

# Lakeshore Tableaus

Rosemary Ford

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*Summer 2004*

One of my earliest memories of the Chicago Lakefront is standing in Millennium Park at dusk as the sun disappears behind the squat buildings of the far west side, just visible between the skyscrapers of Michigan Avenue. Staring up into your face, smiling because you love my smile and you make me smile, I slip out of heeled sandals to better appreciate the cool, damp grass, and to ground myself in this moment so that I can always remember the gleaming surface of the metal orchestra shell as its lights change color as the darkness creeps in from the waterfront and is reflected in your eyes.

*August 29, 2016*

You and the Pumpkin meet me at the coffee shop at the end of my shift, and we cut east past the Hilton, on to Michigan Avenue, heading north to Millennium Park. We pass the outdoor dance floor in Grant Park with its weather faded tiles of blues, grays, and taupe set in a herringbone pattern; pass The Bowman and The Spearman with their majestic war bonnets, naked and weaponless astride their mounts; pass the old man playing chess for money outside of the Memorial Court and the hidden fountain of the Spirit of the Great Lakes, the pedestaled lions guarding the entrance to the Art Institute, and the bucket boys pounding their plastic drums for change with beaten drumsticks beneath the lions watchful gaze. Sometimes I imagine their stone tails swaying indolently back and forth behind them in the summer heat.

We finally approach the Crown Fountains, two mini skyscrapers made of glass bricks displaying a rotating collection of strangers, their faces 50 feet tall, grinning, stoic, staring at each other across the distance of a reflective pool, blinking, breathing under a cascade of water. You sit on a park bench, watching as the Pumpkin and I run

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screaming, laughing splashing through the shallow pool with the other children; tourists, Loop residents, Latino kids from Pilsen and the far west side, a few black kids from the south. Fewer black kids maybe because the adults aren't often seen relaxing in the Loop, only cleaning, serving, panhandling. Maybe also because some mothers aren't like you, willing to wash chlorinated water from the curls that are quickly shrinking under the cooling saturation; willing to detangle the naps that result after a hard day's play in the water and the sun, after it disappears behind the false horizon created by the squat buildings of the far west side, just visible between the skyscrapers of Michigan Avenue.

*June 2, 2017*

I'm leaving the coffee shop one late morning in June, cutting east past the Hilton, crossing the five lanes of traffic on Michigan Avenue and into Grant Park on the other side. Seating myself on the lip of the 8th Street Fountain, I remove my glasses before reclining on my elbows, closing my eyes and turning my face to the sun. I lie there for long, uncomfortable minutes, the sparkling deposits of the pink stone digging into my bony elbows, the gentle warmth of Spring too precious to let go of with the oncoming brutality of Summer.

I lie there a moment longer before sitting up, putting my glasses back on, pulling a book from my messenger bag, turning my back to the fountain, the glare reflecting from the surface of its water and the loose change in its depths, shielding the pages of my novel from the spray.

*August 16, 2017*

Lor'Enyah, my barista coworker, tells me that she and some of the ladies from her church Women's Group are going to attend one of the Chicago Parks District movie nights in Millennium Park, so naturally, I invited us along. Taking a break from steaming milk and pulling shots for customers, I step into the back and call your grandmother, asking her to drop you at the coffee shop after my shift, and could she please pack some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, juice, snacks, and a blanket? Your Granddad drops you off a little early in jeans and a pink plaid shirt, so I make you a fruity tea lemonade and stow you

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in a window seat to people watch until the end of my shift, then we cut east past the Hilton out onto Michigan Avenue to hop the number 3 or 4 bus north to Millennium Park and the Orchestra Shell.

Lor'Enyah is waiting for us at the entrance, her dark skin absorbing the light of the sun even as the big coils of her black hair reflect it, and we pass through event security before searching out the vendors offering free pints of ice cream before staking a spot on the cool lawn. We spread out Lor'Enyah's blanket, lay out our movie snacks, and set our empty backpacks out as markers to claim spots for the church ladies stuck at their 9 to 5s. They trickle in singly and in pairs, using cell phones to announce their arrival and our group of waving arms as true north to navigate the ever-expanding quilt of blankets overtaking the lawn.

