

FROM SAC

HUMAN

PATTERNS

2015

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All stories may or may not contain information about, or reference to, real living people, places, and events. Life is like that sometimes.

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table of HUMANS

(9).....jordan briggs

(19).....jordan davidson

(45).....c.j. green

(53).....tamer s. mostafa

theme for 2015

The **THEME** for 2015 is **HUMAN PATTERNS**. Think about what Carver covers in his book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (that doesn't mean we want Love stories). Think about how expectations create patterns; how experience creates patterns and ways of being; how these patterns affect our interactions or play out in our lives.

jordon briggs



about the author

I think for me, what makes me human is the ability to absorb and take things in. I think a lot, so that's a part of my pattern. But I also am completely surprised by things. Always in a state of wonder. I live in New York now so this continuously happens—and I like it. I like to be wowed what can I say? I think for me, when I wake up, I'm thinking about what I want to do, and what I need to do. So being in New York, I have to get everything done and then do what I want. Being a grad student my time is limited. Ever since I took writing more serious than I had in the past—realizing that I love it—I have to really carve out time to write. I think I'm ok at giving myself that time. I'm learning how to do that while in a grad program where I'm not even studying creative writing. Yeah, that's going to change. But I definitely think about what I need to do, make a plan, and try to stick to the plan. I

also try to listen to good music in the morning or watch a radio interview, filmed for YouTube. It's kind of like when my mom or grandmother get up in the morning and listen to a tape or CD of a preacher—my grandma usually watches Televangelists—give what we call a “word” and then they pray, and then go about their day. I will listen to an interview with a rapper, or actor, or film industry person that I like or I've never heard of. When it comes to music, I try to listen to something that really speaks to me or something that “opens” me up. I find that if I listen to someone like Mos Def, or Jay Electronica, maybe Jimi Hendrix, Cass McCombs, J Dilla or Madlib, early in the morning, it just makes me feel better. Makes me open, puts me in a positive state of mind, gets me ready to engage. And when I meet people or encounter people, I try to put that same energy out. In the mornings I dance. When I'm getting ready I'm usually dancing. That's something I need. It's the best. I'll play Kendrick Lamar's new album, or Thundercat's album or albums, and just move while I get dressed, or check on stuff before I leave. That makes the train ride to Brooklyn (I live in Harlem) better. It makes the train ride to anywhere better. I get loose!

I would say another pattern I have is that I check Facebook sometimes before carry on with my plans. I think that has largely to do with this thing about me where I want to see what's going on with other people—make sure everything is ok. I don't like it; it may be a patience thing. I'd rather talk to you in person and find out, more so than looking at your status. But yeah, a pattern is

definitely doing things sometimes for others, before I do things for myself. That is changing.

Last pattern: is thinking. I think a lot. My mom knows this. She wishes I wouldn't, but I do. And being a black person, you have to be conscious, and cautious. A lot of the time, it's in people's words, or their movements in relation to you (walking across the street to avoid you or trying to “peacock” 15 feet from you because they're obviously scared of you and want attention but don't know how to get it—and don't necessarily want it from you) as well their interaction with you, to tell you how they really feel, or what they may be feeling. The dominant power structure makes things difficult because you have to constantly think about how you're coming off to people, and how you're representing, and being represented. How you're existing. Double consciousness, as W.E.B. Dubois termed it. But a lot of the time things don't bother me—I very much operate in the world in a state of....I guess openness? I don't see a white person on the train and be like ooo a white person, they're gonna get me. I'm not thinking about that. But I am conscious and I'm not stupid. Living in New York, you learn how to read people faster. But at the same I don't care; I just want to live. So a lot of my thinking is: how am I going to live, and what's best possible way to be free and be happy? Yes, I over think. I'll calm down. I have time to grow I think. That's how I feel, and that's how I try to operate.

Regular Bio stuff: Thanks to Tess, Jon, and Elison for publishing my work. Thank you to my parents, and grandparents, and the various coffee shops in

Sacramento that provide me with space and time to write. Tiferet Coffee shop, holla! Thank you to my good friend Louis Osofsky for helping me with revisions. I'm a lover of music, books, and films, and people. Currently working on a short film, which should be done by early next year. I produce music, mostly hip-hop and R&B and soul. Staff writer, and Film review editor for the Black Rabbit Magazine.

