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Category: Poetry

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## Assimilation

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### Bleach Cream

My father watches me carefully after I tell him I want to perm my hair,  
I know to cry when he's not watching. He forces me outside  
tells me I'm getting too pale  
I don't tell him that that's the point. I perm my hair,  
ignore his warning. I lose a quarter of it to chemicals,  
but I feel so pretty. Two years later, my class goes  
to a Jim Crow museum. They keep whitening cream on display,  
my classmate asks *how could someone do that to their*  
*skin?* Says *doesn't it hurt?*  
he walks away and to the pictures of skin damage,  
I whisper, I get it. I'm sure it burned,  
but it's easy to convince yourself that the only way to dance  
is in your own ashes.

### The One Where The Screen Stays Black

I am told for the millionth time that I should watch Friends  
and I try to ignore it. I tell them that  
I just don't want to and they ask if it's because  
of the cast. I don't tell them yes, but I  
don't say no either.  
I don't tell them that it's because some days I don't feel  
pale enough and that this skin makes me feel everything except normal.  
That on my bad days, I wish my ancestors had made me lighter  
and on worse ones, I swear I am not black enough,  
I swear that the sun has missed me. I still don't watch Friends.  
I don't tell them my father would rather crucify me than walk in on me watching it,  
he'll ask how I will explain this to my ancestors  
I won't answer  
and he won't expect me to. Once, he said slavery twelve times  
and skated around my words— said I'd understand when I was older.  
Every year, it makes less sense.

### Branding

Too often, my last name feels like a chain my family still carries  
and I want to smash it. I want to watch this history splinter  
in my hands. Most days, it feels like the slave owners  
burned their influence into me. I wonder  
why my great-grandfather didn't take Freeman and wonder if  
this means I will never truly be free.  
If I missed out on angel wings  
because someone convinced him

he didn't deserve a halo.

### **Tell The Storm I'm New**

I listen to Beyonce                      too loud                      even though my father can't stand her and this  
is a reclamation.                      I skip down the halls                      don't care who sees me,  
I dance as if the chains have finally let us go. On days like that,  
I can forget                      the bad ones. Today, my first  
   hasn't left my thoughts.  
I was in a crappy hotel, tears streaking down my face. This was before I learned  
to speak                      in metaphors. Before                      I learned to speak at all. I was small  
   curled myself smaller, akin to  
   snake or kitten. I shivered  
under too thin blankets.  
   I fell asleep watching Friends. I've known freezing  
   and tonight,                      I will build myself a sanctuary  
out of blankets.                      I will grin.                      I will still curl into myself,  
   I've found I'm safer that way.                      I will watch  
the glowing screen                      and maybe it won't feel like an earthquake  
   destroying my home.

### **Oreo**

I've been told                      that I am white on the inside and black on the outside. I know  
   that this is not true                      but in the important ways,  
I feel like it is.                      I grew in cookie-cutter suburbs,  
used to laugh with my hand covering my mouth,                      and every word I say  
   is measured and proper. I grew up in private schools.  
   I know that these things don't make me white,  
   but they don't make me black either.  
   I know I used these things for  
survival,                      but it doesn't make it any better.  
I was raised to be everything                      except a threat                      in a world where  
   threats are currency,  
but sometimes                      my hand still moves when I laugh                      and it feels like  
I'm stabbing myself.                      I am told I am not black                      enough  
   by my father  
My words carve their way up my throat,                      but they die on my tongue.  
   I don't ask him why he left the hood  
nor why I was raised so far from it                      or why he always chose the schools  
   where no one looked like me.  
I am told                      I am not black enough  
   by people who are supposed to be my friends,  
I remain silent.                      I'm not sure how to respond,  
   they aren't that far off. After all,  
I was born                      in a tub                      of bleach.