

Acknowledgements

This small book was born from the efforts of many, but to name a few, I'd like to thank my mom, Adriana Rich, for being supportive of all my endeavors. My magnificent editor Andrea Kaspyk, for their keen eye, and finally my partner, Melissa Wu for her unbounded love and encouragement.

Marley's Mom

Marley used to hate the smell of bleach but over time grew to love it. Bleach meant cleaning, and cleaning meant he'd see the side of his momma he loved most.

As the pungent aroma and 90s R&B filled the air, she'd twirl around the house with her mop and sing. She sang with the power pain gives, clinging to each note like life itself. During those brief moments of lucidity, she was overflowing with love and poured the excess onto Marley. She'd kiss him and hug him and tell him good morning.

But on those quiet, odorless days, she locked herself in her bedroom until night came. He kissed the door and told her he loved her, but she only replied with faint sobs.

Today, Tina Turner's voice woke him up. He went into the kitchen, and the powerful odor made his little body recoil.

"Good morning, mommy," his five-year old voice squeaked.

"Hey, Marley baby. Good morning, how are you doing?" The lilt in her voice warmed his heart.

"I'm doing ok mommy. Are you going to watch TV with me tonight?"

"Not today, baby, mommy's spending time with some friends later. Another night, I promise"

Weeks ago Marley and his mom lay cuddled on the couch watching a marathon of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Rain forced her to abandon her plans and spend the night with her son. With each thunderous splitting of the sky, Marley's mom squeezed him tighter until he asked her to let go a little bit because he couldn't breathe. That was the longest and tightest he remembered her holding him. Ever since then, he asked her to watch TV

with him every night. Whenever she said no, he'd kneel beside his bed and pray for rain.

Throughout the day Marley hovered under her wing while she cleaned, hoping to be the accidental target of her affection. It was endearing at first, but when he accidentally knocked over the mop bucket, she stopped singing along with Tina's legendary vocal range to a low scolding depth.

"Baby, can you go outside and play? Mommy's busy."

He listened for as long as a child's memory allowed him to; then went back under her wing. She finally had enough and put him on the doorstep, locking the door behind him. Defeated, the tiny child left the tiny apartment with his head hung lower than an autumn weed and walked to the pond to skip rocks. His weak throws propelled each stone only a few feet from the shore, none skipping, all sinking. When he couldn't bend gravity to his will, he decided to work with it and made a game of tossing all the failed stones into a pile off the shore. He kept at it until he ran out of stones worth tossing, then turned to sticks, water bottles, then whatever roadside debris was convenient. He cut his hand on a melted soda can that he was about to throw in when a white sedan crept up beside him and honked for his attention. A skinny man with the same deep brown complexion as his daddy, but with a fuller head of hair leaned out the driver's window.

"Hey, little man, is your momma home?" He bellowed.

"No." Marley lied.

"Aight, well, when she gets back tell her Mason is asking about her."

"Ok."

The sedan peeled off with the tires slinging gravel into the pond, grazing Marley on his right arm. He played with the blood as it crawled and coagulated down to his elbow, then went back to throwing trash into the water until a small mountain of debris peaked above the surface and the street lights came on. When those lights came alive, Marley knew it was time to head home or he would be in trouble. When he walked in, he walked with his right arm behind his back, afraid his mom would yell at him for getting hurt. She hardly noticed. She walked out just as he was walking in. A waft of perfume overloaded his senses, and he started to cry, the smell meant she wouldn't be back for awhile.

"Mommy, please don't leave." At first the tears were staged, but he slowly convinced himself they were real.

"Marley, stop your crying and get your ass in the house. You're filthy and you got mud all on your elbow."

He wailed his best wail and worked up the wettest tears to no avail. She grabbed him by his collar, dragged him inside, and dropped him on the couch.

"There's food in the fridge. Make yourself a sandwich or bowl of cereal if you get hungry, and don't answer the door for nobody."

Marley continued to sit on the couch crying for at least an hour. He threw his face into the armrest and darkened the already dark spot on the sofa's armrest. He never heard her speed off as his ears were ringing from the sound of his own voice.

He awoke late at night to an empty apartment with all the lights still on. His throat raw from his performance, shirt matted against his slightly damp chest. He treated it with a glass of water he warmed up in the microwave and turned off all the lights because his mommy told him, she can't afford all these damn bills, then sat by the window to watch the blur of cars race past. Their apartment was on a main street, giving him an endless

supply of hope that the next one would be hers. His eyes began to betray his anticipation, so he turned on the TV as an act of resistance — and to give him company throughout the night.