Visit my blog whatsbeenscene.tumblr.com where I write film and sometimes music reviews, and criticism. Shout out all of the homies (you know who you are).

and we're rolling . . .

Here's what is:
I learned from gazing
at portraits of white men looking
down from buildings
in Time Magazine,
in Life Magazine,
in USA Today.

Coming
in contact with a narrative
of poets from seeing
Poe on the Simpsons.

Absorbing Vogue
ads, gangly limbs draped in Versace garments,
sitting under a hair dryer
at my mom's job.

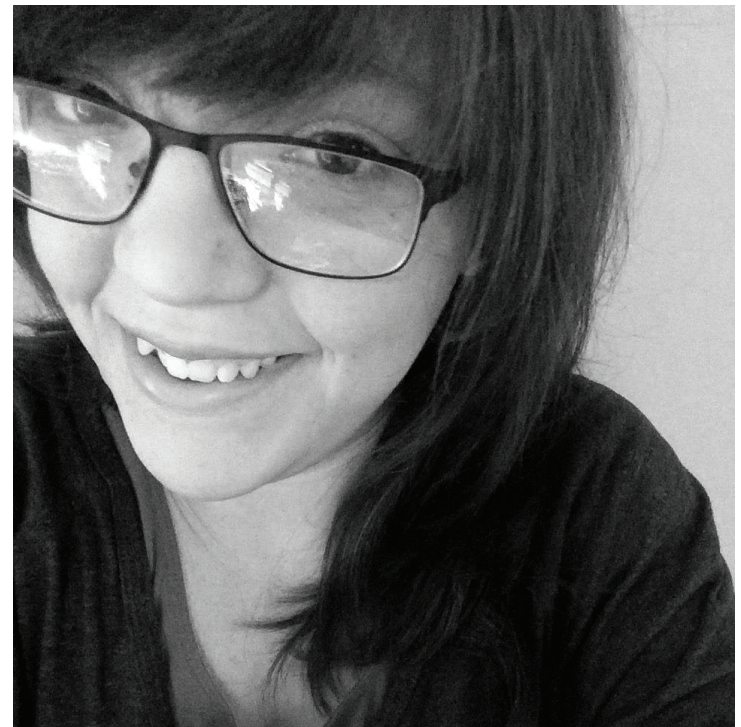
Encountering
white hipsters
in camper clothes, pressing
down
school hallways
blissfully
benefiting
from commandeered English courses.

Digesting
television shows
starring white girls,
depicted as
dependent,
victims,
ignorant

of me –

the truth:
White men come from buildings
and Blacks don't exist

jordan davidson



about the author

I can't say that I've ever given much thought to my own patterns. In a sense, I guess that's why they're called 'patterns' to begin with—things that become so ingrained into your life, your behavior, your psyche, that eventually they meld with you and become a part of who you are. For better or worse, our patterns can control, consume, and define us.

So that being said, what are my patterns?

When I really think about it, I am a rigidly-structured person. I know that flies in the face of the typical writerly stereotype—you know, tempestuous and flighty and thriving on uncertainty. The type that creates their own rules and lives by them until they tire of them, at which point they simply create new rules. I've always

envied people like that, because their way of living is so far removed from my own.

I content myself with routine. No matter where I am in the world, I try to make a nest for myself of scant-but-dear friends, steady employment, painstakingly-crafted daily schedules. When faced with the threat of change—and to me, change is always a threat—I drag my feet and deny and despair. Sometimes, if I think about it too deeply, the sheer unpredictability of the world is enough to drive me mad; and so, I choose not to think about it, and instead I bury myself in days so similar and uniform that they may as well have come off an assembly line. If all of this sounds terribly depressing, I can assure you that it isn't. Although I am still fairly young, I have no regrets about how I have lived my life thus far.

