This Here Flesh

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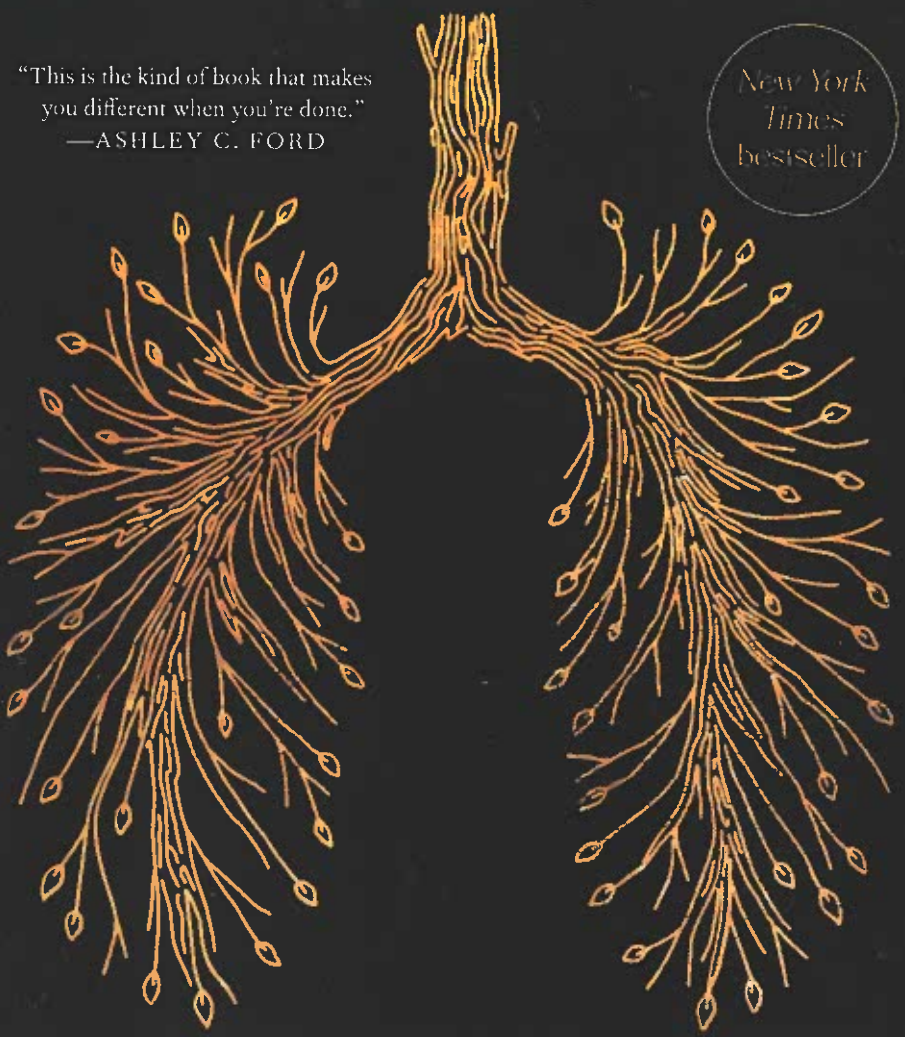

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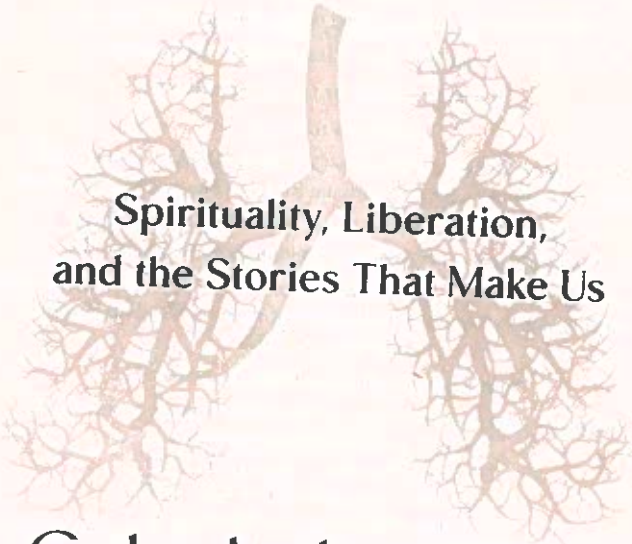

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This Here Flesh is a work of nonfiction.
Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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THREE

Wonder

I have holes in my eyes. About a year ago, a doctor said it as plain as that. *You know about the holes?* I did not.

