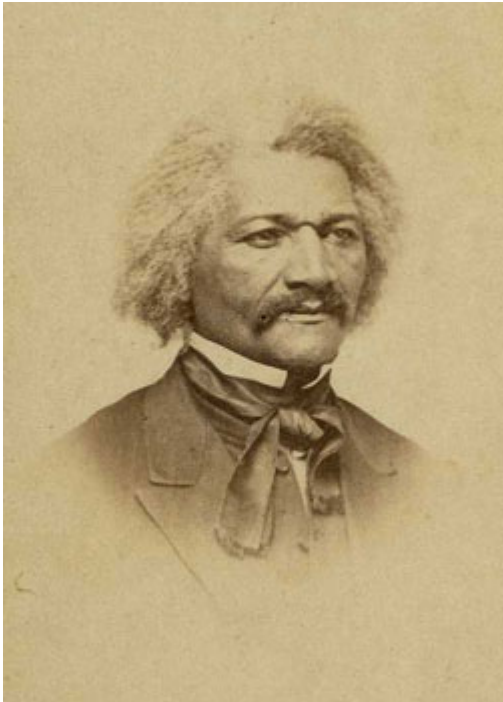


TAFFETA



The next morning I was discussing *My Bondage and My Freedom* with the Frederick Douglass t-shirt spread out on my bed like a flag. I'd climbed out of the sheets believing myself a slave to various pornographies of style (hair, language, demeanor), and because I wanted the glamor of the mythic black man with a blasting afro and fortified stare to adorn my vulnerable heart that day, I said to the t-shirt, "I don't know if it's the guy who wears eyeglasses that's me, the guy who wears contacts, or the guy who wears nothing at all." Frederick Douglass wrote, "*I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule*

of others," but the t-shirt was silent.

I know it seems odd to converse with a garment,
but I have no one else to talk to these days,
plus I think it's great that I can talk to a t-shirt
when I am not confessing to a sheet of paper.

Most people are not so lucky; some only have
conversations with God, money or bodies.

Last night I dreamed my father had shed
like 200 pounds. Shirtless, the muscles
he'd had in his twenties when he met my mother
and me were restored and made me ashamed
because in the dream I realized he'd never been
comfortable enough to walk bareback
through his own house. "Titties," my mother called
them before he moved out of their bedroom
and began to dress and undress downstairs.

*"I say nothing of father, for he is shrouded
in a mystery I have never been able to penetrate,"*
Frederick Douglass wrote. In the dream my father
smiled when I told him he looked good with no shirt,
but the truth is, growing up, I was happy
he did not walk around shirtless. He was so large
I feared the flesh hanging from his chest
would remind me of a woman's breasts.

I told the Freddy D tee the infant that would become

our first black president nursed at the breasts
of a white woman from Kansas and the shirt replied,
"Naturally, the mother was a tapestry of nurture,
who does not desire that? I was born Frederick
Augustus Washington Bailey into slavery
on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay,
and still remember that my mother's touch,
before I was taken from her, was like cloth
the shape of my future, all the threads of decision
and consequence to come; how her spirit
filled me with elaborate dreams, extraordinary clarity,
and doom as I moved among the so called pilgrims
in the kingdom of God." *"A man's character
always takes its hue, more or less, from the form
and color of things about him."* FD also said,
*"My first wife was the color of my mother
and the second, the color of my father."* Color,
it turns out, is fluid. Some of us sweat History
more than others. Frederick Douglass was married
to the black underground railroad abolitionist
and laundress, Anna Murray, for 44 years
before she died, but no t-shirt honors her visage.
Later when he slept beside his second wife,
a younger, very white woman named Helen Pitts,
he did not once stroke the downy hair along her
arms without the embarrassment of an erection.

She would be asleep when it happened, the touch,
the erection, and in the dark the great black man
would reach beneath a fabric as plush as the fabrics
his first wife laundered before and after marrying him.
The children with the first wife likely considered this
the worst of their father's abolitions. The mind longs
to abolish misery, but unfortunately who can say
whether a mind can actually abolish anything.
A mother's clutch, marriage, slavery, heartache:
it all lives in the thread. I believe nothing
can be abolished, that's my problem. Not fear
in this universe of cost and erasure, the death inside
everything, not fear of the world's dark avenues
and adventures, not fear of other men and women,
the Zimmermans, the plain clothes cops, the handcuffs
and malice, blame, bullets, bruises, and blues
alighting the skin, slipknots, silk cloth, mischief—
nothing can be abolished, though we agree,
Frederick Douglass and me, slavery nearly abolished
our ancestry just as it nearly abolished our families.

I wanted to wear the Frederick Douglass t-shirt
because it's as close as I'll ever be to Frederick
Douglass. I wanted to appear revolutionary
and decorous entering the day like a needful star,
superb in love and logic. My mother often says

she's so happy she didn't kill me when she found out
she was pregnant. She's so glad she didn't give me
to the old woman who asked to adopt me.

When sweat weeps along the sides of my ribs
from the two great stains yellowing my shirt pits,
I'm like a man ashamed by his own tears.

I used to keep my arms clamped at my sides
the hot days of my adolescence in South Carolina,
oh Carolina, peace was not the word I knew there.
The last time I visited my mother told me how,
when her handyman gave the waitress
sweating before them a ten dollar tip, the waitress
gave him in return the keys to the apartment
she lived in with her delicate 20 year old son.

He whined "Why mamma" exactly like a daughter
anticipating the heartache her mother was courting,
"Why would you let somebody you barely know
into our house?" "He used to turn all the heads in town,"
my mother told me, and though he was fatter now
because of the drugs he took with a mind to change
himself into a woman, he was still easily mistaken
for a girl in a sundress with his milk-less breasts,
and gooseflesh swaddling his belly and biceps.

Two months later the handyman and the waitress
broke up. He was not even that handy, really,
he was just out of work and hired by my mother

to repair some leak or shamble and because
she did not pay him much, sometimes she'd take
him to lunch. I was the shade of perspiration
imagining his fingers sliding over a woman
whose mouth straightened, curled and puckered
as if she was praying or giving birth. Taffeta
is the kind of cloth that makes a sound
when you touch it. It sounds like flowers
being painted on a dress. It falls in a crush
by the bed and the tongue folds around
a lonely center and because of it,
your son changes his name to Taffeta
when he becomes female. We're all so full
of envy. Nature's favorite color is green.
Taffeta's dress is covered in flowers.
At sixteen I wore my mother's dress to school
and stood on a stage with three other boys
in lipstick lip-syncing to the Mary Jane Girls.
I loved the feel of cloth folding around
my movement. That dress still hangs somewhere
waiting to be worn, its sheen and she-ness
shameless. There's a yearbook photo
to prove I wore it though it's true a photograph,
especially when it's an image of flesh,
grows over time, more and more strange.
You are not you for long. I am not trying

to change the world, I am trying to change
myself so that the world will seem changed.

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