Life has taken me to the highest of highs: late nights spent with friends under starry autumn skies feeling like we were immortal and invincible, building relationships and watching them grow and flourish, the rush of discovering my love for words, the thrill of watching that love unfold in ways I never could've imagined that it would. Life has also dragged me into the depths of hell: the unrelenting misery of abuse, the cataclysmic pain of grief, frequent feelings of alienation from the belief systems I've always been taught to adopt, my ongoing struggle with the darkness of clinical depression. But for all of this living, this messy and imperfect and glorious patchwork of experiences, I can say that I have found a way to navigate life that works for me. I have carved out my own

space in this dilapidated and beautiful world, and made myself a home there.

Maybe it isn't always the most exciting of spaces. Maybe it isn't the dramatic, sexy vision that most people have of writers; maybe I don't fit into the writer archetype. But my patterns, plain as they may be, are mine. They, like these words I just used to describe them, are mine; they are something that nobody can take away from me. And in a world where nearly everything can be commoditized and monetized, bartered and bought, that makes them priceless beyond measure.

my favorite disease

It is nearing 4:00 AM, that mysterious and splendid blur between deepest night and earliest daylight. The moon sits in a nest of fraying clouds as a few stray moonbeams fall through my windowpane and land in fragmented rectangles on my floor. From where I am curled beneath chilly sheets, I can see the red numbers on my electric clock tick away the seconds. Each flip of the minute counter edges me closer to the time when I know she will arrive.

Lifting my fingers to my neck, I press against the skin beneath my chin. I feel my pulse thudding with expectation. Every inch of my body feels electrified; if I could bottle this feeling, I would sip from it every now and then on the days when life feels dull and leached of its vibrancy.

The clock hits 3:59. I close my eyes and pull my blankets up over my nose, feigning sleep because I know she loves finding me when I'm like that. It makes her happy to open my eyes with a stroke of her finger against my forehead. I can picture her smiling: the uneven creasing at the edges of her eyes, the asymmetrical rise of her lips, the wrinkle in her chin that she tries to cover with her hands.

I clutch the sheets around my face to hide a grin as I hear the light creak of footsteps falling on the floor. The numbers of the electric clock whir softly into place, signaling the arrival of 4:00. Instantly the image vanishes, burned away by what feels like a coil of fire writhing deep inside my chest. A scent like a daisy freshly raised from rich brown soil drifts over me. I have to stop myself from inhaling until I choke; I want so badly to capture this scent in the palm of my hand, to pocket it and carry it with me during all the bleak moments when we cannot be together.

She brushes her finger across my forehead, gently sweeping away a few stray locks of hair. The touch is light as a feather, but sufficient to pull my eyes open. She bends over me, silhouetted against the white glaze of moonlight on the windowpane, her auburn hair faintly burnished by the electric clock's glow. As she leans toward me her hair tumbles forward, carrying with it a fresh wave of that flowery scent, and I curl like an infant towards the smell.

"You," I answer, my cheek burning where her breath touched it. Even in the dim light I can see her smile in response, embarrassment and shyness

and elation spun into one immaculate package. She drops her hand away from my face and I cringe at its absence. I never knew it was possible to feel a loss so acutely until I met her. Whenever she is near and we are not speaking or touching or seizing every spare moment of our rare time together, I am struck with a premature regret flowering under my skin.

I know she will leave at 5:00 exactly, because the punctuality that she keeps to in her arrivals, she also keeps in her departures. The time that seemed to crawl past as I waited for her slips away like water now. I could try to catch it, but my efforts would be fruitless.

She sits on the floor in the shrinking puddle of moonlight, drawing her knees up to her chest. Her eyes glitter like green embers against the darkness.

"If I could dream, it would be about you," she tells me, her tone melancholy. A lone tear trickles down her face, drawing a pearly trail in its wake. She rubs it away with a flick of her wrist and drops her gaze from mine.

Every time I see her like this tiny fissures open inside of me, and lately it's been happening more and more. Each night she's visited this week, her voice has become progressively softer, sadder. The smile that I love is fading, and rather than rejoicing in what she has—me, us—she mourns what she feels she does not.

Last night before she left, she told me that she's beginning to feel disconnected. "It's like my lines are beginning to blur and I'm starting to fade," she had said, "and soon there won't be anything left of me." She speaks like this now when she never used to; she casts aspersions on herself and on the world and on her place inside of it.

