specifically Back in Undergrad Muthafucka had the Nerve to Tell Me He Ain't Never Seen a "Negro with a Degree Before" Well Kevin how about Eight and a Book Out Huh Who's Laughing Now Sucka?? The shortening of the title is the only change made to subsequent editions.

3. The poetry book was called *55 Poems about Being Black in America and Also I about Pasta*. The twist was that the title had it backwards; the book was actually a collection of well written but otherwise unremarkable poems about various meals Fhoul had had throughout his life that included pasta, and only one poem was about being black in America. It was the last one, confusingly titled "Pasta," and is included here in its entirety:

"Y'all think niggas can't eat pasta?
Y'all think Pasta can't be Political?"

4. The comic book series he created was for Vertigo, DC's mature label for non-canonical superhero books, called *NiggaFast!* It followed mild-mannered sixteen-year-old D'andre Simons who, after being sent to the hospital due to exposure to radioactive gang violence, develops Super Speed. His powers are made stronger by watermelon, grape Kool Aid, and fried chicken, while his "kryptonite" is mayonnaise, anything with salt as its only form of seasoning, and reruns of *Friends*. The book got its title from a recurring bit where, whenever D'andre would use his powers, there would always be someone around to yell "Damn, that nigga fast!" According to consumer feedback reports, it turns out that the outdated and hackneyed racism wasn't what caused readers to jump ship; it was the fact that the story wasn't "action

packed” or “exciting” enough, and it took three issues for people to realize that, yes, the entire series was literally just going to be about whether or not D’andre is willing to act like a coon in order to save people’s lives.

5. Fhoul’s version of *Do the Right Thing* was essentially the same, except for two main differences. First, Fhoul originally cast himself as Radio Raheem’s radio, perched on Bill Nunn’s humongous shoulder, curled up in elaborate body paint and screaming the lyrics to “Fight the Power” as loud as he could. Second, Fhoul also wrote an alternate ending to the film, where we follow Radio Raheem’s spirit up to heaven and watch as he develops a Dante-and-Virgil-esque relationship with all the members of Public Enemy (who, for some inexplicable reason, are dead) as they go on a journey across Heaven to find God and ask him how come he lets so many niggas die. Spike Lee appreciated the ideas, but ended up rewriting the ending and giving Radio Raheem the CGI radio you see in the final cut of the film in post.

6. The novel follows Jerome Watts, a young black man growing up in Washington, DC, trying to figure himself out emotionally and politically. The book is known for being both a compelling narrative and a complex political thesis on Fhoul’s ideas of humor and gags-as-spectacle as a form of resistance and reclamatory healing in the face of systemic injustice, hence the title. Watts falls in and out of political groups, romantic relationships, and various ideological identities before finally, after the violent deaths of several friends at the hands of the police, decides to tattoo his face with the names of everyone he can find who has died to police violence in black ink, so numerous that they begin to overlap and, after dozens of painful hours, give Watts permanent blackface. He dies just a few days later of what the novel ambiguously calls “Natural causes.” In high school, I wrote an essay for one of my English classes about how, as a black person living in America, “Natural causes” could be anything from more police violence to diabetes to gout. I got a B-.

Fhoul's work was seminal in my understanding of myself as a black person living in this country; his writing, no matter the medium, often struck a perfect chord between absurdity and truth that I am still honing in my own work to this day, trying to explore the difference between things that happened and things that might as well have happened. I remember finding every issue of *NiggaFast!* signed by Fhoul in silver Sharpie in the dollar bin of a Half-Price Books in Columbus, since no one knew what they had, and reading them over and over and over again. I remember mumbling the full title of *A Segregated History* to myself when I first started at Otterbein, a kind of sacred mantra, an incantation chanted to summon sanity between microaggressions. I remember finding any and every reason to spout off my favorite quote from *PRANK*, in papers, at parties, in casual conversation: "Humor, real humor, the kind that builds up and interrogates and does not distract or downplay real pain and the people that suffer because of it, this type of humor is the absolute most essential political tool for all people in any marginalized group."

