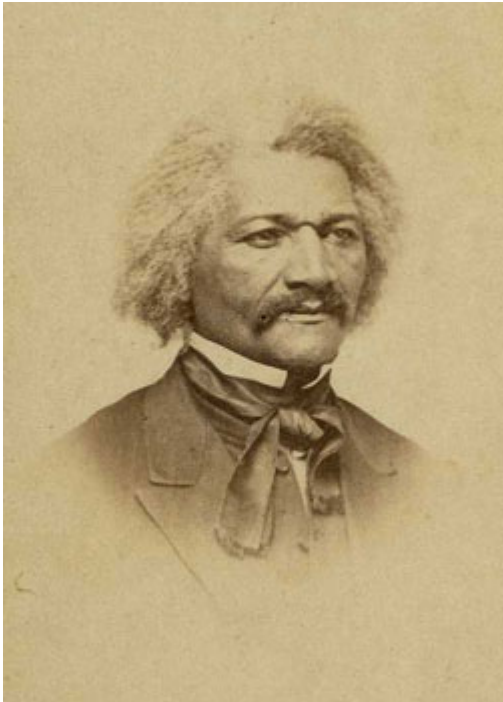


# TAFFETA



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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