

# PUNCHING THE AIR

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# PART I



# BIRTH

Umi gave birth to me

at home

She has a video  
and every birthday  
she makes me watch

When I was little  
I would run away

Umi would laugh and say  
*Come here, boy*  
*You gotta remember*  
*where you came from!*

She'd chase me around  
that small apartment  
and I'd cover my eyes and  
pretend to be gagging  
*That's nasty, Mama, I'd say*

*That's life, Amal*  
*You have to respect it*  
she'd say

Umi was in this inflatable pool  
in the middle of our living room  
with the midwife next to her  
My father was holding the camera

She was taking deep fire breaths  
eyes closed tight, not even screaming  
almost praying  
Then the midwife plunged  
both her hands into the pool

And then  
there I was rising out of water  
Squirming little brown thing

barely crying  
big eyes wide  
as if I'd already done this before  
as if I'd already been here before

Umi says  
I was born with an  
old, old soul

# OLD SOUL

The thing about being born  
with an old soul  
is that

an old soul can't tell you  
all the things you weren't supposed to do  
all the things that went wrong  
all the things that will make it right again

The thing about having an old soul  
is that  
no one can see that it's there  
hunched over with wrinkly brown skin  
thick gray hair, deep cloudy eyes  
that have already seen the past, present, and future  
all balled up into a small universe

right here, right now  
in this courtroom

# COURTROOM

I know the courtroom ain't  
the set of a music video, ain't  
Coachella or the BET Awards, ain't  
MTV, VH1, or the Grammys

But still

there's an audience  
of fans, experts, and judges

Eyes watching through filtered screens  
seeing every lie, reading every made-up word  
    like a black hoodie counts as a mask  
    like some shit I do with my fingers  
    counts as gang signs  
    like a few fights counts as uncontrollable rage  
    like failing three classes  
    counts as being dumb as fuck  
    like everything that I am, that I've ever been  
    counts as being

guilty



# CHARACTER WITNESS

We're in the courtroom  
to hear the jury's verdict  
after only a few hours of  
deliberation

and Ms. Rinaldi, my art teacher  
was a character witness  
It was the first time  
she saw me

in a suit and tie  
like the one I was supposed to wear

to the art opening at the museum

Or the one I was supposed to wear  
to my first solo show in the school's gym

The suit I was supposed to wear  
to prom, to my cousin's graduation  
to mosque with Umi

is the suit I wear to my first trial



It's as if this event in my life  
was something that was  
supposed to happen all along

# GRAY SUIT

Umi told me to wear a gray suit  
because optics

But that gray didn't make me any less black  
My white lawyer didn't make me any less black

And words can paint black-and-white pictures, too

Maybe ideas have their own eyes  
separating black from white as if the world  
is some old, old TV show

Maybe ideas segregate like in the days of  
Dr. King, and no matter how many marches  
or Twitter hashtags or Justice for So-and-So

our mind's eyes and our eyes' minds  
see the world as they want to  
Everything already illustrated  
in black and white

# ANGER MANAGEMENT

*Did you ever see Amal get angry?*  
the prosecutor asked Ms. Rinaldi

It's the most important question in my trial  
Am I angry Am I violent Am I—

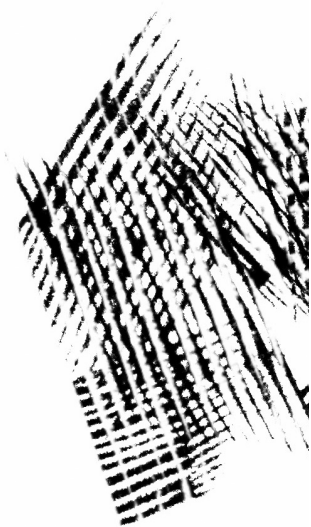
*Objection*, Clyde said

*Sustained*, the judge said

*Did Amal ever display emotions that were—*

Yes, Ms. Rinaldi said  
*That's why I work so hard with Amal*  
*To channel his anger into his art*

And I know, I know  
that right then and there  
she didn't even have to look my way  
because she won't see me  
She's never seen me  
She only sees my paintings and drawings  
as if me and what I create  
are two different worlds



There's a stone in my throat  
and a brick on my chest

