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Shape-Shifter

by Tarish Pipkins

Racism/White Supremacy is a shape-shifting beast with claws, fangs, and glowing eyes that morphs and adapts to its environment.

I was a little boy when I had my first encounter with this monster. It came in the form of two dirty little white boys on a bike with a banana seat, chasing a bus I was riding with my mother. It threw something at the bus, yelled “Nigger,” flipped us off while laughing, and it was gone.

I grew up in a housing project called Blair Heights. Right across the street from the Clairton Steel Works. I remember coming home from church a few towns over and falling asleep on the church van. I would be awakened by the smell of sulfur and knew I was close to home. My childhood has a stench to it. It’s connected to all of my memories. One of my aunts told me when she was a child in the same projects they would have to come in and change clothes during the day because they would be covered in soot. It’s funny how no one ever admits to breathing it into their lungs. The monster morphed into Environmental Racism.

I remember Chuck’s Ice Cream used to come to the projects in the summertime. He would pull into our lot blasting “Pop Goes the Weasel” through horrible-sounding speakers, making two laps around the lot while we gave chase. We chased his van whether we had money or not. It was like a ritual. Chuck was a middle-aged white man with a bright red face and white hair that matched the tee shirt that barely covered his big belly. He tried to maintain a smile while attempting to wait on a crowd of screaming black children all wanting to be waited on first. All the while trying not to pass out from the heat, wiping sweat from his brow, hunched over a deep freezer. When we did get ice cream, my friends and I used to rub the left-over popsicle sticks on the curb, creating designs and sharpening the tip. Then we stuck the fancy new arrowheads into straws,

making arrows. We shot them at each other with rubber bands. It's a miracle no one lost an eye. We played Indians and Indians: no one wanted to be cowboys. We knew they were the shape-shifter. We saw it in the cartoons, and old black-and-white films. The shape-shifter is the media.

I started to learn about this country's history and the great leaders of Black America such as Malcolm X and Dr. King. As a young boy, I realized that if you promote Unity, Justice, and Equality, in this Country, the Government will kill you. I accepted that reality right then and accepted the fact that I would also be assassinated in the fight for justice. The shapeshifter is the government.

Since then I've always weaponized my art to fight this beast. From my rap lyrics, to my poetry, to my visual art. Now I have a weapon of mass destruction to fight the beast with: my Puppetry.

A couple years ago, I was overwhelmed and frustrated from the epidemic of police brutality. I took to social media and posted videos voicing my frustration. It was therapy for my internalized Racial Depression. The Shape-Shifter came after me in the form of a racist internet troll. They saw these videos and didn't like what they heard. So they decided to TROLL me in the physical world and contacted a job where they thought I was still employed and harassed my former boss, telling her how hateful and racist I was. Asking her how she could have such a person around her children. Let me tell you in the shortest way possible how I ended up working at this school. Well, the super short answer is "PUPPETS." Anyway, I did a week-long puppet workshop at a summer camp for children with special needs. My former director's daughter was working under me as a camp counselor.

The Director observed how I interacted with the children and offered me a teaching position at her school that was opening in a few months. I told her that I never planned on being a teacher. She said that she would teach me how to teach. She was looking for someone who had a love or passion for working with children. I forgot to mention I was running a Therapeutic Foster home with my wife and two sons at the time. The school started out with three teachers. The Director has taught a million children how

to read. Her friend is a scientist and mathematician. And I brought up the rear, teaching art and social skills. We had nine students. Fast forward: Hope Creek Academy now has a staff of over twenty-five whom I love dearly, and sixty students whom I claim as my own. I built a puppet to teach social skills to our students on the spectrum. I would bring puppets for students to play with during recess and bring my newest puppet that I finished the night before so that my students could claim that they were the first to see it. My students and coworkers call me Mr. P. My former boss and friend came to my defense, telling that racist piece of shit that everybody loved me at the school, and that I was magical with the children. Puppetry is magic. I was a loving magician accused of being a racist puppeteer. The irony. It was then that I discovered the art form that I dedicate my life to today was baptized in the evil religion of racism. Their deity is that same shape-shifting beast with claws, fangs and glowing eyes that morphs and adapts to its environment. *This monster has stalked me all my life. Now it's taking the form of social media. Attacking my livelihood.*

One day I was scrolling through my timeline and came across this quote: “Take what you do best, and do it for your people.”—Dr. John Henrik Clarke.

That’s when I decided to move forward with a project that I had titled *Just Another Lynching*. I also went back and rewrote my Afrofuturistic Hip Hopera titled *5PINOK10: The Android Who Wants to be Real b boy*. I even added the lynching scene from the other show to spice things up a bit. The Shape-Shifter attacked. Now I’m fighting back using puppets as my swords. Luring the monster into the theater to slay him. When it came to auditioning Puppeteers for this production, the question came up. Does the combination of race and puppeteer matter in this production? Where do my white peers in this art form fit into this world of Black Magic Puppetry that I’ve created for myself? Do they even belong in this world?