

---

---

SHARA MCCALLUM

## Through a Glass, Darkly

If we choose  
to keep any part of what is behind us,  
we must take all of it.

—NATASHA TRETHERWEY

I LEFT JAMAICA FOR THE U.S. in 1981, when I was eight-going-on-nine years old. Nearly four decades later, one of the ways I continue to see the world is through the lens of that child, the emigrant looking back to measure herself from the distance between where she stands and her first home, quickly receding from lived experience into the realm of memory and imagination.

Like many immigrant families, mine migrated without all its members. It was dismembered, the family, its arms and legs left behind. My parents stayed in Jamaica, and my father, two days after my arrival in Miami with my maternal grandparents and three of my sisters, committed suicide back home. A year later, my mother rejoined us in the States, and we were partially reassembled. We were luckier than many families who make such crossings, yet, like the sad figure of Humpty Dumpty from the nursery rhyme, we seemed unable to fully be put back together again after our migration and my father's death.

I still don't know how I would disentangle these personal losses from the forces of politics, culture, and history that shaped me upon entry into America—just as I don't know how to disconnect all of it from the maelstrom of adolescence that soon followed. Like many, my transition into adulthood was marked by acute self-consciousness. When I arrived in America, a taken-for-granted aspect of who I'd been began to unravel. I *am* Jamaican became, more frequently, I am *from* Jamaica. And into that slippage of grammar fell the country of my birth, the country where I'd landed, and all my uncertainty, grief, and longing swirled.

As a young girl in Jamaica, I'd grown up in a Rastafarian community. My earliest understanding of myself was inextricable from family and church: I was the child of Brother Stair and Sister Migdee, I was a daughter of Israel, I was a member of

the Twelve Tribes, I belonged to the tribe of Dan, my color was blue. I knew myself in visceral, unconscious ways: my sisters and I making mud pies in the yard, walking with members of my family and congregation on Hope Road in Kingston, hearing “dutty Rastas” hurled from a passing car, singing prayers with my brethren and sistren at weekly meetings, watching my father strum his guitar. What I didn’t know myself to be, as a child in Jamaica, was a body marked by race.

Of course, I must have noticed my skin was lighter than the majority of those around me. I have no specific memory to confirm this, but even young children observe phenotypical difference in others. Still, I have little on which to mount a plausible case that before I came to America I knew myself to be either Black or white or had attached significance to those words beyond their relative shading of color.

In the years after arriving in the U.S., that rapidly began to change. When my family came to Miami in the late ’70s and early ’80s, we entered a city of immigrants and exiles. Miami was a second, makeshift home to many people like us, hailing from countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean—individuals with various languages, foods, and customs, whose racial and ethnic identities were complex and layered. I’ve lived away from Miami for the last twenty-five years of my adult life and have come to understand that the city, because of its demographics, is viewed by outsiders as a multicultural *mélange*. And, yes, the Miami I grew up in during the ’80s and into the early ’90s was defined by its admixture of peoples from a host of backgrounds and nations. But this did not make it a paragon of racial harmony.

In my adolescent body, coming of age in that city, race became a radioactive isotope and I its unstable nuclei. Even small incidents in those years felt charged. In sixth grade, my teacher pulled me aside in class more than once to admonish me, in a code to which I did not yet have a key to unlock: “We have to do something about your hair.” What exactly were we to do with my hair? I wondered. The year I arrived, my grandmother had cut off my previously waist-length locks and taken to plying the defiant strands left with VO5, brushing my hair down madly each morning in her efforts to tame it and make me presentable. The approach was an abysmal failure. By midday each day, my hair had met its match with Miami’s 100 percent humidity, and I looked like a cartoonist’s rendition of an electrified, mad professor.

This same sixth grade teacher mystified me yet again when she thanked me for a Christmas gift. Smiling, “Brown is my favorite color,” she winked as she draped

the kitchen towel I'd given her across her arm, motioning to her skin and mine, drawing an ellipse in the air between us. Only years later did I understand what she'd seen and in turn surmised: my grandfather dropping me at school each morning had cued her to who I was.

By the time I got to high school a few years later, I understood a great deal more of what was going on, but even offhand remarks about race would leave me reeling. A casual exchange I was not meant to overhear between two white classmates at a high school party struck me silent, sucked the air out of me, and stuck—

“Shara dances so Black.”

“Apparently, she is Black.”

“For real? That's crazy.”