I wrestle one hand free of the sheets and reach out, cupping the curve of her head in my palm. Her hair slides between my fingers, and I wind them into the strands as though the action could brand my skin with them.

"How about I dream about you enough for the both of us?"

"That's not the same." Her voice is choked with restrained sobs. I knew my offering of comfort was lackluster, but hearing her confirm it is searing.

"You don't get it, do you?"

"I'd like to." God, I would. I wish I could look into her eyes and understand. I want to erase the greys and the blacks that cloud her brain, and replace them with electrifying color. I want to gather her in my arms and blow in her ear, sending her worries and fears scattering like dandelion seeds in a sudden gust of wind.

"No, you wouldn't. Trust me." With a jerk of her head, she slides out from under the cover of my hand. "I have to go now."

"Don't leave yet. You just got here. I've been waiting for you all day." I realize how my voice sounds—pathetic, pleading, and desperate—but I don't care. All I want is to return to how things were when she first started visiting. She was a balm to the loneliness of my days then, her presence full of the warmth and concern that everyone else I knew lacked. Missing her then was almost pleasurable, characterized more by excitement than by desperation.

Her retreating figure wavers and blurs as my eyes fill with tears, but I can't let her see my expression. Clearly, she has enough to contend with already. Resolving to do what I can to make her happier tomorrow, I pull the blankets over my eyes and fall asleep to the sound of her leaving.

At 7:30, I drag myself from my bed and into a dreary grey morning. My window is glazed with frost. The sky beyond it is lashed with raindrops. Sometime in the middle of the night a clammy chill seeped into my apartment through the gaps where the front door doesn't fit properly into its frame, and as I groan my disapproval at the arrival of morning, I can see my own breath form a white mushroom at my lips.

I stumble towards the kitchen for breakfast after pulling on the first shirt my fingers touch, sloppily knotting my only tie, and shoving my legs into a pair of pants that have been crumpled on my floor for three days. A few minutes later, the coffee maker is burbling as I sit at my small dining

table, stirring milk into a bowl of watery instant oatmeal.

On mornings like this it's hard to keep myself from wondering what life would be like if I could convince her to stay with me. We would go shopping for real furniture, replacing my bare mattress and crookedly-built Ikea table with its single mismatched chair. I could wake up to the warmth of her body beside mine, rather than the cold isolation of my studio. Then I would slip quietly into the kitchen to surprise her with the kind of foods I see people eat on TV—fresh cut fruit, thick bacon shiny with grease, golden waffles dripping butter and syrup—rather than forcing myself to swallow gritty coffee and poorly made oatmeal. Leaving for work in the morning would seem less daunting if I knew she would be here when I came home.

Out of habit, I check my phone for any missed calls. I don't have text messaging—I don't have the money for it, and I don't know anyone who likes me enough to send messages anyway—but recently I've become obsessive about monitoring my voicemail. I still remember what happened the last time I allowed myself to get lax about it.

It happened not long after she had first come to see me. I had left my phone in my desk at work, but shrugged it off when I noticed its absence in my pocket later that evening. I assumed that she was coming to visit me that night, just as she had every night for the past few weeks, and I couldn't think of anyone else I'd want to talk to. My sister would only talk to me if she needed something—

money, a cover story of some sort, someone to convince the orderlies at her most recent hospital that she was healthy enough to be released. My brother would want to tell me the most recent family drama. My mother would only call if she had something new to berate me about. I could talk to my father, but I wasn't sure he'd want to talk to me, and I didn't know what we could talk about anyway.

When I got to work the next morning, I felt my stomach bend itself into a pretzel when I found my phone sitting by my keyboard. I had four voicemails, three more than I normally would have, and immediately I knew this signaled disaster.

First voicemail, from my father: "Hey, Mark. Just . . . calling to see what's going with you. I haven't talked to you in a while and I miss you, I guess. Talk to you later, maybe." A moment of his quivering breathing before the call clicked to an end.

The second voicemail came from my mother a few hours later. Her voice was a narcotic-slurred haze. "Mark. It'ssss Mom. Pick up your phone. Something bad happened."