Besides the full scale of his impact on me being too ubiquitous in my life for me to even begin to consider writing about, I suppose I stuck to the biographic stuff to create some sort of distance between me and Fhoul because the way the story ends is tragic.

Because the fact is that Sabastian Fhoul never died. *PRANK* was met with mixed reception at the time, falling out of print for over a decade and not developing its status as one of the most important pieces of black art ever made (in a cult classic sort of way) until several years later. Most people just accused it of being a shock-factor rip-off of *Invisible Man*. Fhoul stopped making public appearances shortly after the novel's publication. The novel, much like *The Bell Jar* for Plath and *On the Road* for Kerouac, borrowed so heavily from Fhoul's life that many people weren't even aware *PRANK* was fiction. Fhoul's unwillingness to clear up the intention of his work or his situation only fed the fire, and after a few weeks, a sort of proto-Mandela effect had taken hold of the literary community. Fhoul was Schrodinger's Negro. A trend began of people pulling pranks on each other during April Fool's Day in his honor, partly for the pun

on his last name and partly for internet wokeness points, but it quickly died out once someone wrote a think piece about it being in bad taste in *The Atlantic*.

The things that happened, and the things that might as well have happened.

If I'm being honest with myself, as I made my way past various passengers on the airplane, mumbling "excuse me" and "sorry," I wasn't sure if Fhoul was alive. None of the videos I'd seen from any of the other talkbacks had featured Fhoul, and no one really seemed all that interested in his part of the writing process, if he was indeed part of it. And even if he was there, signing copies of his books next to Baldwin's skeleton, what would I get to say to him? What could I even say?

I read *Fine Already, You Lazy Muthafuckas: Here's the Hope, You Happy?* on the plane and was underwhelmed. I didn't see all the nuances everyone else seemed to be raving about. It was easily the worst thing everyone involved had written, but I didn't blame them.

The Richard Hail Research Center was nice enough, but you could tell it wasn't designed to be able to handle this kind of crowd. They had screens set up in a few neighboring cafes where the whole event was being livestreamed. I managed to check into my hotel and get in line early enough to get a spot in the main building, but I was in the balcony, looking down from the nosebleeds.

As he had been at all the other talks, Fhoul was nowhere to be seen. I sat through the presentation, disappointed and curious about my disappointment. A white woman a few seats down from me cried while Toni Morrison read excerpts from her section of the book. The woman's friend or partner or whatever rubbed her back in a way that invited her to cry into him. I rolled my eyes and tried to think of the greater good.

Eventually, when questions started to be asked of the speakers, I snuck away to the bathroom for a classic stay-sane-and-get-yourself-together reprieve, the most basic healing trick for anxious and marginalized people. I washed my hands for no reason, splashed water on my face, looked at myself in the mirror.

I heard a laugh from the other side of room. “This some bullshit, ain’t it?”

I turned to see an old black man mopping the floor, wearing a boiler suit and a coy smile.

“Uh, yeah. Kind of hard to be in the room, you know?”

He nods. “I feel ya, young blood. Muthafuckas always say they got good intentions, but we all know what’s up. I can’t blame none of them niggas on stage, though. A paycheck’s a paycheck, and niggas need to cut loose, stretch they legs, you feel me? Niggas need to make moves or die. Nah, I ain’t blame ‘em much at all. Ay, watch out real quick.”

I step back from the sink as he mops in front of me, humming something that sounds jazzy. He laughs to himself for no reason, and it’s not until this second laugh bounces off the empty bathroom walls that I recognize the janitor as Sabastian Fhoul. At least, I think it’s him, but I’m not sure. Why would it be? Cuz I’m exhausted and the dude’s old and black and was able to say “young blood” with a straight face?

I go to dry my hands, the handle of the dispenser screaming a rhythmic *ka-chunk ka-chunk ka-chunk riip* as I pull a length of paper towel. I know I’m about to look dumb as fuck, but I have to ask. He’s still humming, making the floor shine.