Apparently they are not uncommon, but I have enough of them that the doctors are all concerned. I am concerned. No one wants to think of decay in themselves.

There I lay—scratchy grass and soft earth wriggling around my little body as I looked up at the sky. Slow and chubby, there wasn't a game of tag I could keep up in. In the middle of the game, I would lurch over to the other side of the yard and collapse like a dead thing as the other kids ran around me, skipping over my motionless limbs. My eyelids would come awake slowly, finding the sky as I was resurrected. And I'd look up and just stare.

Then one day I learned to move my eyes in and out of focus. As I did so, it felt like I was witnessing a mask rip from the cosmos. In focus: clouds and blue, perfectly beautiful and or-

dinary. Out of focus: hundreds of minuscule clear floating bubbles suspended in the space between. I thought I was seeing air.

I wrestled my sister to the ground. *Look, there.* She squirmed and squinted. *Tell me you see the air.* She did not, which made me think I had special powers, and maybe I did. I try not to let the knowledge of my eye holes steal this magic now. For in actuality, I was simply seeing my own eye—floaters and shadows and flashes of light. It was still beauty to me. Now, a solemn magic. Some wonders have a way of holding us even in the deterioration of our present world. We must protect this.

Have you ever watched a three-year-old blow the wisps off a dandelion for the first time? Children are made of awe. We have much to learn from them, but we seldom aim to. When we encounter the freedom of a child, we can choose to participate in their liberation or we can grow to resent the freedom in them. The words *childish* and *juvenile* are made derogatory as we become overly concerned with the serious. It is a feigned superiority. The tragedy is that as we distance ourselves from the delight of our youth, we become increasingly prone to disillusionment. Wonder and beauty are not precise cures for disillusionment, but they certainly can stave off the despair of it. To reclaim the awe of our child-selves, to allow ourselves to be taken by the beauty of a thing, allows goodness to take up the space it's often denied in our interior worlds.

My first friend who was mine was a girl called Boo. "Mine" in that, before her, the only friends I had came to me by association with my sister, who was charming and popular enough to have friends left over to donate to me out of sympathy. This

was enough for me then. Until the day Boo glided up to me at recess, pressed a spoon into my chest, and said, *Let's go to the fields.* And I went. Skipping so close behind her I had to dodge the plastic Kuhn's bag she had wrapped around her wrist. When we got to the middle of the deserted field, she lifted the bag and tore it open with her teeth. A jar of chocolate icing fell to the earth. I picked something crusty off the spoon and we ate. Legs crossed under us and knees touching, making shapes of the space between us. *This is our ceremony,* I said. *Yes, a ceremony,* Boo said, pinching the roots of her braids and whipping them over the icing in a circle.

It began like that. Knee to knee in an empty field, eating icing and clinking spoons. We began collecting seeds from helicopters fallen from trees. We'd grind them up and blow the dust into each other's hearts. Boo would cartwheel around me until the clouds whispered the secret of the day. *They say you are an angel.* And we laughed and bowed. *They say you'll be a dancer.* And we crossed our hearts. Our ceremonies ended with a whistle—fake, because neither of us could actually whistle. But to us it was real.

Until the day we had visitors. Three of them standing over us with their hips popped. They called us weird and "lame." They called us disgusting little babies. And the next day, Boo didn't bring a spoon for me. After that, I just sat by myself against the demountables, reading books and trying to forget being magic.

As we grow older, the "serious" becomes a simulacrum for wisdom and even honor. Impoverished by the honor withheld from us in childhood, we become very willing participants in a kind of spiritual maturation that honors the profound and

grave, even at the expense of the simple and beautiful. In fact, the path to wonder is not sophistication or intellect or articulation; it is a clock wound backward. It is foolish, excessive. Two girls in a field flicking icing to the clouds. It's when you, as my family would say, *play too much*. The wonder I've known squeals in delight and trembles in terror. It waits for the clouds to whisper back.

. . .