He wasn't sure what time it was when three knocks on the door caused him to spring up. Scared to answer, but also scared of letting his mommy get locked out, he weighed his options and figured it was better to get a whooping later than to let his mommy get stuck outside.

There she was, but so was Mason. Her eyes were half open. She was slumped over his shoulder with a thin white foam around her mouth, barely being held up by Mason. He shoved Marley out the doorway, came inside, and laid her on the couch on her back in front of the noisy reruns.

"Hey, little man, your mom isn't feeling well, but she'll be alright." Without further instruction, Mason left.

"Mommy, are you ok?" He whispered in her ear, afraid to wake her up.

She didn't respond.

It started to pour with an unnatural abruptness, putting a smile on Marley's face for the first time all day. His prayers were finally answered. The deafening echos tearing the sky apart concealed the final coughs of Marley's mom. He was too busy staring out the window, smiling at the sky, and thanking god to notice.

When he looked back, he saw a mixture of white fluids filling around her mouth. He panicked and went to the bathroom to get some toilet paper to wipe it up. Satisfied that his mommy was finally home, Marley took this chance to curl up next to her on the couch, pulling her limp arm around his body as he laid there watching *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* reruns for the rest of the night.

The Golden Lion

The Lancaster Zoo for Extraordinary Beasts epitomized the beautifully malevolent crusades on which we (humans) embark on for mere entertainment. Within these seven-foot brick walls are the most exotic creatures you could ever lay your eyes on. I wouldn't believe it myself if I wasn't staring at one of them right now, the Golden Lion.

The golden fur of the lion shone so bright it was surreal, out of place like a golden tooth in the decayed mouth of a scorched corpse. Devoid of reflection, the fur's sheen battled and evaded each ray of sunlight, instead choosing to emit its own electrifying glow.

The true madness of the fur, however, was the creature it chose to rest on. The lion was a beautiful beast, but by no means remarkable as far as lions go. You could even argue this lion was less lion than other lions.

Being restricted to the confines of its cell devolved the beast from ferocious king to pitiful passing attraction. With no motivation to kill or hunt, the lion became lazy or depressed or both. Its sluggish movements and slouching posture were a far cry from what you would expect from hundreds of years of evolutionary design culminating in the perfect predator. I mourned the future of this beast, but still found myself in awe. Unlike most zoos, the Lancaster Zoo for Extraordinary Beasts had a no camera policy. Upon traversing the vine-encrusted brick arches that composed the entrance, you were immediately met with imposing metal detectors and security guards barking orders. The experience was no different from entering an extravagant airport only to be humiliated by the TSA yelling at you to take your shoes off. With nothing more than my watercolors and canvas, I went immediately to the cages of the Golden Lion to recreate and immortalize its majesty in my own image.

Five hours of countless sketches, drafts, and spilled watercolors got me no closer to finishing than I was when I started. Pure hubris led me to believe I could preserve this image from my mind's eye, but truthfully this serene scene is beautiful just the way it is.

Perhaps after decades of training, my brush strokes would allow me to do this divine creature justice, but for now I conceded defeat. As I am packing up my supplies, a small boy with his father approaches terribly close to the glass prison.

“Daddy, daddy, daddy, look at the lion! What’s wrong with him?” he innocently asks.

“There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s an extraordinary beast that this zoo found, so they brought it back here for us to see.”

“He looks like a broken lightbulb,” the boy says.

Visibly confused by the boy’s analogy, the father asks his son, “what do you mean?”

“It keeps glowing and dying,” explains the boy.

Even after observing this lion for hours, I still did not immediately entirely recognize what the boy was saying, but after squinting my eyes and focusing on one patch of fur by its leg, I caught it. An almost imperceptible darkening of the fur would occur at odd intervals. I was watching a candle leading up to its final moments, barely flickering to stay alive. As much as I considered myself an astute artist, this boy casually detected such a subtle detail I certainly would have never noticed had he not made that passing remark.

What a shame.

I continued to stare for the next few minutes, watching the lion, while occasionally catching glimpses of the boy making faces at the animal from an unsafe distance behind the glass. What, indeed, was wrong with this lion, and did anyone else even know?