“Hey, are you, uh. . . maybe I’m trippin’, but are you Sebastian Fhoul?”

He smiles. “What makes ya say that?”

“I guess you just look like him?” I ball up the paper towel and try to make it into the trash can a few feet away. I miss. He laughs at me as I walk over to pick it up. “Shaaaaaq.” He chuckles.

I throw it away. “Sorry. My bad. You must get that a lot.”

He grins, shakes his head. “Nah, ‘s all good. I ain’t get it as much as ya might think.”

I tap the lid of the trash can a few times, feeling defeated. I chuckle, trying to brush it off. I stare at the slick floor, focus on a grout-filled line between two tiles, embarrassed. “Yeah man, my bad. Of course you aren’t him. Sorry to bother you, I know you’re just trying to do your job, and I come in all—”

When I look up, he's gone. The floor is still wet, glistening and clean, but otherwise there is no evidence the janitor was ever here. I stand confused by the trash for several moments, maybe waiting for him to come back, but he never does. I leave the bathroom and step outside; they're signing books now, and the line pours out the door, down the block, and into the horizon, stretching on forever. I call an Uber and sit on the curb, waiting.

II. AFTER

I turned in that essay, as it is here, as part of my undergrad senior thesis, sixty pages of an essay collection about holidays and joy and being black and being sad and being American. My thesis defense was with two of my favorite faculty members: Shannon, a ferociously smart white lady who first told me that my poems read more like mini essays and that I should definitely take her creative nonfiction class, and Jeremy, a black dude with dreads rocking anime mech statues and Red Hot Chili Peppers CDs on his office's shelves and who reads my work with more tenderness and generosity than anyone else I've ever met. Shannon said that, regardless of the piece's quality, it wasn't an essay, that this was a short story that I had called an essay despite the fact that all of it was made up.

We spent twenty minutes of the forty-five minute defense parsing out the details. I told her that I wasn't trying to be a pretentious douchebag by saying this, but that I didn't really see much of a difference between the two. I told her that everything in the essay was true in all the ways that mattered, that everything was true emotionally and mentally and racially, even if it never happened. She, in impeccably polite workshop speak, told me that my head was getting so far up my own ass I was in danger of having to resort to echolocation to get around. She said she really did like the piece, but warned me to think of my audience: that having this piece in the middle of a book full of, for lack of a better word, "Legitimate" essays, it's going to confuse and throw off the reader. I told her I was trying to prime the reader's expectations about reality with the whole bones of James

Baldwin thing in the first paragraph, and she laughed and said that, if she was being perfectly honest, what tipped her off was not that bit, but the whole Otterbein giving me money to go to Alabama on a travel grant thing, since she, as the head of the English department, had been the one to sign off on my trip, and so knew that the grant had been to go to the Harry Ransom Center in Austin to see the David Foster Wallace archives for an essay that I never ended up turning in. I told her that, when she put it that way, it made me sound like a shithead. We all laughed.

Jeremy chimed in, saying that his concern wasn't so much for whether this was an essay or not, but that I should be mindful of audience and expectations and all of that with regards to the humor. He had been my thesis advisor, and so saw the early drafts that had just been the footnotes, too long and contextless to be truly funny without more of a solid framing. He told me that what got to him most was the ending, this magical negro scene with the janitor. He said that the scene read to him as kind of dark and morose in a way that seemed to go against the entire conceit of the collection, the finding of nuggets of joy and humor in such a hostile country. He said he hated to put it like this, given the piece, but where was the hope? The ending seemed to imply that black artists and the work they produce will always be appropriated and misquoted and just straight up tainted by white people, even well-meaning white people, and that the only way to avoid this and to maintain purity is to never breach a certain level of fame or influence. He corrected himself, saying maybe what he was looking for wasn't hope per se, but some kind of something to cushion or push against the hopelessness, the bleakness of it. All the humor in the piece seemed, to him, to be fighting against that conclusion, but the ending with the maybe/maybe not/probably Fhoul seemed to give a definite answer: nah, this shit is, and will always be, fucked. He asked me if that was what I had meant to imply, if that was what I thought.