People who truly know how to wonder don't expend a great deal of energy talking about it; they are off catching snowflakes on hot tongues. They're folding themselves in half to smell the sweet potatoes in the oven just one more time. I no longer try to convince someone of the delight of soup dumplings; I take them to Dim Sum Garden on Race Street in Philly and let them watch me slurp. I let the steaming miracle broth run down my face and lap it up in remembrance.

I think awe is an exercise, both a doing and a being. It is a spiritual muscle of our humanity that we can only keep from atrophying if we exercise it habitually. I sit in the clearing behind Wisewood listening to the song of the barn swallows mix with the sound of cars speeding by. I watch the milk current through my tea and the little leaves dance free from their pouch. I linger in the mirror and I don't look away. I trace the shadows hugging my lips and I don't look away. Awe is not a lens through which to see the world but our sole path to seeing. Any other lens is not a lens but a veil. And I've come to believe that our beholding—seeing the veils of this world peeled back again and again, if only for a moment—is no small form of salvation.

When I speak of wonder, I mean the practice of beholding the beautiful. Beholding the majestic—the snow-capped Himalayas, the sun setting on the sea—but also the perfectly mundane—that soap bubble reflecting your kitchen, the oxidized underbelly of that stainless steel pan. More than the grand beauties of our lives, wonder is about having the presence to pay attention to the commonplace. It could be said that to find beauty in the ordinary is a deeper exercise than climbing to the mountaintop.

When people or groups become too enamored with mountaintops, we should ask ourselves whether their euphoria comes from love or from the experience of supremacy. For example, whiteness, as a sociological force and practice, loves mountaintops. Being born of an appetite not for flourishing but for domination, it loves the ascent, the conquering. It will tell you about the view from there, but be assured that it is only its view of itself that rouses its spirit. It is about bravado and triumph.

There is nothing wrong with climbing the mountain, but bravado tends to drown out the sound of wonder. Perhaps you've known that person who devours beauty as if it belongs to them. It is a possessive wonder. It eats not to delight but to collect, trade, and boast. It consumes beauty to grow in ego, not in love. It climbs mountains to gain ownership, not to gain freedom.

I've climbed to 13,000 feet in the Himalayas, and when I think of it now, I very rarely find myself drawn back to the memory of a peak. I think of myself stopping somewhere along the way to watch a girl pick purple flowers sprung from snow. I'm listening to the Sherpa hum what sounds like Ri-

hanna as he floats from rock to rock and I'm breathing hard as hell. I'm bowing. *Namaste.* I'm stealing glances at the tops of heads as I pass by the people in each village, and they bow too. *Namaste.*

To encounter the holy in the ordinary is to find God in the liminal—in spaces where we might subconsciously exclude it, including the sensory moments that are often illegibly spiritual.

When I was twenty-two, I boarded an unreasonably small plane to Nome, Alaska, and went to volunteer with the annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. The historic trail, much of which was once a trade route for Alaska Natives, was made famous after mushers with teams of sled dogs raced a serum to a remote village in the pits of a diphtheria outbreak. Now, each year, dozens of teams compete in a dogsled race to commemorate the journey from Anchorage to Nome.

I was working the lot overnight, scuttling around in the dark to keep my toes from turning to ice, when the winning musher and team of dogs came tearing through the finish line. I helped as the race vets examined the dogs. We walked them around as the doctors paid attention to how they moved. We slithered off their poop-caked dog booties. We helped bed them down, breaking apart straw bales and making nests in the snow. Sled dogs don't look like they do in the movies. They were small and wet and perfectly ordinary looking.

When I tell people I helped bed down the winning dogs of the 2014 Iditarod, their eyes get a particular shine to them. It reads like quite the grand adventure for a Black girl from Pittsburgh. And in its own way, it was. But this is the story from Nome that has settled into my skin: There I am, sitting on the

porch of a rusting youth center with a friend and a local Inupiaq girl who can't have been older than twelve. We ignore the brown snow-slush coating the porch as we kick our legs over the side and brace our chins on the cold of the metal railing that wraps the perimeter of the porch. The girl is in the middle, holding her phone up like an offering, and our cheeks are all but touching as we lean into the screen and watch one video again and again—a parody of Psy's 2012 hit "Gangnam Style" that re-creates the entire song's music video using the game *Minecraft*, changing the iconic chorus to "Minecraft style."

