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Both There and Not

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Author Bio

Ellianie Vega is a sophomore English and WGS major and Japanese minor. She loves tofu, vintage Nintendo games, yoga, David Bowie, and the color pink.

Both There and Not

My hair is dyed pink; you just can't see it. I dyed it before a trip in early December when I was feeling deprived and found my hand-me-down-camel-colored coat. My room radiates pink. You can see it from where I'm standing in the white bathroom we're renting with hanging green ferns, black and gold accents. I am clean and warm and cold. I cannot spill my bottle of pink dye onto the white rented fake marble sink. After eighty unfruitful minutes I am still brunette, but I believe I can see pink in my hair and *I swear to god you can see it and it's not really there.*

I want to feel like this radiating, pink aura moment, show everyone in the capital how I felt the day before. I am not counterfeit, even if my happiness is boxed and dyed and fleeting. I want to cut off my ends, all way up to the shoulder, and strut in my hand-me-down Calvin Klein. Upload it to show a new me.

Led by my tiny, pregnant Spanish-origin linguistics professor, my class rides a bus for hours. Instead of wearing my feminine coat and pink hair, I travel coatless in masculine sneakers and a purposely shapeless grey sweatshirt. My hair is braided behind me to show the fat in my face. We are here to see the Smithsonian museum of Native American History, but it takes us hours to get there. First thing, we use the bathroom in the lobby of the air and space museum, astounding feats of architecture, only briefly witnessing the aircrafts suspended from the ceiling in imagined midflight.

The girl who has been around the earth like her belted coat wraps around her waist complains in a small voice for Starbucks coffee. She looks clean in the way that only expensive clothes can do. A month and a half later during the inauguration, a trash can got thrown through the window of that coffee shop. For now, I suck up my disdain of visiting a chain cafe in such an endless city. I suck up velvet and gritty matcha tea.

We go sightseeing before anything else because most of these students have never witnessed the sites of a city that makes decisions for them. Once, now common knowledge, this city was a swamp with water so sour and toxic it killed three presidents. Now, it is filled with Pokemon GO creatures; flopping cheddar-colored fish with fat yellow mouths, starfishes with bronze limbs and rubies in their middles, short limbed teal turtles standing on their hind legs and fighting with their hands. I walk poetically on the long stretch of a greening reflecting pool, thousands of copper pennies at its bottom as I walk further ahead from the crooked conversation of students behind me.

At these memorials, guides excited by seeing a group of students exorcise the demons of their architectural knowledge and tell us all the little things we can't see in these monuments. A man in an olive hat, standing at the end of the reflecting pool, points upward and explains that under the semi-translucent ceiling of Lincoln's memorial are the names and shapes of the American states.

Little foxes start squirming in my pocket, their nine tails like the plume of a fan. I don't want to listen to the guides because, though I know nothing, I am not a tourist. I am here to live and *not* to explore. A weak fox tries to run from

me; I follow her. I stray further and further from the tourists of my class. I chase foxes and hold them hostage.

At every corner, there are colorful carts of Obama merchandise and ice cream. Both the ice cream and the Obama merchandise cost five dollars. Both items are out of season in December. I tell myself to save my money for the museum. Besides, you can come back to get that Obama tote bag before inauguration.

The class, hours behind schedule, has perhaps accidentally found the World War II memorial. It is *infested* with those cheddar-colored, fat yellow mouthed fish. But I close the app in respect to this memorial in particular. I had never seen it before.

Coins litter the bottom of this giant fountain, hopeful offerings of goodwill below a sign that says PLEASE DO NOT THROW COINS IN THE FOUNTAIN. Spoken rule.

Please do not throw coins in the fountain. A spoken rule unfollowed.

Please do not throw coins to the beggars. Unspoken rule, followed.

This man looks clean in the way that comes from never sweating, perhaps from being outside all of that forty degree December. He is wearing a red cap (but not one of *those* goddamn red caps), a markless white long-sleeved shirt, and jeans that are not wrinkled or soft. I can't tell his age, but I'm famously bad at telling age. He is a performer, and he enchants us in a way that he moves inside a circle of students that he wrangled himself. He opens up a glossy military folder that is worn but uncreased.

He was drafted and dutiful for Vietnam, where he returned from unharmed. But this isn't about his time there. I think he's living in a shelter. He speaks of how much he's cleaned himself up, physically, since when he was homeless decades ago. Now he keeps himself nice and clean, he says. "I didn't have a job for a while, but I have that all figured out now." He says it like he has a disdain for the version of himself that didn't--and, I assumed, couldn't--work. Self-blame for a version of himself that wasn't his fault. This rhetoric is masterful. It appeals regardless of personal beliefs. If you do not like those who plead for your money, you pay him for his storytelling.