The drugs had worn off by the time she called again. Her speech was considerably clearer by that point, though her tone had become a high-pitched and panicky keening: "Your dad, Mark. He hung himself. Strung up like a scarecrow from our ceiling fan! Answer your phone"

Third voicemail, this one from my brother: "I didn't think he'd actually do it. Call us back. Mom's freaking out."

That night with my head cradled in my girlfriend's lap, my cheek pressed against her soft thighs, I sobbed from guilt. Guilt that bubbled like black tar inside me. It tasted like chicory. Though I spent half the night crouched on my bathroom floor, vomiting again and again as she stroked my hair back and trailed her fingertips down my cheeks, that dull and bitter burn remained. Sometimes I still taste it now, the repulsive aching taste of knowing that I was not there for my father when he needed me. After that, I made sure to keep my phone with me at all times.

This morning there is nothing new, and so I breathe a sigh of relief.

The rain hasn't eased in the slightest by the time I get to work, fifteen minutes late. The threadbare tires of my '95 Civic whirl in protest as they slosh through inch-deep puddles. By the time I've made it to the front door my shoes are dark with rain, leaving wet prints across the carpeted office lobby. The secretary glances up from her computer, tucking a strand of dry rust-colored hair behind her ear as her gaze falls on me.

"Good morning Mr. Davis," she says, her tone sweet but laced with venom. "Mrs. Stone would like to see you in her office. Immediately, please. She told me to send you in whenever you got here." Her emphasis on the last four words

removes any confusion I may have had about the topic of the pending conversation.

I'm sent home early that day, without pay, my boss's voice trailing behind me as I exit her office with my head hung low. "Don't let this happen again, Mark. Punctuality is an expectation here, not a suggestion. My patience with you is running out, and—" the slamming of the door behind me cutting off the last of her words.

The rain drips down my shirt and runs in rivulets down my back as I cross the parking lot back to my car. Rain whips my windshield, tires squealing against the sodden road. All I can think of is how badly I want to call her and tell her what has happened, beg her to come and see me through what has already promised to be a terrible day. But I can't, because she has never given me a phone number and has always evaded my requests for one.

When I step inside my apartment I find her in the kitchen, leaning against the green Formica counter with her arms spread wide towards me. My hand freezes on the doorknob, my gaze locked on her lips—curled into a smile—and her hair—ruffling slightly even in the apartment's still air—and her eyes—glittering as always, their green beautifying everything they fall upon. Underneath her gaze I feel Mark Davis, the haggard and exhausted man for whom getting to work on time is too great a task, melt away. That worthless and pathetic layer of myself peels apart. Beneath I am still Mark Davis, but this time I am a man for whom life is exciting, his broken and imperfect pieces

stitched together by the very presence of someone so breathtaking.

I don't stop to close the door before loosening my tie and throwing it aside. I run straight to her and nearly knock her over with my embrace, burying my face into her hair.

"This is a surprise," I murmur.

"Excuse me? Who are you talking to?" A new voice, this one raspy and dry like its owner has been swallowing sand, interrupts us. It yanks me out of my delighted stupor, shattering the world of just her and me and filling it with uninvited guests. Unable to keep the scowl from my face, I turn towards the sound of the intrusion.

My neighbor, Ms. Lowell, is ogling me from the doorway. A white bag from the convenience store on the corner dangles from one hand, a dripping umbrella from the other. Her beady eyes are set on me, confusion swirling inside their dull brown irises.

"My girlfriend," I tell her, my voice edged with venom, telling her just how thoroughly unwanted her presence is. "I don't get to see her often, so if you could—"

"Girlfriend?" Ms. Lowell interrupts. I'd forgotten that she had the habit of interrupting; laboring eternally under the delusion that what she has to say is more important than what anyone else has to say. "What are you talking about? There's no one here besides us."

I consider suggesting that she visit the eye doctor for a sorely needed set of eyeglasses, but then think better of it. I'm already worried that this encounter has left a bad enough impression that daytime visits will never become the regular occurrence I want them to be.

"There is. She's right there. Don't you see her?" I point behind me, towards the edge of the counter.

