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## Student of Light

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for my teachers

“All right then, let me try to rephrase. When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light.”

—Maggie Nelson, from *Bluets*

1) I just retweeted a video clip of Venus Williams being interviewed at age fourteen. It begins with her discussing an upcoming tennis match. “I know I can beat her,” she says calmly about her ability to defeat an opponent. The interviewer, a white man, questions and calls out her confidence, after which Richard Williams steps in. Here’s a transcription from ABC, where this interview aired in 1995:

**Interviewer:** You know you can beat her? (Venus nods.)

**Interviewer:** Very confident?

**Venus:** I’m very confident.

**Interviewer:** You say it so easily. (Pause. Insistent.) Why?

**Venus:** Because I believe it.

**Richard Williams:** Alright, hold it right there if you don’t mind, let me tell you why. What she said . . . she said it with so much confidence the first time, but you keep going on and on—

**Interviewer:** But—we can’t keep interrupting. I mean, if you want—

**Richard:** You’ve got to understand that you’re dealing with an image of a fourteen-year-old child. And this child gonna be out there playing when your old ass and me gonna be in the grave. When she says something, we done told you what’s happening. You’re dealing with a little black kid, and let her be a kid. She done answered it with a lot of confidence. Leave that alone!

2) Yesterday, I went to the other side of town to hang out with my mom. We ended up in Safeway in Burquitlam, where I bought her biscotti and a chai latte from the

Starbucks inside the store. I can no longer remember the context, but my mom said, “Ever since you’ve been little, you’ve been writing, writing, writing all the time, eh?” I looked away to the security guard by the entrance and tried not to cry from the relief of being seen by my mom, after all these years. Suddenly I fantasized about having sex with the guard.

3) The first story I ever had the guts to send out, “Pilgrims,” is about a solitary girl who works in surveillance. She has tried to leave a violent and co-dependent relationship many times and is finally able to do it. The story received an honourable mention for *The Humber Literary Review’s* fiction contest judged by Cherie Dimaline and Ayelet Tsabari. I sent it in because I had read their work and felt sure that they had known violence in some form. This perceived commonality gave me hope of being understood.

4) In the last week of April in Toronto, I tried to make the most of my visit and decided to attend a book launch. I befriended an accomplished older poet I’ve admired for a long time and we went outside to smoke cigarettes. I saw the way he was drinking and smoking. It was hungry, lonely, excessive. I felt sad and saw my past self and my old patterns of addiction in him, though I was smiling outwardly. I decided I was going to trust him. I wanted to seek his opinion on some poems about addiction that I’d been reluctant to include in my book scheduled for October 2018 publication. To try to ask him, I began talking about drinking and drugs, and I told him that I’m a recovered addict and a recovered alcoholic. “How can you say it so calmly?” he said.

5) When I was choosing my major and minor for undergraduate studies, I clicked “English” and “Music.” My parents found out and made me drop music because we

were poor immigrants and music would not get me anywhere. I cried secretly. In case I was told the same about English, I reassured my parents that people who study English can earn a living by becoming teachers. Student loans came through and I enrolled in music. When I got to music class, I dropped out after a few weeks, telling myself I couldn't do it, even though I was getting good grades.

6) My late uncle broke his fingers while using heavy machinery. Recently I found out that he was the first of my mom's siblings to ask their father if he could leave the family to study engineering and music. His father refused. Before I knew this, a dark and perverse part of me imagined and still imagines that he broke his fingers deliberately because he couldn't live towards his dreams.

7) I'd been in bed for seven days until a calm voice inside my head told me I needed to get up and talk to somebody, before I ended up like how I used to be—a major depressive and an addict. I got up to do something about the manuscript that had received an award and a book deal: I withdrew it from publication. If I hadn't done that, it would've been published with a press where a man accused of sexual assault was an editor.

8) When I worked as an editor at a press a couple of years ago, I worked alongside an older white woman who had been there for years. It took me months to realize that when authors I was working with would enter the room, she would position her chair in front of me so that it was difficult for the authors to talk with me. Later, she photocopied hundreds of pages with my edits and initials so that she could add her own initials on the corners instead and pass the edits to the authors as her own. And later still, she left me out of the conversation on emails meant to be shared with authors and staff. I resigned. The only reason I

stayed for as long as I did was because the publisher had invited me to work there. I foolishly presumed this meant he would look out for me eventually. Months later at a new job as a poetry editor, while completing the mandatory run-through of WorkSafe BC videos, I learned that what happened with her in that office is categorized as harassment and bullying.