His mother died two months ago, and he keeps a flyer from her memorial service in that well-kept and well-worn glossy folder. I would cry if his eyes hadn't told me not to. The rest of the students treat this story as grand entertainment. I am well aware it might be, but this is not about making money. Begging is not a lucrative business.

I can't vouch for his narrative, but I believe it. We walk away as a class and ride the bus in a circle until we gaze upon the cherry blossoms in winter. I know I am the only one who sees his pleading as more than entertainment.

He's in pain. Perhaps he's faking. Begging is not a lucrative business.

I wander around the city dreaming of wasting my money. The D.C. skyline is made of low buildings and looks marbled and sandy. Its sky is white and grey like only one drop of ink mixed into a large glass of milk.

Squander. My money would not be well spent on a memorial Obama bag. They're all five dollars. I should save my money for the museum we came here

for, even if we theoretically will never reach it. I look at the prints of Obama in a blue suit walking down a hallway with Michelle in red, lilies against the walls. There's one of the first family on the green lawn back when his daughters were girls instead of women.

I love him. A man who has killed thousands by remote drones is one of the best things that has ever happened to my life. He has deported high volumes of immigrants. Been incredibly progressive but more centered than I can always handle. And I love him for what he's done for me, and therefore wonder if I cannot think clearly, or critically. I see him and see safety, a man who championed difference and diplomacy. Nobody else dared to give me marriage equality, educational investment, environmental regulation, or dreams of immigration reform. What does it say that this horrifically problematic figure gave me more than you people* ever have? I continue to love him.

*You people is a phrase I uttered for the first time when I was sixteen years old. It was a starkly quiet and suffocatingly black night; the moonlessness ate the Leland Cypresses beside my dark blue tent. My best friend and I were camping in my backyard, and as she was a Republican, and I did not understand her beliefs with any of my viscera, we were arguing again. She and I were talking about welfare, and she talks about the "stereotypical" girl who spends all her money on acrylic nails and uses food stamps. And I start off my rebuttal with "you people" and she responds "you people?" and opens her mouth while widening her eyes as if to show me my rhetoric meant she had officially won the argument. And I did not misspeak. When I say "you people," it means that you have fit the image of the oppressor history has taught me about you and I never wanted to believe. When you say "you people," it means that you believe the stereotypes you, the oppressor, created about me. I want to explain that when you are not white, when you are not heterosexual, when you are not Christian, American politics is no theoretical. "You people" are white, speak in theoreticals, and never challenge your own views.

But I didn't know how to articulate that.

The distance between "but" and "and" is a false dichotomy. I threw this away sometime not too long ago, and I don't know why. If I say "but I don't know why," all I've done is split time into a before and after. There is no defining moment in time. And I don't throw it away when writing. A philosophy and opposed practice can coexist.

I told my best friend never to use "but" when she asked for my advice in breaking up with a guy. She tells me it works really well, minimizes hurt. When you remove "but" from your vocabulary, you spare your words from undertones of justification, of blame, of excuses. "We were on a progressive track politically, but then the election happened."

"We were on a progressive track politically, *and* then the election happened."

I can split time into before and after with the flick of a tongue. And when I do, I see clear beginnings and not what caused them. I dismiss cause and effect. Using "but" treats the first half of your sentence like an anomaly, a now defunct way of thinking. "But" throws its weight around like a bully. There are

no sudden shifts; these effects have always been building, growing, and “but” admits you didn’t see them.

Take “but” out of your vocabulary. It’s the only way to view time nonlinearly.

Our bus leaves in two and half hours, and we are somewhere around the Lincoln memorial taking pictures as a group. We are forty minutes from the museum on foot, and fifteen minutes by car, and I know this because I keep Googling it. It is a sunless December, and I know that even though the she’s invisible, she is ready to set. Since we left before the school cafeteria opened and we haven’t yet had lunch, most everyone is solely full of coffee. Maybe we only made it to the museum because we were hungry.

This city is vibrant yet clean, perhaps just because it’s marble white. The facade of the Native American museum, made of beige rocks and with water cascading down it like a waterfall, is one of the only things that stands out. We enter to find a small artisan marketplace full of people asking respectable sums for beautiful work, and I am poor so I make one circle and walk away. My troop of classmates gets tired and silent. Once at the cafeteria, I buy what I’m told is buffalo meat but tastes too familiar.

