

SURVIVING ON SMALL JOYS

When people in America are faced with confronting and accepting the evolving landscape of human gender and sexuality, one of the earliest cries often heard is *How will I explain this to my children?* People become so caught up in a child's understanding of a world much larger than their own, one that, I imagine, they are in no great rush to understand. I think of these people, eager to burden their children with their own discomforts, every time there is a mass shooting. Their question is often posed as *How will I explain this person in the bathroom to my child?* or *How will I explain those two people kissing to my child?* but rarely *How will I explain to my child that people die and we do nothing?* How do we explain to a child that children have been buried and we were sad but could not let go of our principles and our history and the violence that is born and reborn from it—that we clung to our guns, those small deadly gods, more tightly than to our neighbors?

During weeks, months, years like 2016, I remember how urgent it is for the child to stay a child, or for the joy of that child to be an entity with its own body, for as long as possible. I spent the Sunday morning after the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando underneath a swath of blankets, scrolling through any website providing news, knowing that the news, in these cases, rarely gets better as more unfolds. I checked in with friends and allowed myself to be swallowed by my own anger. I sent tweets and deleted them just as quickly. I cursed politicians, the ones who were silent

and the ones who were saying the wrong things. Eventually, I was pulled out of bed by a small chorus of yells and laughter creeping in through my kitchen window. Below, in the parking lot behind my apartment, boys on their bikes were riding in circles, pulling their front wheels up and trying to balance themselves. Falling, laughing, and getting right back up. This small bit of joy, for no reason other than because it is summertime and they're with their friends and they're outside and free. I do not know what they knew of death, or if they knew that a world outside of their own free world was mourning. Or if they knew and, even in knowing, saw clouds blowing in from the south and decided to not let whatever sunshine remained go to waste on a hot summer day to be followed by another hot summer day to be followed by months where the entire land was theirs. The city, a sacred playground with no room for grief.

For poets, the elegy is a type of currency. So many of us are, especially now, speaking to the dead, or asking the dead to speak again, or apologizing to the dead for the lives we still have. Particularly for poets of color, queer and trans poets, the contemporary elegy often exists as half-memorial, half-statement of existence. Something that says *You have taken so much from us, but we are still here*. As we are being asked to come to terms with death, again and again, I consider the elegy and how empowering it can be. Even then, though, I think of my own work, and of how rarely I find myself speaking to the living. How rarely I am asking readers to imagine a world in which I am surrounded by my many living friends, family, and my deepest loves. And yes, rare is the soul who first ran to poetry because they were overwhelmed with happiness. Still, even with a notebook full of ghosts, I have begun to ask myself what these times

demand of me, as a writer working to balance grief over the departed and praise for the still living. It becomes urgent, I think, to do more. The people I love are black. The people I love are Muslim and queer. The people I love can't get people to use their proper pronouns. The people I love are all afraid, and because these are my people, I am afraid with them. I work, in times as urgent as these, to unlock the small pockets of joy that have kept us all surviving for so long. The small and silly things that aren't death. I get on Twitter and make jokes about basketball, or I send a friend a video of a panda that we both remember laughing at once. I text the words "I love you" to people to whom I've owed phone calls. I spend a whole day writing poems in which no one dies.

I want to be immensely clear about the fact that we need *more* than love and joy. Love and joy alone will not rid America of its multilayered history of violence that has existed for longer than any of us have been alive. That violent culture, no matter the amount of prayers and grief we throw at it, remains unshakable. It is rooted so firmly into the machinery of America that it has its hands around our decision-making processes, the language we use for endurance and survival. The violence is, in some ways, inescapable. It isn't always done with a gun, and is sometimes done with a pen. Joy alone will not grant anyone safety. It can, however, act as a small bit of fuel when the work of resistance becomes too much. My activism is at its best when it takes time to laugh over FaceTime with a beloved friend on the morning after people were murdered, because it allows me, even briefly, to imagine a world where that happiness can still freely and comfortably exist. Joy, in these moments, is the sweetest meal that we keep chasing the perfect recipe for, among a world trying to gather all of the ingredients for

itself. I need it to rest on my tongue especially when I am angry, especially when I am afraid, especially when nothing makes sense other than the fact that joy has been, and will always be, the thing that first pulls me from underneath the covers when nothing else will. It is the only part of me that I have to keep accessible at all times, because I never know what will come. The only thing promised in this world is that it will, oftentimes, be something that makes living seem impossible. And I hope, then, that a child who blessedly knows less of the world's evils decides to laugh with his friends in a place that reaches your ears. I hope it carries you back to the fight, as it has done for me. Joy, in this way, can be a weapon—that which carries us forward when we have been beaten back for days, or months, or years.

And what a year 2016 was. Oh, friends, those of you who are still with us, what a year we survived together. We are not done burying our heroes before we are asked to bury our friends. Our mourning is eclipsed by a greater mourning. I know nothing that will get us through this beyond whatever small pockets of happiness we make for each other in between the rage and the eulogies and the marching and the protesting and the demanding to be seen and accounted for. I know nothing except that this grief is a river carrying us to another new grief, and along the way, let us hold a space for a bad joke or a good memory. Something that will allow us to hold our breath under the water for a little bit longer. Let the children have their world. Their miraculous, impossible world where nothing hurts long enough to stop time. Let them have it for as long as it will hold them. When that world falls to pieces, maybe we can use whatever is left to build a better one for ourselves.

After finishing, Marvin Gaye bowed lightly to thunderous applause before walking slowly from center court. Almost a year later, Marvin's fading body was resting in his brother Frankie's arms after being shot by his father. Before dying, he told Frankie, "It's good. I ran my race. I've got nothing left to give."

Frankie told police that he didn't get to his brother's side quicker because he thought the sound of the shots from his father's gun were fireworks.