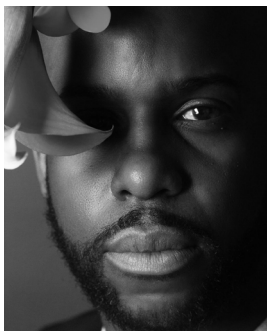


# CALL ME KEROSENE

THE TENTH MAGAZINE



Essay by MARCUS ANTHONY BROCK

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## *A Romantic Voyage*

My dear friend An tells me that I feel life more deeply and violently than others. Inherently, I suppose we both do.

One evening, I was hesitantly on my way to romance a loveless romance. I sat in the yellow cab gazing through the window pane. I wasn't looking at anything in particular. I was in a trance. As the African driver approached a turn at the corner of Manhattan's Avenue of the Americas, I noticed his eyes deliberately peering at me in his rearview mirror. Once my eyes met his, he took that as his cue to break our silence, "I can see the sadness in your eyes," he said.

He got me together.

Yet, not right away. It took months upon months for that level of recognition of my spirit to impress itself unto me.

After that moment, symbols became even more significant to me. The act

of burning sage, having a born day, purchasing calla lilies from the florist for my environs, or keeping my favorite authors at my bedside table became intentional. At this juncture in my life, it is likely more important for my subconscious mind to know the symbols are there, just there, almost as a form of osmosis edifying my soul. When I first began to buy calla lilies to place in my home, I was moved by the representation and the simplicity. Its use in our events is symbolic of both endings and beginnings and the juxtaposition of masculine and feminine, a binary that constantly ruptures. Initially, I would only buy a single stem because a single stem was as far as I could stretch my coin. My choice in showcasing had nothing to do with irony or what would later become a trending hipster idyllic. For me, there was power in the single stem. Over the years, I kept the single stem in a tall, cylindrical glass vase alongside a large monstera leaf. On one occasion, a friend and mentor walked through my entryway and thought the display on my table was minimalist and beautiful.

But, what she did not know was that necessity beget my creativity. In my mind, I could not digest life at the time. So, survival was my mode of transportation and modus operandi. How can I survive in the world with the least, but still look as though I'm doing the most—to the naked eye? It was less about abundance and more about the act of conveying a glory I could see, but could not yet touch.

My Laurel, Mississippi-born Bigmomma once told me, "There should be something living in your home." I have always taken that to signify that there should be something living around you, even when you are not. Toni Morrison interrupts the sentiment that we did not ask to be here. "I think we did," she says. Over time, I have agreed more and more with that sentiment. My notion is likely a bit more macabre than my grandmother or Morrison, but perhaps Bigmomma implored me to read between the lines and my interpretation is actually right on point. When I think back on that redefining evening with the cab driver, his words and the cadence in which he spoke to me are as vivid as the darkness when I close my eyes. I did not know this man. He did not know me. But something emanated so powerfully from my stature that he was compelled to address me, a stranger. He was firmly holding my black mirror. I was firmly turning it away. Did my lack of confidence compel him? Was it the underlying, visceral pain that seeped from my pores? No. I don't think I conveyed any of that, in that moment. He spoke of the emptiness in my eyes. He spoke of my vision. He spoke of the one place I could not hide when I thought I was alone.

He got me together.

For me, the acting of giving or temporarily holding a flower is not an

isolated occurrence. It is a ritual occasion that signifies birth and rebirth, hope, breath, and futurity. I must cherish visions of myself, *myself*. I must hold myself closely, otherwise, I'm too fragile if I begin to loosen the grip. When you begin to work at the age of thirteen, you learn earnest and how to labor. But, when you begin working at the age of thirteen because somewhere along the way in thirteen years, you've acquired the sense that you feel you need to take care of yourself—well, that's a far different cry. It's the kind of cry you spend the rest of your years trying to peel away, even when love does surround you, such as my mother who was in my childhood home. Today, I feel the antagonistic nature of that relationship and a similar sadness my mother felt when she was trying to raise an outspoken, gay, black young man, who was ready to be in the world. I was tasting the flames and she was already in them. Now, I understand. There is royalty, but there is also trauma inside [our] DNA.

*"Fuck Your Breath!"*

It was Thanksgiving Day when I first stepped foot into the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History of Art & Culture in Washington, DC. Even with the ticketed passes, we all shuffled through the museum like cattle. It was an eerie symbolism for me as I remembered how slaves were jammed onto ships such as the Brooks or the São José. You enter through the bowel of the museum. It's quite dark. But when I think of that very first visit, my mind always returns to the plaques on the wall that read the number of Africans taken and the number of Africans who survived and arrived at a port, only to then die a different death. In between those two numbers,

I only thought of the storytellers, thinkers, artists, scientists, and healers we lost along the way.

Just a month ago, Erica Garner died at the age of 27 years-old old from a heart attack. At this point, an autopsy is circumstantial evidence to me when you consider the trauma she endured by losing her father, Eric Garner, in such a vile way. We are not the wretched, but visual culture, media, and the populace would have us believe so. It is imperative to continue to push through black death as spectacle when we have so much life left within us yet. I don't romanticize our past, but I must return to it every so often so that I am reminded of how we are not a pathology to be studied, but visions to be celebrated. Nostalgia, stemming from Latin, is not only remembering, but its literal meaning is a return to pain. Every black art movement is responding to the futurity of our race and of our breath—it is responding to *nostalgia*. You can call it *Black is Beautiful*. You can call it *Négritude*. You can call it *40 Acres and a Mule*. You can call it magic. You can call it *Black Lives Matter*. You can call it *Afrofuturism*. But, what is consistent is that we have to keep giving a name to the preservation of blackness and black art. In order for me to pump through it, I need a sentimentality that is rooted in self-preservation, forming itself like Kevlar around my soul.

There was and has been so much life lost in voyage. We've been romantics, because how else could you explain the fury, vision, and sentimentality of our steadfast survival? We flicker. The light dims. And yet, it burns still. A bit brighter with each generation. A bit righter with each passing year. A bit tighter with each verse and each song.

During the summer of 2014, I spent

a week in Grasse, France. While there, I looked out over the mountains in Chateaufort one afternoon and grew nostalgic over Michael Brown. After Mario Woods was shot in Oakland, California, my heart was quite heavy for some time. The number of shots that poured into his black body was grotesque as he stood there, mentally ill, holding a kitchen butter knife. But that day, it was Michael Brown, and my heart seized as I looked over those winding, beautiful hills. The dichotomy of it all was grotesque. I felt guilty that I could sit atop this hill in a fit of escapism, while my kinsmen and kinswomen lay slain with no redemption.

During that trip in Grasse and through the winding hills of Saint-Paul de Vence I began to fill with ire and love, simultaneously. After traversing the mountains during the day, I lay awake in bed that evening, alone, trying to string my feelings together. I was agitated that the deep thoughts I could not shake were my own and not necessarily those of the white companions I traveled alongside. The pain is what's left for us to deal with. It's left for us to pick. It's left for us to sort. It's left for us to leave behind. Trauma, and glory, is riddled in our bones from every stress fracture that black men and women endured through every reification of slavery, that exists even still. Freedom still hasn't cut us loose yet, so I began to write:

*"Dearest Mike Brown: Now that you're a shining star, as a brown boy, I know what could have been. And, what should have been. But, may your star illuminate the world, as the sun illuminates the Alps, as a catalyst not for what might have been, but what will be. I'll look for you, tonight.*

Je t'embrasse, Marcus"