I told him I didn't know.

Even though everything is true, or speaks to truth, bits of that first part weren't lies, weren't jokes, weren't made up. I really

did go to Alabama, albeit to visit UA's Nonfiction grad program. I sat through Q&As and tours and all the standard visitation rites. They gave me all sorts of swag, a portable charger and a pen and a bottle opener shaped like an elephant. Michael Martone drove a group of us around Tuscaloosa and talked to us about trains. At one of the Q&As, I asked the faculty, a group of scholars that were the kind of white you see hanging above plaques on university walls, where I might be able to find some current, or recently graduated, student work. They took this to be a subtly disguised question airing concerns about diversity, and proceeded to talk at length about the measures being taken to teach from and include all kinds of different perspectives. For once, I wasn't even thinking about race, or at least considered those truths to be self-evident; I just wanted to know if the writing of anyone here was developing worth a damn, if any of these classes were working for them.

I nodded and thanked them for their answer.

Sometime later, I dropped my things off at the hotel and headed back into the Alabama spring night, looking for a gas station to hit up for some Little Debbie snacks, a sort of anchoring comfort food that, to my Ohio-bred, corner-store dwelling, pre-diabetic, stretch-marks-look-like-a-sudoku-board, fat-booty ass, screams Midwest, and thus acts as an orienting force for me when I'm traveling.

They don't have any, and, standing in front of a variety of the objectively inferior Hostess snacks, I had to decide whether to give up my morals to satiate my snack-cake craving.

I stuck to my meaningless and capitalistically imparted brand loyalty and go down a few isles to get some chips. I pass a dude on the way over, torn jeans, dirty Timbs, skin so black it's almost purple, a tallboy under each arm, bouncing between the beef jerky and the freezer full of beer, focused on his own consumer choices. The white lady at the counter has been staring at him for some time. I'm trying to end a three-way tie in my head between puffy Cheetos, cheesy popcorn, and regular Fritos when she finally calls out.

"Hey! Sir! I'm going to have to ask you to check out or get out!"

Dude turns around. "What?"

White Lady doubles down. “I said, you need to check out or get out. You’ve had plenty of time to pick something. I can’t have you walking around between aisles.”

Dude sucks his teeth. “Bruh, I’m just looking around! I ain’t even done shopping yet!”

“You’ve had plenty of time to figure that out. It’s obvious your trying to buy time to steal something. I’ve been watching you this whole time.”

Bold. Dude looks at me like *Can you believe this muthafucka?*, and I give him a sympathetic look and an eye roll that I hope says *Bro this place doesn’t have anything anyway, I mean who ever heard of a convenience store with no Little Debbie? I know you just shopping bro but just pay and bounce so she doesn’t pull a gun out from that counter and go all Goetz/ Zimmerman/ Bryant on our asses.*

Dude doesn’t catch it. “Bruuuuh! This some bullshit!”

“Sir, don’t get an attitude with me. Just pay for everything or get out.”

Dude puts the tallboys on the ground, throws his arms up. “I ain’t steal shit! You can search me!”

“Sir, please don’t get aggressive with me. I’ll ask you again: pay for everything you have or get out. I don’t want to have to call the police.”

That gets to him. Dude walks out, cussing up a storm. “Man, fuck y’all and this raggedy-ass joint! Fuck outta here, Rosanne Barr-lookin’-ass bitch, fat-ass, Stay Puff Marshmallow, back-boobs, stank-ass, dirty-mop-head-lookin’-ass bitch. . .”

I look straight down, trying harder than I ever have in my life not to laugh. It’s involuntary; my stomach strains with the effort.

When Dude has left and I’ve composed myself, I look up to find her with, of all things, an apologetic look on her face. *I’m sorry about that. Crazy, huh?* Colorism be real as fuck and guilt be real as fuck too.

