

Dear Fiona,

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Opening article for new column #Dear _____



August 12th, 2017

“Smith: So we have one person dead in Charlottesville, a reported 19 injured. What is your reaction...”

Bellamy: Yes.

Smith: ...To what's going on in your city?”

—NPR, August 12, 2017, "White Supremacist Rally in Virginia Turns Violent"

The water is boiling amidst the voices from the radio. Fi and I are pickling fresh beans from the farm. It was an abrupt decision to join her, an anchor idea, something I grabbed on to at once while processing Charlottesville and the thunderstorm coming to the southeastern suburbs. Earlier that afternoon, we carried all the ingredients and the Mason jars to the Brick house. It was a short crossover from the White house's backyard, through a tree-made border between two private properties that looked like the path to Narnia.

Vinegar, sugar, kosher salt, mustard seeds, bay leaves, coriander, pepper, garlic.

I sit across from Fiona, perfecting the art of quartering garlic, not really aware of what happens under the blade of my knife, except the repetitive, mechanical sound of something being

crushed. No words spoken, only breaths gulped. It is the kind of silence that doesn't kill yet questions. It is a byproduct of anger, grievances, anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation. I feel hysterically sour. Nothing new. Bodies that don't matter, wholesale hostility birthed from whitelash, organized racism, police brutality, unjust power claimed from fear and hatred--what kind of society are we living in that continues to tolerate violence and injustice to such a blatant extremity? White supremacists are energized; they organize, and they are heard. They celebrate their bodies and power on marginalized bodies and struggles, history, legacies, unity, until the only response we have left is either silence or violence.

"In Kenya, violence has killed 24 people since Tuesday's presidential vote. [...] all the victims were killed by police gunfire [...] police battled demonstrators rioting in Nairobi slums."
—NPR, August 12, 2017, "A Deadly Aftermath of Kenya's Election"

I divide the dry ingredients into each Mason jar while Fiona concocts the liquid. Five, nine, eleven, twenty-four portions. One bay leaf missing. More bodies turned into counts. More victims of state and lives at stake for screaming their truths under the teeth of power. "It feels isolating being here," Fiona murmurs. Amidst the sizzling counter-currents of the world we occupy, we cannot join the immediate fight. We can't get up and run to the streets. We listen to the radio, we turn our words into digital texts, and we pickle beans. Ironically, somehow, the process of pickling beans seems utmost anchoring in that moment of turmoil. I'm consoled to some extent that my hands don't feel so tied. I seek refuge in this process because I'm not at ease. Simultaneously, I realized that I participated because I wanted to be in Fiona's presence.

There are a lot of shades of silence between us. Some are just an essential part of our relationship, some are birthed momentarily. Sometimes, the best thing you can offer a person struggling/hurting/grieving is your presence. Genuine, ordinary, yet not evasive. Even though Fiona and I carry different histories, we converge at friendship and sisterhood. We might have our own definitions of "my people," yet we grow from some kind of collective struggle. We give each other space; we care and we fight for each other. She is attentive to my boundaries while still unearthing hers. She respects my questions. She's aware of my being and constantly reminds me of it. I appreciate not only her wisdom but also quietude--nurturing, stimulating, healing. It's a blessing to mature alongside a friend like that.

I close all the jars tight. The radio emits only white noise. Now we just have to deal with the suspension of how the beans will turn out. "It takes a couple of weeks," says Fi. You can't be impatient with pickles after all. We follow the recipe, we follow our intuition and perhaps a bit of mix-match frivolity, but we can't foresee the taste and the level of pickleness. I look at the little uncertainties/surprises in jars, mulling over how visceral the attempt has been.

In a couple of weeks, I will walk into my last year at Bennington. The pickled ideas and undercurrents might or might not come to expected fruition, but at least I know my battle, and I won't have to go through it alone.