

Anderson/ENGL 102

Homework for Tuesday, February 4

Please read the selected poems from Cornelius Eady's *Brutal Imagination*. Through poetry, Eady has used the real event of Susan Smith (who murdered her two children in 1992) to bring to life the voice of the man Smith claimed abducted her: a black man she **invented** to cover up her crime. Read them through once, take a break and then read it again. On this second reading, mark places in the text you think are significant or where you have questions (I want to see your writing notes on the pages!). When you have finished, write a one-page response to the reading. In addition, write two questions to be used for discussion. Bring all this work to class on Tuesday and be prepared to discuss.

A MARIAN WOOD BOOK

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NEW YORK 2001

CORNELIUS EADY

BRUTAL IMAGINATION

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*The speaker is the young black man
Susan Smith claimed
kidnapped her children.*

HOW I GOT BORN

Though it's common belief
That Susan Smith willed me alive
At the moment
Her babies sank into the lake

When called, I come.
My job is to get things done.
I am piecemeal.
I make my living by taking things.

So now a mother needs me clothed
In hand-me-downs
And a knit cap.

Whatever.
We arrive, bereaved
On a stranger's step.
Baby, they weep,
Poor child.

MY HEART

Susan Smith has invented me because
Nobody else in town will do what
She needs me to do.
I mean: jump in an idling car
And drive off with two sad and
Frightened kids in the back.
Like a bad lover, she has given me a poisoned heart.
It pounds both our ribs, black, angry, nothing but business.
Since her fear is my blood
And her need part mythical,
Everything she says about me is true.

11 row down
about 1/2

both

WHO AM I?

Who are you, mister?
One of the boys asks
From the eternal backseat
And here is the one good thing:
If I am alive, then so, briefly, are they,
Two boys returned, three and one,
Quiet and scared, bunched together
Breathing like small beasts.
They can't place me, yet there's
Something familiar.
Though my skin and sex are different, maybe
It's the way I drive
Or occasionally glance back
With concern,
Maybe it's the mixed blessing
Someone, perhaps circumstance,
Has given us,
The secret thrill of hiding,
Childish, in plain sight,
Seen, but not seen,
As if suddenly given the power
To move through walls,
To know every secret without permission.
We roll sleepless through the dark streets, but inside
The cab is lit with brutal imagination.

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SIGHTINGS

A few nights ago
A man swears he saw me pump gas
With the children
At a convenience store
Like a punchline you get the next day,
Or a kiss in a dream that returns while
You're in the middle of doing
Something else.

I left money in his hand.

Mr. _____ who lives in _____
South Carolina,
Of average height
And a certain weight
Who may or may not
Believe in any of the
Basic recognized religions,
Saw me move like an angel
In my dusky skin
And knit hat.

Perhaps I looked him in the eye.

Ms. _____ saw a glint of us
On which highway?
On the street that's close
To what landmark?

She now recalls
The two children in the back
Appeared to be behaving.

Mr. _____ now knows he heard
The tires of the car
Everyone is looking for
Crunch the gravel
As I pulled up,
In the wee, wee hours
At the motel where
He works the night desk.

I signed or didn't sign the register.
I took or didn't take the key from his hand.
He looked or forgot to look
As I pulled off to park in front
Of one of the rooms at the back.

Did I say I was traveling with kids?
Who slept that night
In the untouched beds?

Probability

MY FACE

If you are caught
In my part of town
After dark,
You are not lost;
You are abandoned.

All that the neighbors will tell
Your kin
Is that you should
Have known better.

All they will do
Is nod their heads.
They will feel sorry
For you,

But rules are rules,
And when you were

Of a certain age
Someone pointed
A finger
In the wrong direction

part of town

And said:
All they do
Is fuck and drink
All they're good for
Ain't worth a shit.

You recall me now
To the police artist.
It wasn't really my face
That stared back that day,
But it was that look.

*who are
my father's*

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SUSAN SMITH'S POLICE REPORT

My shape came from out-of-nowhere.
The way some things don't belong
That's the way

I clanged up to the car
Trapped by a badly timed light.
Her poor kids never saw our image

Swell in the rearview mirror.
I was the danger of bulk; fast,
Nervous fingers

Barked the unlocked door open
And in I flooded, all the heartache
A lonely stretch of road can give.

Then she was alone, blinking in
The sight of an indifferent moon
Above the pines.

This, she swore, was the sound
Of my voice.

WHERE AM I?

Looking for Michael and Alex means
That the bushes have not whispered,
That the trees hold only shade
That the lake still insists on being a lake.

I flicker from TV to TV. My flier sits
On their grandmother's easy chair. I hover
Over so many lawns, so many cups of coffee.

I pour from lip to lip. The town blossoms
In yellow ribbons, sprinkled like bread crumbs
Or bait. I crackle from cell phones and shortwave,

I am listened for in alleys. Looking for Michael
And Alex means each car is scanned at the
Drive-thru windows, that sightings are hoped for

At the self-serve pumps. Clerks long for the crook
Of my arm, reaching for diapers and snacks.
So many days I have loped from ear to ear,

From beauty parlor to church. They count the days
Till someone comes back. We've never left.

Handwritten notes:
Susan
The lake still insists on being a lake

THE LAKE

When called, I come.

My job

Is to get things

Done.

Our hands grip the wheel
As I steer toward
The lake.

The children and I
Have been driving
For days.

Ever look someone
You know
Straight in the eye

And have them look
Right through you? That's been
Our fugitive lives.

They think:
They'll have to sleep
Sometime,
But we don't do things
The way you do.

They think:
Sooner or later
They'll have
To eat,

But a deal's a deal.
Our appetite behaves.
Our day seeps
Through yours.

Ever try to say
Something.
And know what you said
Slid past an ear?

That's the way these headlights
Rake the road along the lake.
That's the way
Her children yawn in the
Back seat.

THE LAW

I'm a black man, which means,
In Susan's case,
That I pour out of a shadow
At a traffic light,

But I'm also a mother,
Which is why she has me promise,
"I won't hurt your kids,"
Before I drift down the road.

I'm a mother,
Which is why we sing
Have mercy, come home,
No questions asked.

But I'm black, and we both know
The law.
Who's going to believe,
That we had no choice
But to open that door?

Who's going to care
That it was now or
Never,
That there was no time
To unbuckle them,

That it was take the car
Or leave the car?

I'm black, which means
I mustn't slow down.
I float in forces
I can't always control,

But I'm also a mother,
Which is why
I hope
I'm as good as my word.

** She knew she could get further with this
if she said a black man did it.
—A black resident of Union, South Carolina*

WHY I AM NOT A WOMAN

How far do you think we'd have gotten
If I'd jumped in her car, a car I wanted
For who knows what,
A woman,
And not noticed the paraphernalia?
The rattles, the child's seat?
Had smelled the spills, the dried pee,
The cloudy musk of old formula?

Even if I had pushed her out, head wild
With all I guessed I'd taken,
How many minutes,
After my foot brushed a ball,
After my eyes cooled down and focused on
The rubble of play,

How many lights do you think I'd run
Before all the stuff they'd dropped
Over the years
Into the small cracks; the straws, the cold
Fries, the pacifier,

How long do you think the cops would listen
Had Susan not sworn
I was black, I was a bad dream,
The children didn't mean a thing
To that woman.

type changes