9) Who could I tell that I had withdrawn the manuscript? When I got out of bed, I wanted to email the women I'd worked with online and whose work I'd read. Nobody knew I'd withdrawn the manuscript. I needed to ask for help. I thought of the mean woman who bullied me. I thought of Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People." I told myself, "Just because you're a woman and somebody else is a woman doesn't mean you're going to be buds."

10) The fear of falling into clinical depression again was bigger than the fear of trusting other women. I emailed them, and they emailed other women to share word about my manuscript. "This book has won an award and it needs a home," they said for me. I cried. Leigh Nash at Invisible Publishing took my book after Erin Wunker reached out to her. I cried again.

11) On the night that I signed the contract, another editor emailed me to say she'd like to take a look at my book. I presumed it was because people like the women I confided in had heard that I'd previously withdrawn my manuscript and were trying to help. Half a year later, in June, I visited Toronto again. I talked to the editor who had emailed and I thanked her for wanting to take a look at my work during that difficult time for the book. She was utterly confused. It turned out she had been following my work and the invitation was a coincidence. I had felt entirely alone during this time, yet everything that followed proved otherwise.

12) When I withdrew my book, I also told Ian Williams, my poetry mentor. Later, I told him about the addiction poems. I wrote more in his class. I also admitted I wrote the book in the wake of being stalked by a thief. He suggested I was working through trauma. Later, at the Canadian Writers' Summit, and because of Ian, I was able to share the process of writing the book. It was the first time I talked about what had happened.

13) Earlier in the spring, Ian said he had nominated my work for the *Best New Poets* anthology. He said that regardless of whether or not the poems make it, he's sure he'll be seeing some of my work in a *Best Canadian Poetry* anthology sometime. In April this year, I woke up to an email from the BCP saying that Hoa Nguyen included a poem published in *Canadian Literature*. I can't help but feel as though I somehow made it happen, because I kept Ian's words with me, but if I believed this, I would not be believing in myself. I can only thank Ian for reminding me to do so.

14) This year, I am working on a novel and a few non-fiction pieces. Timothy Taylor is my mentor. He has been my fiction professor and my non-fiction professor at UBC. For the first time in my entire education, I came across a reading list that featured writers of colour whose experiences and lives reflected my own. This was in Timothy's class in my last term at school. We read Alexander Chee, Durga Chew-Bose, Dur e Aziz Amna, and others.

15) A young white writer approached me after a reading at the Vancouver Public Library. We went for a quick bite and he said that he had read *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* and that he felt that there was no place for him, but he found my work inspiring and wanted to write. I was overjoyed to read *Refuse*. I was surprised to feel so sad for him. I left wondering what exactly

we talk about when we talk about making space for others. I decided I would think of space not as territory, but as interval, a distance between two points. There are infinite points on a line. After our meal, I sent him calls for submission and upcoming events he could participate in. He was white, yes. He was male, yes. He was privileged, yes. He was also younger than me and his life was full of possibility.

16) While teaching poetry class, I watched my students as they completed their free-write at the start of class. I was overcome by how much I wanted to give them but couldn't. I thought: What kind of teacher could go ahead with a syllabus and reading list that didn't reflect their students' lives and experiences? The thought of such a teacher felt like that time when my Netflix froze on a shot of an iguana basking in the sun, and when it resumed, I realized the iguana was dead, not basking.

17) I began my first job in grade seven English class by accident. I had finished writing a story in the allotted time and had written two more, even though we were only meant to write one. The student next to me leaned in and realized I had finished. She asked if she could pay me "five bob" to write her story. I said yes. Word spread and the week after that I was writing *Titanic* rip-offs with *Jurassic Park* endings for a handful of my classmates. The teacher knew what was going on. She shook her head in disapproval, but she couldn't help but smile at me. Even though I was piling on the Chupa Chups with my five bobs, I stopped after seeing my teacher's disapproval. I remembered her smile, the way it filled me with silence and vastness, the space it made for me. I wrote and wrote and wrote after that. This was how I became a student not of longing but of light.