We are a diverse group of young women gathered on a summer's evening to talk about work, church, and family; pass the chips and dip, please, and where did you get this salsa? The movie starts as the sun disappears behind the squat buildings of the far west side, just visible between the skyscrapers of Michigan Avenue, and you settle against me under the fleece blanket as a group of women who look like your father help launch a man who looks like your mother into space, and before Alan Shepard has burnt his way back into Earth's atmosphere and splashed into the Atlantic Ocean, you have fallen asleep in my lap, hogging the blanket.

### *Autumn 2017*

I am on the phone with you after work, standing on the terrace overlooking the 8th Street Fountain, but my gaze is to the east, skipping over the Metra railroad tracks below, over the verdant lawns and rounded treetops lining Lake Shore Drive, drawn to the water, the uncomplicated horizon where the sun has left for the day and the darkness has yet to rise. I know that even as the words simmer up from inside you breaking past the guard of your lips and into my ear that I will not remember them, only the sound of your voice (smooth like your high thread count sheets, and cool as them too, when we slip between them at the beginning of the night) and the damage they cause inside of me as I hold them too close, too long.

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July 31, 2018

Your mother dropped you off for a week this Summer, hoping that I would teach you about life in a major city, and I have spent most of that week getting up at 3:30 in the morning to steam pitchers of milk to the consistency of melted ice cream and pull shots of espresso that look like caramelized molasses before returning home to power nap before we hit the streets.

A light rain has settled in for the afternoon, but it's Movie Night in Millennium Park and we Washington girls never let a little rain stop us from playing outside, so we pack a blanket into my Army issued backpack along with a plastic tarp to protect our blanket from the wet grass, and we head out, riding the 67th street bus east to the Redline, and the Redline north into the Loop. We stop by Osaka Sushi on Michigan Avenue to select a variety of hand-rolled maki for our al fresco dinner garnished with pickled ginger shaved into translucent ribbons spooled into little rosettes next to a small clump of wasabi, the rose's petal.

We sit on bar stools in front of a window facing Van Buren, you reading the copy of *The Help* I gave you, me watching the office workers hurry east and west in the light rain that has subsided to a drizzle, and even that has stopped before we leave the shop, crossing to the east side of Michigan Avenue and continuing north to the park. The afternoon heat has returned and burned the dew from the expansive lawn of the Orchestra pavilion, but the sky is still overcast with the harbingers of rain as we spread the tarp and layer our blanket on top. With you settled in, I visit some of my coworkers at a local branch of my coffee shop, fueling up with three shots of espresso over ice for me, and a cup of hot tea for you, and as I approach our spot on the lawn, seeing your oak colored hair flowing over your shoulder as you slouch over your book, I wonder at how you resemble me at that age with a book in your bag every place you go, and your nose in it at every possible moment of the day, and now you're reading on the same buses and trains as me when I was 15 and Aunt Beverly would kick me out of the condo on weekend mornings to explore the city, not unlike I have done to you, and as dusk approaches and the steel gray of the Orchestra Shell melds with the sky and the opening credits of Wall-E appear on the screen, it occurs to me that your earliest memory of this place will include me. Maybe the sushi dinner we ate

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on the lawn, or reading the book I gave you while I was fetching mint tea and espresso, or how I fell asleep beneath the Chicago sky as the sun disappeared behind the squat buildings of the far west side, just visible between the skyscrapers of Michigan Avenue while darkness creeps in from over the waterfront.

*May 25, 2020*

It's your birthday and the end of a long Memorial Day weekend, and I volunteered to go into the shop and make cold brew for tomorrow's shift. I text you to see if you want to join Sugar and me for a walk in the park before packing her up and driving into the Loop with the window down so she can stick her fluffy head out as we speed east on the Dan Ryan Expressway.