This two-second snatch of dialogue played on a loop in my mind, adjacent to the recorded conversation I'd recently had with a Black classmate who was becoming a friend. It started by her asking about my accent and veered from there into my past. “I thought you might be Black,” she beamed, after learning my father had been a mixed-race Jamaican.

“What's your accent?” is a question I've fielded over the course of my life. I've come to think it's a major reason I end up stumbling into conversations about race with people I barely know. When I explain, “Well, I'm originally from Jamaica but my accent isn't Jamaican, exactly, or entirely American either, just a mixed-up jumble,” I can by now predict most listeners' reactions with alarming rates of accuracy: surprise verging on disbelief, followed by one of a handful of likely rejoinders. More than one person across the years has blurted, “Are you sure you're really Jamaican?” as if I might have forgotten where I come from. Many others have tested the waters, “Jamaica, New York?” Nope. The island. Or, “Was your father in the service?” Nope again. Despite my near fluency in American, there are no Americans in my family tree. No servicemen either, I might add, and, for good measure, the U.S. has never had a military presence in Jamaica. Finally, the response I'm most frequently graced with is this one, “I didn't know there were any white Jamaicans.”

Each time I hear that last sentence, I'm returned to a familiar crossroad: Do I correct this person's assumptions or lack of knowledge, about me and Jamaica both? Taking this route, despite my best efforts to deliver correction with gentleness and a sense of humor, often produces intense discomfort for the person I'm facing. Plus, I know the conversation likely won't end quickly. I'll have to sketch the outline of my family story and probably need to follow it up with a refresher on genetics

and on the history of the U.S. and Jamaica vis-à-vis slavery and miscegenation. And who has this kind of time at the grocery checkout? Inside each of these casual encounters, a decision fraught with meaning looms: Do I say something, or do I just let it go? And if I let it go, what am I doing yet again?

As a teenager in Miami, I was only beginning to glimpse how race operates in the U.S. and what it meant for me and my family. I was only beginning to see myself sliding beneath an almost uniquely American microscope, identified by a racial taxonomy that exists in regard to Blackness and whiteness nearly without parallel in the world. The only place that offered close comparison at the time I was a teen was apartheid South Africa. Now a site we see in the rearview mirror of history, in the 1980s, it was an example of man's inhumanity to man writ large on our television screens. Many people I knew in Miami in those years preferred to view apartheid as an aberration in modern times, happening at a safe distance on the other side of the globe. To me, it felt eerily similar and too close for comfort.

But Americans, like most people, are hard-pressed to deal with the mess in their own backyard. Who was I, an immigrant, to be giving lessons anyway on what race meant in their country? Even if, daily, I was feeling the weight of its history bearing down on my body, my mind struggling to hold on to the paradoxes that abounded. I am Jamaican, but I am no longer in Jamaica. I am in America, but I am not fully (or, *will I ever be?*) American. I am Black. I look white. I simply did not know, for many years, how to carry the contradictions jostling inside of me.

When I turned to my grandparents for answers, their attempts to simplify things only made matters worse. They believed—as I think many, maybe most, people do—that race is fixed and transcends time and place. My grandparents repeatedly put forth the solution: being Black or white is simply a matter of what you look like, or mostly look like. Following their line of reasoning, for someone of mixed race the roll of the genetic dice either highlights or erases whole swaths of your ancestry. For someone not only of mixed race but also of mixed nationality, the problem can quickly compound. The frequency and pitch my grandparents often failed to hear in our many arguments over the years was how hard I was trying to forge a sense of myself by straddling the crevices of history and geography.

In the same way my grandparents carried our food and language with us from Jamaica to Miami, they brought conceptions of race and other ingrained beliefs of how to exist in the world, even if and when those had been formed in a world we were no longer inhabiting. They countered my growing need to assert myself in the country where we'd landed, the country I was becoming more and more a

part of daily, with the only response they could see fit to offer. They delivered what most parents do when faced with a child's not easily resolved, vexing questions: a command. Out of love, mixed with fear, and anger, and hope, my grandparents issued a directive, "You look white, so just say you are white."

My grandparents were adults in their fifties when they migrated to the U.S. and, to be fair, their positions on a good many things evolved the longer they lived here. Yet their views on race seemed always to carry a whiff of where they'd come from, at the time in which they'd come of age themselves. My maternal grandmother was a white, English-born woman, adopted as an infant and raised in the Caribbean by a Trinidadian mother and English father. Her second husband, my grandfather, was Jamaican of mixed African and European ancestry, whose family on both sides had been in Jamaica going back generations. Both were born in the early part of the twentieth century, when the British Empire still covered huge swaths of the globe and independence for many colonial nations was decades away. My grandparents were British subjects, citizens of the Crown, well into their adult lives.