I put the tallboys back in the freezer, and, because I’m hungry and I ain’t about to spend more time in the open Alabama air, I walk up to the counter to check out. As she rings me up, she shakes her head.

“Sorry about that, sir. I just. . . I hate people like that.” She looks at me, pausing. “People who are obviously trying to steal like we won’t notice.”

“Yeah.” I say. “Obviously.” I’m not sure if selling out is really a thing the way most people think it is, but if it’s real, I always think of it not as a single transaction, but as a kind of slow and corrosive unraveling.

As I turn around and head for the door, another white lady comes out of the back, having recently finished up doing some kind inventory, and the woman at the counter begins to fill her co-worker in on the drama, telling a vastly inflated and victimized version of the story, like Dude was Jahan Dillinger or some shit, and all I can think as I walk out of the door, the weight of the bag hanging off my wrist, is *That's not true none of that is true that's a lie that didn't actually happen.*

After much deliberation, I ended up at Iowa, joining the 3.75 percent of the population of Iowa City made up of black folks, and the 13.94 percent of the population made up of non-white people. The thing about Iowa City, as multiple POC from the grad program are quick to prep me for, is that, more so than other predominantly white places, Iowa City natives tend to weaponize the Midwest's trademark coded and passively aggressive pleasantries as a way to give you permission to exist, or rather, to make it clear to you, even if you two are perfect strangers, that they don't mind your colored ass being here. Indeed, in my first few weeks in town, everyone from clerks to elevator patrons to people stuck next to me in traffic to students to old couples to neighbors, no matter the time of day, the circumstances for us being in the same twenty-foot radius, or their level of inebriation caused by any substance, had given me a classic tight-lipped smile or the more forward "howyadoin" mumbled like an incantation. The white woman smiles politely at me as I walk in on her making copies as I pick up my print out. The white kid behind the McDonald's register takes my order efficiently and smiles and calls me "boss." The drunk forty-something tailgater yells "What's up, homie!?" with a big dumb grin on his face as I walk to my apartment.

In between trying to write and trying to read, I try to teach the young white proto-alcoholics that are in my Gen Ed Lit class. They've never heard of Rodney King, so we have that conversation. They've never heard of Ferguson, so we have that conversation. They think "systemic" is when you approach something in a very organized way, so we have that conversation. I go home hoping I've done something. I grade two dozen papers that all say Racism is Bad a hundred times each in only about three different ways. One of my students uses the word "nigger" in his reading response. It was his most coherent work

yet, so after sending him an email about power and usage and who should get to say what, I give him a C-.

The only black student in my class writes a paper about his friend's dad dying and all the responsibility his friend had to take on after that, what it meant for him to be forced to become a man, and even though it had almost next to nothing to do with the assignment and read like he typed it with his knuckles, I gave him 100 percent, because it was real. Later that same day, I get a text from my dad, the only black teacher at a California charter school, saying how, during his first period English class, cops came into his classroom and searched one of his Latinx students for no reason, that he had to somehow still teach Shakespeare or whatever the hell after that. I tell him that all cops are bastards, that just yesterday I got mean-mugged by one on my way back from the program's first speakeasy, and that he probably would have followed me and pulled me over had he not been preoccupied with the brown person he was currently pulling over, to which my dad responds "Wait, a speakeasy?? How'd it go??" and I realize what it is we really talk about.