"No I don't," Ms. Lowell snaps, "and I'm not sure why you do." A moment later, her tone softer, "there's nothing there but air, sweetie."

I whirl around, anger spiking through my veins at this continued insistence. I need to see the green glimmer of her eyes, the red sheen of her hair, and the glow of the halogen kitchen lights through her skin. Proving her existence to others doesn't matter to me as much as verifying it for myself; coming from the family that I do. No matter how stable my life may be—a steady job, my own apartment, a romantic relationship—there will always be people who consider me no better than my bloodline would suggest. But just because they believe that, it doesn't mean I have to.

Facing away from Ms. Lowell, towards the counter, I feel something inside me splinter. A tether snapping, scattering my thoughts and flinging them in a centrifuge against the walls of my skull. She is still here, but her skin has turned a marbled white and her face is glossy with tears that glue strands of her hair to her cheeks. Her eyes bore into mine, green like molten grass. A

second later she is gone, the space where she had been standing now empty in the grey light trickling in through the kitchen window.

Burning. Leather bands around my arms and my legs, squeezing like tourniquets. Someone has shoved a plastic-bound pillow under my head, but somehow it only emphasizes the discomfort of the chair I've been strapped into. The room is stark and grey, with mottled tiles peeling up from where they were hastily applied to the floor and a single lamp glowing dully in the corner.

I'm not sure how I got here. I remember a soft thud and a shriek. A harried voice gasping words into a telephone, words I barely heard over the roaring inside my head. Most of all I remember clutching at the air, willing my fingers to close around a slender arm, a pinch of fabric, a lock of hair, anything tangible and physical and real, but finding nothing.

The door opens and a man steps into the room, using one black-shoed foot to gently ease the door shut. He regards me calmly from behind a pair of thick-rimmed glasses, his eyes a pale slate grey in the dim glow of the lamp. He's carrying a clipboard in one hand, and wears a long white coat with his name stitched in black above the pocket. When he crosses the room to lower himself into the chair that I've just noticed beside me, his shoes rap steadily across the floor in a machine-gun-fire staccato.

"Good afternoon Mr. Davis," he says, his voice greasy with false niceties. "I am Dr. Lee. I've been assigned to your . . . case. I'm sure you're aware of why you're here today?"

"Not really," I reply, although I am beginning to remember now, not sights or smells or sounds but feelings. Hatred, rage, disgust, frustration, a turmoil of feelings storming inside me, biting and swarming like locusts aiming to devour me from the inside out.

"We have a distraught woman in this same hospital. She claims you assaulted her. Do you remember that?"

"I don't." Though I know the action is an admission of guilt, I glance down at my hands bound to the sides of the chair. There's still blood caked around my fingernails, turning a flaky rusted red as it ages.

"You attacked an elderly woman," the doctor insists. I twitch beneath the constriction of the leather bands, feeling a drop of sweat as it beads at my hairline and glides down my face. "You hit her. You broke her nose."

"She deserved it."

"And why is that?"

"She said she wasn't real. She made her leave." The words fly of their own volition from my mouth, spiked through with rage. It's amazing I am able to speak at all. My chest is heaving, my breath stuck there somewhere deep in my lungs.

"Said who wasn't real?" The doctor continues to peer at me over the thick black frames of his glasses, chewing on his bottom lip where the skin is beginning to tear.

"My girlfriend." The answer sticks in me like a knife plunged between my ribs, aching and burning for reasons I don't want to understand. I need her here now, to come in through the door and stop this and clear up the mistake that's clearly been made. I would do that for her, so where is she?

My voice is quickly becoming a pitiful mewling sound, my words shattering into broken sobs. The doctor's face beside mine blurs into an indistinguishable mess as scalding tears swirl in my vision and drip down my cheeks; I want to free my hands to wipe them away, but I can't, and so they mingle with the sweat on my face and fall indelicately from my chin.

The doctor temples his hands beneath his chin, resting his head on his fingertips as he locks me with his unceasing gaze. I can't decide if looking at him in this state, or away from him to hide it, would create the greater shame. At this moment—and at every moment that's ever preceded it, every moment that will ever follow—I hate my body for its limitations, for its susceptibility to leather bands and heavy buckles, for its everyday silent mutinies in the form of tears and sweat and skin that pales beneath the calculating look of someone smarter and stronger and more powerful than I will ever be.