Though I only have an hour to admire the works in the museum, I notice how I’m always walking in spirals. One exhibit highlighting the basic traditions of nearly every Native American tribe in North America is composed of spirals. Black sky rests above the exhibit, little punched out stars shining light. Like somebody lifted a child to the ceiling and they dipped their hand into a bag of glow-in-the-dark stars and used every single one. I watch these people who have always lived in this country from behind a digital screen with wonder because I have never really seen them.

I didn’t anticipate that I’d feel like I was on fire when I saw the Mayan exhibit. By that time, I was completely alone with my professor and the PA. I knew very little about my father’s side of the family, but that my great-grandmother, who was born on either April 25th or 27th and *not* the 26th, is Native Mexican. I don’t remember that portion of the exhibit. I remember feeling viscerally, and my professor and I talked about the beauty touching everything in the Mayans, and then I couldn’t stop talking. I talked about how my great-grandmother had survived the Pancho Villa revolution by living in a cistern and eating armadillo. My professor nods her head up-down and acts as if I’ve blessed her with this story. Her blonde ponytail bobs and her blue painted eyelids flicker, but I do not remember what she says, just that she is talking. She is Spanish, my tiny pregnant Spanish professor. The adjectives that describe her are a lesson in English word order.

In November in her class, we were discussing the census and its odd categorizations. She is Hispanic, but not Hispanic non-white, and is generally confused by the affair and categorization. I bring up how I am Latinx, but not Hispanic, and not Hispanic non-white. I am also not able to fill out the singular bubble for white. Does the government know what these words mean? What do they want from me?

Was it their intention I go uncounted in some way regardless? Is this a test to see where my loyalties lie? Do you think that political loyalties rest along

race? I am alive but always absent from the record in some way because these bubbles weren't built for anybody but the concentrated singular. Do you think me a diluted something-else?

Pink is diluted evil, a first step to the wickedness of red in western symbolism. Before the 20th century, it was the color of men and of strength. We remember Eve, and we remember the wickedness of red, and afterwards we dress our girls in pink. Our homosexuals in pink. We are almost at the gates of something wicked.

And this is why I love it. It is natural, but it is fleeting, the first and last seconds when the sun dives below the horizon. It is blossoms that will fall and someday shrivel, the insides of berries that will someday rot. Beauty destined for quick death. It is the color that I hated because I thought femininity was weak. Its pigments are more often made from diluted red than from concentrated pinks. It is a pigment scarce but thrust upon every baby girl. It is designated to the gendered descendants of a theoretical Eve. There is no wonder why I, a lover of Lilith, cling to it like no one else.

When we moved from the home I'd grown up in, I insisted I paint my new room pink. The shade is called Old Flame. It soaks up the light and radiates it, throwing it like a ball out of my room and reflecting it throughout the hallway. I wanted my head to be this color. Fleeting. Bouncy. Thirsting for light. Throwing good energy around like a ball.

Pink like the palm of hands squeezing who they love too tightly. Pink like a day spent steeping in sunlight for only a few minutes too long. Pink like the liquid perfume my abuelita sent me for a quinceañera I never had. Pink like how my room was painted when I first moved into my own room. Pink like the strip of color from the original pride flag that has since been removed. Pink like it is finite, because it is.

It does not work, but I smell it. I smell the unspecific fruit scented dye on everything. So I know I am pink, but I am obscured.

But before pink, I had painted my old room blood red.

How do I exit through the gift shop? This is the third one I've found. Where are the stairs? Where are the windows? Where's, uh, anything I can afford?

I buy my mother a postcard because I cannot afford the print. My brother, an unspecific pan flute. I buy a blue decal for my laptop but have no idea what nation it is representative of. Does giving Native American nations respectful representation really necessitate that I shell out more cash? Are most wealthy always be the most informed?

I run out of the museum fifteen minutes early because night is falling, and I am anxious to find my way home. As much as I love this city, it exhausts me, and I never realize until I'm at my wit's end. It is safe in that December, but I will not visit any time soon without protesting. I nearly run down the staircase that circles only once down the entire first story. It makes you descend much slower than necessary.

I see my classmates and watch the sun set for three minutes until the city becomes unnaturally dark. Since I am still ten minutes early for the bus, I tell my friends to hold my things and that I'll be right back. I run to the end of the

block, peer to its other end, look across the street. I panic. The Obama carts are gone.

My hair is pink, and you can't see it. I follow the virtual, and it's really not there. He needs my money, and he might be faking. He has given me the world, and he's done awful things. I misspeak in rhetoric, and you have not automatically won. I am not one singular word, and I am not a diluted something-else. I love the color of diluted evil, and it is fleeting beauty. I am chasing after something, and it is gone.

I am both here and not.