Maybe a week later, I send him a draft of this essay and ask for some general feedback. He says that whatever other racial malaise I'm experiencing, it has to be noted somewhere that I'm mixed; that my mother is white and my father is black and that my lightskinnedness counts for a lot. He says that this lack of information makes the persona's voice seem disingenuous, since it's presenting as "total black." He reminds me that my mom hates it when I call myself black instead of mixed, as if I'm trying to cut her legacy out of my life. I want to remind him about the colorism line from the corner store bit but I guess it wasn't enough. I want to tell him that he knows that that whole dynamic is fucked up, an identity steeped in a negative definition. I want to spout off my vindictively thorough list of half-black-half-white-and-still-fully-black celebrities I've committed to memory over the years to defend my own ontology (*HalleBerryMariahCareyAlicia KeysZazieBeetzLennyKravitzCorbinBleuObamaDrakeBobMarleyRashidaJonesEtc*). I want to remind him that this isn't apartheid South Africa, that niggas aren't walking around with their Ancestry.com results in their wallets

doing percentile math for street cred. I want to ask him that if my experiences don't make me black and white people's racism doesn't make me black and I don't make myself black, then what does?

But I don't. I thank him for the advice and go back to writing.

In the second first draft of this essay, the first draft that wasn't just footnotes, Fhoul had the police victim blackface tattoo put on himself, his actual real person, and his self-exile from the public was sparked by the fact that this final act of radical self-mutilation-as-gag-spectacle went over the heads of the people who needed to hear it most: he was already so dark that many people couldn't tell the difference between his face before and after the procedure. The draft ended with me actually getting to meet him, sitting behind the signing table next to Ta-Nehisi Coates and Baldwin's slumped over skeleton. We don't actually exchange any words, but I have a Nick Carraway, "I was him too," self-projection, mirror stage moment where I see Fhoul and the blackface is totally and completely obvious. Jeremy told me he liked this ending more than the janitor one, but appreciated what putting the blackface tattoo into a decidedly more fictional realm did for the piece overall. During one of our meetings, he laughed so hard thinking about it he almost spit out his tea. "I mean, you're going to have a hell of a time getting people to laugh at it in any context. Shit is dark, man! But it's funnier as part of the book, definitely. It's more comfortable that way, too, if that's something you wanna go for."

I hadn't thought about Sabastian Fhoul and my trip to Alabama to maybe get a chance to meet him in months, not since passing my thesis defense and graduating from Otterbein. Lately, I've come to realize that, much like the whip/nae-nae, the phrase "Tea," and the idea of civilization, white people have ruined satire; there is a very narrow and specific literary frequency created for black art, the regurgitation of racial trauma that is white-centered and destitute and only one side of a human being, and everything outside of that tone is post-racial or revolutionary or brand new or satirical. A black person smiles and it's brave and daring and thus unnatural. A black person writes about shit that makes them

smile and all anyone wants to know is why they're focusing on that when there is real resisting to be done. A black person makes a joke and instead of laughing people write reviews about how the new negro has reached its final evolution, *Niggerus Rhopalocera*, a hip new Mothra emerging with fresh slime and endless grace from its discourse cocoon.

Nothing is absurd because everything is absurd: I find myself thinking about Fhoul and his works a lot these days, as the world bends itself toward the gravity of his realness, either by embracing his work or making the journey I took truly impossible. Jeremy emailed me a few weeks into last semester to tell me that he had been thumbing through some of his old comics, and rediscovered what everyone forgets about: Static Shock got his super powers from a radioactive waste spill caused by gang violence. Then DC discontinued their Vertigo label. Then Toni Morrison died. Then I found out who Jean Toomer was and that, in addition to writing some experimental poetry/fiction that many consider to be nonfiction, disappearing from the public eye, and dying in obscurity, he attended six different schools in three years and studied biology, history, fitness, sociology, and agriculture. I knew none of this then, but I know it all now.

Then, on Twitter, sandwiched between Spongebob memes and news about Joshua Brown getting murdered after Amber Guyger's trial, I find a poem by Catherine Barnett called "O Esperanza!" the twenty-seventh line of which is "hope hope hope hope hope hope hope hope hope hope." I laugh and I laugh: this cascade of fiction foaming up into facts, or facts foaming up into fiction, or whatever I am to call the logical conclusion of a life built on this kind of tension, this kind of friction, this kind of truth. Muthafuckas got jokes, and the poem is pretty good, too. I screenshot it and send it to Jeremy, tell him I was on to something.