I hate that I have always been this person he sees: pitiful, sniveling, and weak.

I hate that I have finally found something beautiful to fixate on, finally tasted the kind of joy and light that most people have spent their entire lives experiencing—they have had so much happiness gifted to them that they can indulge in it, ignore it, waste it even.

I hate that I've had only one thing—her—and now they are trying to take her away. After a long moment I turn to look at him, blinking the last of my tears away to retain some semblance of dignity. The doctor collapses the steeple of his fingers and leans forward, so close that I can smell his astringent breath.

"Is there any history of mental illness in your family, Mr. Davis?"

"Yes." He doesn't ask me for details, and I don't offer them.

He stands up suddenly, sending his empty chair swiveling. "Tell me," he says, tapping his fingers rapidly against his legs. "What have you heard about schizophrenia?"

"Not much." This is a lie, of course. I've seen what it does. I was the one who unstrung my father from the noose he hung himself with after one too many useless therapy appointments and ineffective antidepressant trials. I've been bruised by slaps from my mother when I tried to stop her from talking to air. I helped bury my uncle after he

froze to death on a park bench because he could never keep a job long enough to afford an apartment. I've secretly wished my sister would come through on her promises to kill herself like her imaginary "friends" keep ordering her to. My entire life has been spent escaping their stigma and building a life for myself, one separate from their mayhem and their madness; I've worked hard to establish myself as an island of normalcy in their sea of insanity.

"I think that it may be causing your . . . problem," he says delicately. "Fortunately for you, there are medications available to help counteract your . . . symptoms."

"What symptoms?" I don't want the answer.

"Hallucinations, Mr. Davis. Seeing, hearing, and feeling things that aren't really there." Dr. Lee resumes his seat beside my chair and pulls himself closer to me, lightly resting his fingers against my elbow. His touch makes my skin burn. "That girl you've been seeing isn't real."

When I get home, I deposit the bag of medication they gave me on the kitchen counter and stand beside the sink, staring out the tiny window above it. The evening sunlight filters in greyly through the curtains, casting a pall over the room.

Can't take them. Won't. Can't take them. Won't. The words are a steady mantra in my brain, thundering through the lobes and cortexes and

hemispheres, amplifying steadily until they become a scream. Until everything else is swallowed. Blindly I reach out for the knobs to turn on the sink, hoping the sound of the water will drown out the chaos in my head.

"You deserve a normal life," Dr. Lee told me. Well, what I've experienced of normalcy is nothing I want. Did he mean that I deserve mediocrity, despair, and boredom? That I deserve to have the one thing that's ever added meaning to my existence, blotted out of it?

"A delusion, even if it's a good one, is no way to live," he said. Well, reality, especially a dismal one like mine, is no way to live either.

"This is what's best for you," he assured as I left.

"You'll appreciate this in the long run." I question the validity of this being 'best' for me when the very idea of it makes me miserable.

Closing my eyes against the sound of the water rushing in time to the crash of my thoughts, I try to fill my mind with images more pleasant than sterile doctor's offices and white coats and scrawled handwriting on clipboards. I want the memory of leather bands biting my flesh to be replaced by soft arms embracing me, harsh words from a doctor transformed into quiet utterances of love. More than the rest, though, I just want to know these images I fight to conjure are real and tangible and alive; that I'm not the only one who has seen and heard and felt them.

Leaving the water running, I turn from the sink and seize the crumpled white bag on the counter. The pills inside the bottle rattle as I draw my arm back and then thrust it forward, releasing the bag from my grip. It lands neatly in the trashcan, crunching noisily as I slam the lid down on top.

That night I curl into bed at 3:30, propping myself against the wall and fighting to keep my eyes open. My fingers shake so much that I have to bury them in the pockets of my pajamas, sparing myself the sight of their incessant trembling. All I want to do is close my eyes in resistance to all of this—the garish red glow of the alarm clock, the full fat moon looming, the ragged whispers churning inside my own polluted mind—but I won't.