Before they settled permanently in the U.S., my grandfather had come into contact with the ugliness, small-mindedness, virulence of this country's particular brand of racism. Visiting Miami in the 1960s with a group of Jamaican insurance salesmen, he and the others were denied access to the swimming pool at the hotel where they were staying. His recounting of the story to me, years later, was evidence the incident had made a lasting impression. Prior to migrating to America, my grandparents had lived most of their lives in countries in which race played a key role in ordering the societies but was readily masked by class. Racism, so plain to see, so unapologetic, so undisguised in daily life and in the body politic of the country, was anathema to them. Urging me to "just say you are white" wasn't just casual advice they were dispensing. It was a warning, fueled by what they knew was racism of the U.S. variety, a force they found particularly frightening, one my grandfather had already come to understand, no matter how he was regarded or seen or treated in Kingston, he could not circumvent once he got on that plane to Miami.

Racism has a way of worming itself inside all of us. It surprises some people to imagine this would include those of us who are Black. My grandfather carried within him a great unease toward his own Blackness, if not outright denigration and denial of it, his entire life, often unwilling to examine his attitudes, even when I'd point out what to me was the most glaring contradiction in his main argument about race: *race didn't matter*. If that was true, if it really didn't matter, I would

ask him, then why would I need to say I was white, rather than admitting to, dare I consider even being proud of, being Black? My grandfather could never come across to seeing my point on this, or to seeing me or himself fully in the light of America. While he more often than not referred to himself as “brown” or “colored” when pressed, he died “white” on his driver’s license—the designation he chose for himself when, at the DMV in Miami, he was asked for the first time in his life to declare his race on an official document.

Despite living out the balance of their adult lives in the U.S. and freely critiquing both Americans’ “obsession with race” and American racism, my grandparents retained prejudices reflective of the social positions they’d enjoyed in the early to mid-twentieth century Caribbean societies they’d been forged in. It was quite easy for them to see and pick apart America’s “racial baggage,” as they called it. But they had plenty of their own, which they’d been carrying around their whole lives and could not seem to put down. When I’d suggest to them praising someone’s “good features”—as they were both apt to do—was inherently racist, they’d deflect my critique with a retort designed to shut me up, “Oh, you just don’t understand because you’ve become so Americanized now.”

The truth is I was not Americanized enough as a teenager to go against their wishes and reject their authority as often as perhaps I should have. I did not like displeasing anyone. I still don’t. But this was always and especially the case when it came to my grandparents, to whom I felt I’d incurred a debt I could never repay. These were the people who’d sacrificed their own lives to remove me and my sisters from our parents’ inability to parent us. They’d given up a great deal to offer all of us a chance at a new start. Even without an adult comprehension of the fullness of their sacrifice, I knew the outline of our family’s exodus story. We were reliving the clichéd narrative of the immigrant, whose departure from home itself must birth the dream of a “better life.” And I did not, as a young girl, have the strength of conviction or the heart to expose the gap between our dream and our reality, even when I glimpsed the edges of that demarcation.

All through my adolescence, when I stared down the boxes—boxes which for people like me take on oversize existential meaning, boxes which at the time did not list “mixed-race” as an option but asked you to check one and only one—thirty years later I am still pricked by shame to admit this: I did what my grandfather did, what my grandparents did for me when they filled out the forms, what they instructed me over and over again to do. I marked the box “white.”

Yet this is only a piece of the whole truth. Looking back at that younger version

of myself, I see many moments in her life running counter to such a tidy narrative. In face-to-face moments, whenever someone asked about her past or if the subject of her parentage arose, it seems she could not keep up the sham. Given the slightest opening, and sometimes even without an opening, she'd wedge her father into the conversation, and with him drag the entire branch of the family tree on his father's side stretching back to Africa. The feeling of disease it created in her to do otherwise, to deny her father, was too great. If race was a game of hide-and-seek, that girl, the girl I was, was also learning in those early years after arriving in this country—she did not have the stomach for concealing herself in plain sight.