I let us into the store, allowing Sugar to explore the empty café which is devoid of furniture in these early days of pandemic life where customers place orders from outside of the store at a register stationed at the north entrance, and pick them up at the exit to the south. I weigh out five pounds of beans sourced from Africa and medium roasted earlier this week in California, grind them, and saturate them with filtered water before mixing with a whisk, watching Sugar from the corner of my eye as butterscotch colored crema rises like a soufflé on the top layer of the coffee, giving testament to its freshness and enveloping me in the aroma of chocolate. She is lying by the front door watching the masked passersby stop and stare and wave to her with her big black eyes shining like lodestones, and the 70 pounds of white fluff that is her body shining and luminous in the shadowed confines of the store like a mound of freshly whipped cream. Settling into the cool silence behind the counter where we have so often stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the silver hulk of the La Marzocco as we dominated the morning rush, our whispered commentary on the state of the customers overcrowding the café barely audible beneath the hiss of steaming milk, the gentle hum of espresso pulling, and the low buzzing drone of the burr grinder pressing our signature blend of beans into a porta filter after crushing them into a fine powder, I smile: You and I were #BaristaGoals.

Finished with the cold brew, I make us two iced chai tea lattes, flat, with oat milk, set the alarm, and leave the store with Sugar, locking up behind us. We stand at the corner looking first to the south and

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then to the west to the nearest transit hubs, but you come from the east, waving at us from across the street in a multicolored sundress and a wide headband, so unlike the neutral beige brown and olive tones that you usually wear. I hand you a chai and the three of us cut east past the Hilton and Michigan Avenue into Grant Park and the 8th Street Fountain where the water has been turned off for this first approaching Summer of Covid-19, none of us knowing that four hundred miles to the west, a man has died in the streets, and this will be the last peaceful stroll for all of us.

*Happy birthday, Lor'Enyah.*

*May 30, 2020, Morning*

We meet Sharon and her new dog, Charlie, in the park. It does not go well. The miniature pinscher mix isn't like the dearly departed Riley, who carried himself with a crotchety dignity that was appropriate for a gentleman of his advanced years, even as he helped teach you how to walk a human with a leash. Charlie's high-strung aggression even in the face of your Zen puffiness leaves much to be desired, and all of us are relieved when Sharon takes him back up to her condo before joining us for a walk-through Grant Park. He was neutered recently. I wonder, do you think his emasculation might have something to do with his behavior?

We climb the stairs to the terrace overlooking the 8th Street Fountain to the west and the Metra train tracks to the east, ambling south along the promenade, moving in and out of the late spring sunshine as you stop every few feet to sniff at concrete pillars and curbs and here and there to mark your own territory. Crossing the bridge just north of Roosevelt Road, moving further east and pressing towards the lake, I wonder if you notice the tension building between Sharon and I when she stops talking about how happy she is to be working from home, and starts talking about the riots and looting taking place across the country.

Generally speaking, I don't engage my white friends in race based political conversations. I believe that those who wish to be better educated on those issues will seek the information on their own, much in the same manner that every person pursues that which they truly desire. I often feel that these conversations are initiated with me in times of social upheaval and civil unrest, when my friends may be

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feeling guilty for the times they saw something and said nothing, or might even have been active participants. Whatever the case, after having often been the only black person in the room, the building, the town, I have learned to not tokenize myself or to allow myself to be tokenized; to not allow myself to be oversimplified and reduced to the color of my skin, to be broken down and stripped of my individuality, my identity as a beloved daughter, cherished sister, adored aunt, obsessive book hoarder, skilled oyster shucker, and your lifelong companion, and so while Sharon goes on and on about how she understands why people who look like me are upset, she doesn't see how wanton destruction of property will solve anything, and I listen, neither condemning nor validating her perspective as the Ambassador of Blackness might, but allowing her the time and space to feel what she feels, as her friend, all the while wishing that I could trade places with you, sniffing at the piles of fresh horse manure left behind by the CPD mounted officers patrolling the park.