I hunch my shoulders up over my ears to block out the sound of the breeze batting at my curtains. A low and malevolent hiss tinges each breath of wind and every rustle of fabric. Pulling my hands from my pockets, I cover my eyes and focus on breathing—each inhale drawing in air with a chaotic rattle, each exhale sending it out in a poisonous gust. My heart is turning in somersaults, flinging itself against my ribcage until it tires out. Then it squats there uselessly in my chest, pumping blood to keep my stupid body and traitorous brain alive no matter how much I'm willing it to stop.

I stay that way until I feel fingers closing around mine, pulling my hands down from my face. In the dark, my eyes lock on the mossy green. Her eyes

crinkle at the edges as a smile winds its way across her face. The sight of it sends my heart careening again, though it feels different this time; exciting, joyful. I don't want it to stop. Turning my hands over, I lace my fingers through hers, relishing the silken feeling of her skin—soft, warm, alive, real.

"What were you dreaming about?" she asks.

c. j. green



about the author

C.J. Green is finally starting to live her life, and part of that is writing. Growing up she felt she couldn't write for work as it was her passion, but now she does it for both. She is currently pursuing her MA in English creative writing at CSU Sacramento. She is also a teacher of composition and English language learners.

She is a creature of habit, who keeps to her typical routine fairly regularly. She adjusts to new things, adding them to her current pace. Advance notice is always appreciated and usually accommodated. However, this doesn't mean she can't do things spontaneously, it's just that she'd probably rather do what she already had planned. Of course, she's sure this will all change next year with the birth of her first child and her graduating with a master's degree to start a new

career. She expects everything to go out the window in order to make place for new schedules and patterns that will emerge and take precedence in the next phase of her life. Though she'll still probably want to do the things she was planning on doing.

pictures of the past

A middle-aged man writes dates on the backs of old photographs and tells the smiling faces to stop talking, he's trying to concentrate.

A fat, happy woman holding a cigarette and baby says he's handsome—the baby with black, almost curly hair is trying to smile his best for the person behind the camera. The man turns it over and writes October 1980.

"Oh, very good," she says, her round cheeks wobbling slightly. The baby gurgles a bit and tries to form semi-words.

"Shush," he says to them and drops the picture into a hard backed suitcase open on the bed.

A young boy, perhaps four or so, is running through a sprinkler. His legs and arms a blur, his face stretches with his laughter—it's high pitched, giggling, and getting louder.

"Stop it!" he yells, but the boy continues his happy shrieks until he flips the picture over and scribbles June 1982.

"Hey," the boy whines. "That's not—"

He flings the picture into the suitcase, and the boy is quiet.

An empty living room. The green floral print sofa has three indentations, two larger and one smaller. The sofa clashes with the dull brown carpet, spotted with multi-colored stains. The blinds are pulled up to show white reflection of light.

September 1985.

"There's nothing there," a voice from beyond the edge of the photo says. It's an older, masculine and almost familiar voice.

He drops the picture in with the rest, then buries his hands in his black hair, knuckles white within the strands.

tamer s. mostafa



about the author

Tamer Mostafa is a Stockton, California native whose writing has been influenced by many, but directly affected by the teachings of Joshua McKinney, Alan Williamson, and Joe Wenderoth. He has published over 30 literary works in various journals and magazines such as Confrontation, The Rag, Poets Espresso Review, Stone Highway Review, and Phantom Kangaroo.

after the sale

Behind a thorn bush,
red paint chips off the shed's
exterior, and inside I swing
to where a punching bag hung.

A hybrid fruit tree
bears a few immature peaches,
plums and apricots
atop a garden hose
lying in a dry grass patch.

Paw print cement impressions
and names carved in cursive
are filled with wilted needles
falling from the pines.

The dog from next door
grunts near the fence,

stares through the gap in the planks
to the burial ground.

I throw a stick over,
tell him there's no bones
to dig for tonight.

Seeing a rodent hole
near the back part of the roof,
I shoot the leftover bricks
from the unfinished pond
towards the structure
hoping it molders with each blow.

Neighbors across the street,
thinking the property vacant,
alert the authorities
to investigate the suspicious activity.
I have left too late.