A self that is fractional must be simplified. The problem of how to reduce people who were from mixed ancestry into a stable and singular racial category became quickly apparent to Europeans in both Jamaica and the U.S. during slavery. In this period, the need for laws governing racial classification arose due to the rampant raping of African women and women of African descent by their European masters. But after slavery ended, even more stringent race laws were enacted, with the intent of quantifying "African blood" so as to continue upholding white supremacy. In the U.S., the infamous "one drop" rule reigned: any known African ancestry rendered a person Black. This, in turn, gave rise to the notion of "invisible Blackness" and to the concept of "passing." The "one drop" legal definition of race, along with the social mores that upheld it, was in force well until the end of the twentieth century.

The more I learned this history, the more I internalized it through my lived experiences as a girl who came of age at the tail end of the last century, the more I came to view the whole concept of "choice" for someone like me as largely illusory. If I was not Black, the alternative was not that I was white, but that I was passing. I was a liar. I was a traitor.

If I didn't already know what passing felt like and meant by the end of my teenage years, a series of events occurred in my family that brought it into full relief. In the fall of 1994, I had just turned twenty-one and was starting my last year at university in Miami when one of my younger sisters, then still in her teens, became pregnant. She and the baby's father chose to put the child up for adoption. At one of many stages of the adoption process, she and the father were asked to submit detailed records of their family histories, including medical information as well as race. My sister's parentage and ancestry is the same as mine, the father of the baby Jewish, of Ashkenazi or Eastern European descent, and thus deemed white in the U.S. After receiving the forms, the agency official handling the case

made an appointment to review them, ostensibly for accuracy, with my sister and grandmother. During that meeting, the agency employee explained the baby could not be listed as “white.” She went on to say the agency would have to disclose the child’s Black ancestry to any potential parents seeking to adopt. “In fairness” to them.

On November 7, 2000, Alabama became the last state in the union to retract its anti-miscegenation laws. While the Supreme Court’s 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* ruling had rendered such laws unconstitutional thirty-three years prior, attitudes in Alabama as in many other places in the U.S. had not sufficiently changed in the interceding years for the law that remained on the books to be removed. Several attempts had been made between 1967 and 2000 to repeal the law. Each one had failed.

As it happened, I was driving with my husband from Memphis, where we lived at the time, to Mobile to deliver a poetry reading the day after the 2000 election. My husband was reading aloud a newspaper article to me as I drove, recounting the long struggle that had led to that moment of the Alabama law banning miscegenation finally being successfully put down. I was twenty-eight years old, had become a U.S. citizen around eight years prior, and had just voted in my second presidential election.

What struck me first and forcefully when I heard the news was the year we were in. The Alabama law was being repealed in the first year of a new millennium, nearly 150 years after slavery had been abolished in the United States. In 2000, I was a fairly green university professor, trying in vain it often felt to get non-Black students—many born more than a decade after the civil rights movement—to believe me that racism still existed and to weigh and talk about race as not only a personal matter but as a defining feature of American social and civic life.

But the news fact my husband read next was even harder for me to swallow than the date: the margin of the victory. In 2000, the law that banned miscegenation was rescinded with 59 percent of Alabamians in favor of doing so, 41 percent opposed. In the year I was very much alive in, not some reliquary of the past, four in ten people I might bump into on the street in Mobile, whether or not they could guess my race, thought the very existence of someone like me was wrong. In their minds, I was conceived by an act on the part of my parents so against the “natural order” it should remain illegal.

I remember saying to my husband when this sank in, “We need to turn the car around.” But that was just my way of signaling my emotional state, as I’m prone



to doing, with hyperbole. Where was I to go anyway? Back to Memphis, a city in which I was witnessing segregation, the legacy of slavery, and the systematic disenfranchisement of peoples of African descent on display in various ways, small and large, every day? Or should I have said to him we ought to hop into a time machine and jump ahead to where we would land next, where we still live and have lived for the longest stretch of both our adult lives: in the middle of Pennsylvania, a state in the quadrant of the United States often regarded as more progressive than the South on views of race. Central Pennsylvania, nonetheless, has long been a hotbed for KKK activity and is now a nexus in Trump country—now, where it is 2020 and I drive past Confederate flags and MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN billboards and oversize posters plastered on the sides of houses and barns. Where another election is about to unfold, and I, like so many, hope and fear for the soul of this country. No, there was nowhere for me to go in 2000, as there was nowhere in 1981 when I arrived, as there is nowhere still in 2020 for me to stand outside of history. By my early twenties, at any rate, I had no desire to do so. I knew full well by then that America, my second and adopted country, was mine, and I imbricated in her history. *All of it.*

Race is not only how you see yourself but also how and by whom you're seen. So let me set the record straight at the outset: I'm well aware I don't warrant a second glance to most people and am quickly sorted as white. My skin is very pale, with a yellow—indeed *yellow*—undertone, signaling the melanin that made it possible when I was younger and unafraid of the sun to turn rather golden under its spell. But especially if you see me in the midst of or following a long winter, my skin is just about the color of paste.