*May 30, 2020, Evening*

After a long walk through the park with Sharon, we meet with Lor'Enyah and do it all over again, with the politics, but without the tension. It seems that politics are unavoidable today; we meet them head on as we pass the same pile of horse shit on the sidewalk heading north on Columbus Drive, which has been overrun by Black Lives Matter protestors coming from the north on a collision course with police officers in safety helmets pressing from the south.

There is a part of me that wants to join them; the part that has always known that I was born about a thousand years too late to be a pirate queen, and too early to channel my inner Tina Turner and rule my own Thunder Dome with a will as steely as my chainmail mini dress. But I am not alone, and the part of me that has loved you since I brought you home three years ago and is responsible for your happiness and wellbeing is bigger than the angry voice in my core that is comfortable with violence and spoiling for a fight, so the three of us turn west on Jackson, pick up lunch at Devil Dog's, and claim a cool patch of grass in a small park off of Printer's Row, Lor'Enyah and I talking about ex boyfriends and how stupid it is for men to allow marriage minded women to get past thirty without locking us down. We both agree that once you've passed that landmark and realize that

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you didn't die from being single and childfree, the entirety of your future and the world open up before you, and it's almost like being a child again: We're asking ourselves, what do we want to be when we grow up?

Neither of us are sure, but as you lie there on the grass watching squirrels that you are too tired to chase, we suddenly realize that helicopters have begun to circle overhead and thunderheads of smoke are visible to the north. While we were reclining in our secluded glen the protests have turned violent with the coming of the dark which has crept in from the east, and as the sun disappears beyond the false horizon to the far west side, the bridges connecting the Loop to the rest of the city, to the light, have been drawn up, corralling protesters, residents, and law enforcement as surely as the walls of the Thunder Dome.

*July 24, 2020*

We meet outside of a neighborhood market on State Street, taking turns holding Sugar's leash as you first go inside for a bottle of wine, and then I choose a six pack of beer based on the label that speaks to me this evening. You brought tacos, and I ordered sushi, and together with Sugar, our spirits, your blanket and my tarp, we crossed the street into Grant Park, heading south towards Roosevelt Road to find a patch of grass for our picnic in the waning hours of the afternoon. A few couples and groups picnic nearby, admiring Sugars' cotton candy mass almost blindingly white in the summer sun after her morning with the groomer, and there are college students in hammocks tied to the trees at the perimeter of the lawn.

We settle in, and for the first time in a long time, this summer is almost normal for the three of us. I feared for your safety in your West Loop dorm during those riotous nights of protest when the sacking of the Magnificent Mile moved west towards the smaller businesses surrounding your college campus. I feared for myself in the days to follow, when CPD required proof of residency or employment before allowing people into the Loop. I wonder if Sharon ventured beyond the Loop that week or the next. Do you suppose that she was stopped as she was coming and going, made to validate her presence in this space, to prove that she belongs, made to justify her existence? You were with us that night as the bridges were drawn up on the western



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front of the Loop, and you stood by as Sharon withdrew her friendship from all three of us. Sometimes the world tries to add to the weight many of us carry as we go through life, tries to make us feel the color of our skin and the circumstances of our race as a burden, as an anchor staking us to the beach as the tide rolls in over our heads.

I wish that she hadn't taken up that burden that perfect morning in May, that she had not carried it home with her from the park, but here we are, two black women and Sugar, laughing, drinking, dancing until the summer sun has set to the west and darkness has crept in from over the water to the east, bringing with it the balmy heat of night, the sliver of a honeyed moon and the corrupted glow of light polluted stars to shine down on the lesser darkness of our upturned faces as the wine runs out, 11 o'clock approaches, and Sugar starts to snore on the cooling grass of the lawn.