To our right, the frozen expanse of the Bering Sea. Above us, powder leaks from the sky. And three very different humans squeal and pitch our voices two octaves too low as we sing out "Minecraft Style" like it's as important as "Ave Maria." This I will not forget. Lips cracking, bellies burning, snow sliding down my pants as I rocked back in laughter. It was one of those rare occasions that I knew was becoming a part of me as I lived it. The moment wasn't just happiness, though that was a quality of it. It was a kind of pleasure that made me feel a part of something—where beauty meets belonging.

When I talk about Alaska, no one really cares about this moment. It's simple and childish. To me, it was a miracle. The northern lights are one thing, but when I die, tell them that I went to Nome, Alaska, only to find God in a *Minecraft* parody.

This past winter, I made my husband lie in our backyard with me and look up. There was snow a few inches deep, and we were supposed to be covering up wood with the tarp to keep it dry. I was embarrassed to ask him. *Just for a second.* I wanted to see if he could see the air. He couldn't, but we lay

there anyway, like forgotten rag dolls, and he let me tell him how the tiny clear things moved and popped around us. There are more of them now, but I don't let myself lie as long. A minute. And we went back to the wood and a conversation about the injustice of urban air quality. There was work to do.

If you want to know if you've forgotten how to marvel, try staring at something beautiful for five minutes and see where your mind goes.

. . .

"Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8)—The Bible talks of knowing God as though it's closer to dinner and a movie than any three-point sermon.

What does it mean that our knowledge of the spiritual is deeply entwined with the sensory? That it is bodily? Double Dutch and the sound of braids and beads clacking together. The soft prickle of grass on bare feet. These are connections that require us to attune ourselves to our bodies.

When my father was in fifth grade, he signed up for a day program at school run by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He was only trying to get out of class, but he ended up being asked to do one of their short residencies for kids in urban centers. *I can't tell you why I said yes. Boredom, maybe. I wasn't a dancer.*

But he's in class on the first day, and he gets brave, and all of a sudden, he hits a jeté like he's not ashamed of it, and the whole room stops as he levitates in the air. *Man, when I tell you I could fly back then . . .* He is suspended in the air like that for so long, his teachers have time to pay attention to every part of him. And as they're delighting and he's still fly-

ing, he has time to really take account of himself. His thin limbs stretching to the ends of the earth, his big globe eyes blinking back at him in the mirror like stars in a constellation. He says he felt the muscles around his knees become mighty. *I didn't know my body could do the things that it did.*

When he finally landed, it was the next day, and he was both terrified and proud. In awe of his body, he never saw it the same again. Years later, when he was in the army, doubled over on the twenty-mile march, fearing he couldn't take another step, he remembered this: the resilience, the strength, the beauty of his once-tiny body. And it's his own constellation that comes over to him and stands him upright again. He says, *It's not arrogant to wow yourself every once in a while. It's not arrogance, it's just paying attention.*

Wonder includes the capacity to be in awe of humanity, even your own. It allows us to jettison the dangerous belief that things worthy of wonder can only be located on nature hikes and scenic overlooks. This can distract us from the beauty flowing through us daily. For every second that our organs and bones sustain us is a miracle. When those bones heal, when our wounds scab over, this is our call to marvel at our bodies—their regeneration, their stability or frailty. This grows our sense of dignity. To be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintop, the sunlight refracting—this manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other.

Our caution is to not become those who focus on beauty in order to dismiss tragedy or to disguise feelings of their own inadequacy. When we ourselves feel ugly and insignificant, or the pain of the world feels unbearable, it can be very comfort-

ing to talk of mountains and sunsets. We train our focus on beauty here or there—this poem, that architecture—because it is easier than bearing witness to our own story. We begin to gravitate not toward beauty but toward illusion. In this state, you are not approaching what you seek. You are running from your own face. But this is not the way of wonder. Wonder requires a person not to forget themselves but to feel themselves so acutely that their connectedness to every created thing comes into focus. In sacred awe, we are a part of the story.

For my father and his bony, levitating limbs, the wonder of his body pushed back the lie of a Black-boy monster. Practicing wonder is a powerful tool against despair. It works nearly the same muscles as hope, in that you find yourself believing in goodness and beauty even when the evidence gives you every reason to believe that goodness and beauty are void. This can feel like a risk to those of us who have had our dreams colonized, who have known the devastation of hope unfulfilled. I once heard the Japanese artist Makoto Fujimura say, "The most courageous thing we can do as a people is to behold." This gave me great empathy for those who have lost their wonder. For myself. We are not to blame for what the world has so relentlessly tried to crush in us, but we are endangered because of it.

Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes:

> Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious ven-

> geance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not—can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.

When we grow accustomed to neglecting beauty, we eventually become creatures of hatred. We lose our imagination—a virtue to which wonder is helplessly tied. Why care for barren land? Why advocate for justice in a system predicated on injustice? We become so accustomed to that bitter taste that we can taste nothing else. Slowly, even mirrors feel like an oppression. We become unable to conceive of anything worthwhile in our own image until we empty ourselves of all beauty and turn against our own bodies in disgust.

This is a path that ends in numbness. It is disillusionment with the chains of this world that leads us to become numb to them, accustomed to a life of burden as our appetite for liberation wanes.

When we wonder, we loosen the cords that restrain our love. And the people most in love with a thing are prone to become its fiercest protectors.

. . .

We have found ourselves too busy for beauty. We spin our bodies into chaos with the habits and expectations of the dominating culture, giving and doing and working. Do not blame yourself for that buzzing terror in the back of your mind; it was injected there at the site of our ancestors' enslavement. It takes work to undo that, especially when the oppressor still holds the whip today, ushering us into sixty-hour workweeks

and minimum-wage jobs, dangling the hope of security in front of those of us who the system ensures will never have enough.

And once we name that we do not have enough, the system convinces us that it is our task to do more. We live depleted of that rest which is the only reliable gateway to wonder. We inhabit an economy of power that views wonder and awe as frivolities or naïveté, distractions on the path to liberation. Our remedy is precisely what our ailment derides. Wonder helps us get free.

I used to think our neglect of wonder was a function of being numb. It took longer for me to admit that this numbness was the result of trauma and disillusionment. When you become accustomed to pain, it is not unusual to, consciously or subconsciously, habitually weaken your capacity to experience pain. But as we become less perceptive of pain, we lose touch with other sensations as well—awe and delight included. As psychological wisdom explains, it is difficult to control the targets of our numbing.

With *The Color Purple,* Alice Walker taught me that wonder doesn't dismiss pain; it brings us out of numbness. Celie, a young girl who was told her whole life that she was ugly, learns about the godliness of beauty from Shug, her husband's mistress. Shug tells Celie, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." The story seemed to me more tragic than beautiful. But Walker knew Celie and Shug could not be reduced. Celie's life was more than a grotesque collection of traumas. She learned the language of wonder. And allowing for this awe in her did not diminish the pain of her story, it made her more human.

After my father tore her wide open, he lay on my gramma's heaving chest, still wearing her insides so you couldn't make out what was his flesh and what was hers. She says she looked down at him and was changed. *I was outside of myself,* she says. *I was a part of a miracle.* This was the moment she realized she was free to create beautiful things, and be beautiful herself.

She used to sing in church growing up, but when you're overworked and barely making it, it's hard to make time for loves. But when my father was born, she began singing again—not in church, but it was still a resurrection. Beauty has a way of multiplying itself. My gramma used to believe that her only role in this life would be devil. The woman and man who raised her convinced her she was born a bearer of the ugly, and that the beautiful things were despite her, never because of her. If she had never birthed a single child, I believe God would've still made a way for her to break free of this, but this is how it happened for her. A child whose beauty she couldn't easily deny.

To be a human who resembles the divine is to become responsible for the beautiful, for its observance, its protection, and its creation. It is a challenge to believe that this right is ours.

Wonder, then, is a force of liberation. It makes sense of what our souls inherently know we were meant for. Every mundane glimpse is salve on a wound, instructions for how to set the bone right again. If you really want to get free, find God on the subway. Find God in the soap bubble.

Me? I meet God in the taste of my gramma's chicken. I hear God in the raspy leather of Nina Simone's voice. I see the face

of God in the bony teenager bagging my groceries. And why shouldn't I? My faith is held together by wonder—by every defiant commitment to presence and paying attention. I cannot tell you with precision what makes the sun set, but I can tell you how those colors, blurred together, calm my head and change my breath. I will die knowing I lived a faith that changed my breathing. A faith that made me believe I could see air.