My hair has long been the part of my body, when people scan it for evidence of my Blackness, where their gaze tends to linger. I have dark, tightly curled hair that was even more coiled when I was younger and has loosened and thinned as I've aged. Like many Black women, of course I had a climactic moment in my hair saga. I remember very clearly the turning point came soon after the conversation of what to do about my hair with my sixth grade teacher. As I was leaving my twelfth year on this planet, something magical occurred: the movie *Flashdance* came out, starring the mixed-race actor Jennifer Beals, with tresses very much like mine. The movie's appearance was followed by another act of providence: my grandmother took me to a hairdresser, herself a light-skinned Black Jamaican, who put the matter

to me very plainly. “You have to stop fighting what your hair wants to be and let it do its own thing.”

Unlike my locks, my eyes are second only to my skin in being another of my body’s dead giveaways that I’m of hugely European descent. Yet throughout my life they’ve garnered comments that suggest, if nothing else, they might be an apt metaphor for my race. My former optometrist offered the same assessment, each time he saw me for years, until he realized he was repeating himself, “I look at eyes all day, but yours are hard to place. Their color is very difficult to pin down.” Several years ago, a white woman came up after a poetry reading I’d delivered to share with me her excitement at having been a master sleuth, “I knew you were mixed before you even began speaking. You have those A-Rod eyes.” Now, I’ve been treated to some devastatingly funny pickup lines because of my eyes over the course of my life, but this woman’s comment took the cake. A-Rod eyes? I smiled politely at the time. But when I got home and googled photos of Alex Rodriguez, I was humbled in my too-quick dismissal of her as imagining things. I could actually see what she had seen. A-Rod, of Yankees and J-Lo fame, is of Dominican (i.e., “mixed”) heritage, and his eyes, like mine, are shapeshifters in their hues.

When people meet me, if they ask what I am or where I’m from, I sometimes playfully, maybe a bit cruelly, make them guess. I’ve heard dozens of countries in response, from far-flung parts of the globe, some of which I have roots in, others not at all. But, notably, the list of countries people have hazarded when trying to name my origins has not once included Jamaica. And the notion that I might be Black, even after I tell them I’m Jamaican, doesn’t seem to register in the minds of most non-Black Americans I’ve come across. Time after time, it’s been other Black Americans who have let me know they see me or at least speculate and wonder if I’m kin.

After living in different parts of the U.S. as an adult, I’ve come to understand where I am in the country plays a role in how my body’s likely to be read. When in Maryland, while a graduate student, I lived in an apartment building with a communal front entrance. Coming and going from class, I would sometimes walk by a young Black boy sitting on the stoop outside, hanging with his friends. Finally, one day, he worked up the courage to ask a question I could tell had been on his mind for some time:

“Are you just light skinned?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Thought so,” he replied and turned to his friend with a smirk. “Told you.”

The reason some Black people can see me is quite simple: they have a mother or grandmothers, aunts, cousins, sisters, daughters, granddaughters who look like me, who are part of their family, who they claim and who claim them. For many non-Black Americans, whose understanding of race in America often remains limited, I don’t exist or I’m the punchline to a joke. If I’m lucky they might have heard of someone called Sally Hemings. But they don’t seem to process what she would very likely have looked like or understand that she and her children with Thomas Jefferson (the ones who didn’t pass, that is) weren’t the only Black people to look white or near white in the history of America. And they don’t seem to fully get how race, as part of the very fabric of how most Black people know ourselves, didn’t end with the Thirteenth Amendment or become meaningless with the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s.

When I inevitably have to explain to anyone who isn’t Black a version of “Hey, I can see you’ve been making some faulty assumptions, so let me stop you before you go any farther,” my follow-up after the awkward pause that inevitably follows me finishing with “I’m Black” is a line I’ve used to the point of exhaustion. “It’s OK, I have a mirror.” This weak attempt at humor is me trying, once more, to put someone who is now visibly and clearly disquieted by the fact of me at ease. My inclination is to console, and I find myself wanting to say: *I know I’ve just upended your apperception of race, but everything will be all right. I promise.*

At one point I joked I was going to have a T-shirt made up that read, “I know what you’re thinking, but I’m Black.” But wearing that every day would get old and, besides, I like dresses way too much to give them up. Or, I thought if I could carry around a photo of my father and whip it out at every turn that would settle the matter. But now I know this also wouldn’t guarantee the desired effect. On the few instances I’ve shown someone a photo of my father, this has sometimes made the conversation easier. But weirdly the effect of the photo seems to wear off fast. I’ve watched as people’s gears start turning and they try to find a way to ask about my father’s own racial admixture, or they might begin to question how “Black” he really was if he was so light skinned. Yet others have tried the tactic of smoke and mirrors—“Didn’t you say your mother was Venezuelan? And aren’t you Jewish now but used to be Rastafarian?”—as if I’m the one who’s confused about my race, ethnicity, nationality, and religious identity, or as if these are all one and the same or maybe can be allowed to coexist in one body but only in certain prescribed combinations (white and Jewish, Black and Christian, for example). The problem isn’t

that I lack proof of being Black, or anything else for that matter. It's that the history of race that birthed me is a narrow inlet on which I conspicuously stand.

Race as it has been made meaningful in America is not rooted in our biology, as the claims of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racist science would have had us believe. The genetic basis for racial taxonomy of human beings has been proven to be categorically false. Race is not a Rosetta stone for decoding group traits, tendencies, and behaviors—as it turns out, we are quite an uncorralable species, us humans. The failure of many Enlightenment thinkers to be fully enlightened in this regard has been exposed. Essentialist racial theories they penned, among their other specious notions of human nature, have been debunked. All this has happened, is happening, and will keep happening, all this unpacking and counter-acting of racism, all while we continue to live and experience the world as raced individuals.

This is the paradox. Race is and has been from the start conditional, in America as in every other country in the history of the world. To be brought into being, it depended on political necessity that manifested as social and personal reality. *To be Black. To be white.* These designations amassed and continue to amass value and power through an intricate matrix of laws and codes, of social practices and norms, of ancestry and family and our attachments to our community and our past. Which is why, if I should happen to meet you and tell you my story, if I should take the time to explain how it is unusual, I understand, but still very much the case that someone could be standing in front of you who looks white and is Black, please understand: Nearing the end of my fifth decade on this planet, I am not asking you to see me. What I'm asking is for you to join me, if even for a moment, in looking squarely at history.

I've been asked over the course of my life by various people if maybe, just maybe, I think too much about race. Which is a rhetorical question. Translation: *You talk too much about race, Shara.*

But, for the sake of argument, I'll agree. I do think and talk a great deal about race, much to the aggravation of those, beginning with some of my own family, who it appears would prefer not to do so very much, if at all.

Truth is: Despite the better part of my life spent doing so, I've failed. I know, when it comes to race, everything I've ever given a passing gander at or examined with the greatest of scrutiny and care, all I've ever whispered to myself or even shouted aloud has never been nor ever could be enough.

Truth is: Despite my failings, I can't seem to make myself stop. Ever since I first began to understand what it meant for me to be Black, I've been talking about race, not only with my grandparents or with anyone else who would listen, but with myself. I'm doing this still. I'm doing it right now.

Truth is: I feel woefully inadequate most days to the task of trying to dismantle and at the same time retool a system of classification created—the irony is not lost on me—to maintain the institution of slavery and uphold a belief in white supremacy.

Truth is: I worry my need to keep turning and turning the narratives of the past to the light of the present remains conscripted by my personal stakes, has been less about rescripting this nation's history and more about my need to write myself into it.

Truth is: I worry I am always the wrong Black person to open my mouth. I've feared the mulatta in me so much I've kept her at arm's length. I've hated her brokenness, her sadness, her loneliness, her isolation so much I've never wanted to call her name and hear my voice in reply.

Truth is: I've come to see—belatedly, reluctantly, resignedly—her story is the truth I know, the one I must muster the courage to own.

Truth is: When I'm looking at that door I fear every single time to open, I worry all I've ever said, am saying, will always say, reflects most of all my own stubbornness. My obstinance. My foolish attempts to deny death its ultimate win, its right to have the final say.

Truth is: No matter where I am, no matter how far I've tried to run in the other direction, I worry I've never moved even one inch from that young girl, standing on a shoreline, staring across an expanse of ocean, trying so desperately not to leave her father behind.