Char Jeré

by Camae Ayewa

opposite and pages 88–89: Installation view of *Zoo or an Orchestra*, Artists Space, New York City, 2023. Photo by Filip Wolak. Courtesy of Artists Space.

Char Jeré's work immediately reminded me of home. Their first solo exhibition, *Zoo or an Orchestra*, which opened at Artists Space in New York City at the end of last year, felt lived in, as if Jeré transported their home studio into the exhibition. Traces of domesticity abounded: Cans of Comet bleach propped up a sculpture, and jars of Blue Magic and Afro Sheen mingled with analog, electronic, and digital hardware, the glow and buzz of televisions and radios sounding out uncanny frequencies alongside the whirr of motorized trees. Painted over windowpanes hung from the ceiling, with one depicting a figure peeking through blinds—a refusal, perhaps, of the demand for the Black subject to deliver oneself transparently and reductively for consumption. In a space dedicated to Jeré's grandmother, a thermos and a tiny couch sat atop a crocheted blanket, offering a space for communion.

What ties together Jeré's practice—which expands from installation, sculpture, and painting into sound, video, performance, and data visualization—is a hacking of what technology is meant to be or do. Materials like cardboard and plywood take the place of canvas in their paintings, and Jeré tinkers with everyday objects and electronics so they behave unpredictably, in patterns different from what we've come to perceive as normal. In Jeré's accounting, history and time, too, are technologies to be reworked. Afro-fractalism, Jeré's approach to artmaking and a concept of their invention, is multidimensional and intergenerational by design, building upon the tenets of Afrofuturism and disavowing the concept of linear time that is part and parcel with colonial and racial violence. Jeré journeys into time, creating spaces that call out to, protect, and provide their ancestors rest in the "ongoing rehearsal or ritual" that is the past, present, and future *now*. This is, perhaps, a place we might call home.

CAMAE AYEWA: How are you?

CHAR JERÉ: I'm well, though I haven't been sleeping great, and I think it's because I'm preparing for a painting show—a medium I haven't worked in for a while. There's a lot going on in the world generally, and my home is also my art studio, so it's a bit chaotic in my living space. I feel like I need to get some proper rest at the moment. I get interested in so many things at once that my mind never stops. That impacts my sleep.

CA: Is there a system you use to try to get sleep?

CJ: I don't have a system. I'm also curious about how much sleep you actually need.

Insomnia runs in my family; I grew up in a household where TVs were on in every room. My great-grandmother didn't go to sleep without a TV on, and I've learned that habit. The computer needs to not be in the bed with me, basically.

CA: So it's more about the struggle to turn off. Not just physically, but mentally as well. What's your sign?

CJ: I'm a Capricorn.

CA: Okay, so you stomp right into the situation. You're not playing around. Being a Capricorn, you must also really care about the work.

CJ: Yes—

CA: Sometimes that care turns into obsession, it's a thin line. But sometimes obsession is good. It cuts something out. And sometimes that work you create in bed? Whoo! It be really amazing.

CJ: I know! Or in the shower! That's where I really go in. I think it's like a portal, that running water. The fluidity that happens. I've been hearing the Helmholtz resonance in the bathroom lately, the sound you hear when you blow into a bottle. It's very melodic. I don't know what's happening in there. People go in and tell me, "There's something going on in your bathroom … it's magical."

CA: Your work feels very much like lived-in space. Can you speak about the role of home in your work?

CJ: During my solo show at Artists Space, everybody said, "Char, this is like your house except a bit more organized." I think I'm always trying to find home, especially knowing my family's story. My mom and her side of the family are from Yazoo City, Mississippi. I spent a lot of time there growing up. Everybody except my grandfather made their way up to Rochester, New York, during the Great Migration. I grew up hearing this terrible story about having to flee home in the middle of the night. So I often ask myself, How do I build a home?

For some reason, I'm able to express that through my art but not my home. There's a block there. Making an installation is enjoyable and freeing; it doesn't give me the anxiety I have when I'm thinking about hanging a picture in my living room or repainting my walls. I've never been able to attach myself to designing a house, like putting ornaments here or there. I don't really interact with material things in this way. My home is closer to a laboratory that's constantly shifting as I experiment with new ideas. I'm more intrigued by the potential of a space or an object to change or be in flux than I am by maintaining a fixed space. When I walk into other people's homes—even when I was young—I get confused by how still the spaces feel.

Building a home, or building a habitat, in an uninhabitable world, especially for Black women, means constantly subverting and transforming what an object or space is designed to do. For me, that can mean turning boxes into chairs and tables, and getting electronics to do things they weren't made to do. My sense of home is complicated, but I find a balance through my work.

CA: That brings up a thought about the house as a tool, something to be of use. My family also comes from the South. I grew up with my grandmother and great-grandmother. We had all these different bodies moving through the house, family moving in and out. I grew up moving from bedroom to bedroom. Historically, and especially now, not many Black Americans own homes. So this romanticizing—Oh, the home is just for me and my husband, everyone else has their own home, no one comes in, and we settle here forever—is unfamiliar. I think we do see some romanticizing in the Southern tradition of the porch as an extension to the house or garden. There was a woman named Mother in the community I grew up in who had a garden. We knew you don't mess around over there.

CJ: Yup. In Rochester, we had Mrs. Hart's garden. Her home was like the hood apothecary.

CA: I think it's beautiful how you expand this idea of home through creative making. I'm curious, what smells and sounds transport you back home?

CJ: I like the word *transport* because it's multidirectional. I'm so sensitive to smells and sounds, and I use both a lot in my work. For inspiration, I distill essential oils and place open containers of Blue Magic hair grease everywhere. I love when I get teleported through smell into a calming place, a place of safety. I love the smell of a wet forest—it's the quickest way to my childhood. For me, dirt basically signifies play.

For my exhibition *Zoo or an Orchestra* last winter, I asked Danielle A. Jackson, the curator, if she could source some soil from Yazoo City. With the help of Ralph Lemon, they found a lovely lady named Rose Yates who dug up and shipped me four pounds of it. To open the bag of soil and smell the Mississippi earth in the gallery was as close to time travel as I'm ever going to get. Rose told them she was trying to dig as deep as she could to get to the red clay. I thought that was really beautiful. The voice, the sweat, the joy, and stories of my people are in that soil. I felt like I was weighing the cost of this soil and encountering my future ancestors in trying to put these pieces together.

I grew up in a Southern Baptist Church, so sonically, gospel music is my way of healing. Those rhythms and melodies transport me. If I am going through something, I will always go back to gospel music. My grandmothers sang in church, and they didn't need microphones. They were big women whose voices could fill up the whole church. While I'm performing, I often think of them, their movements, and the way they held notes for what felt like forever. I don't move to the next note quickly, I hold it until something breaks or releases. I saw an interview with you, Camae, about your durational performances, and I was inspired to not feel rushed by the audience or anyone else to move before I'm ready to move. I'm working on standing in my *self*, in my own time and space.

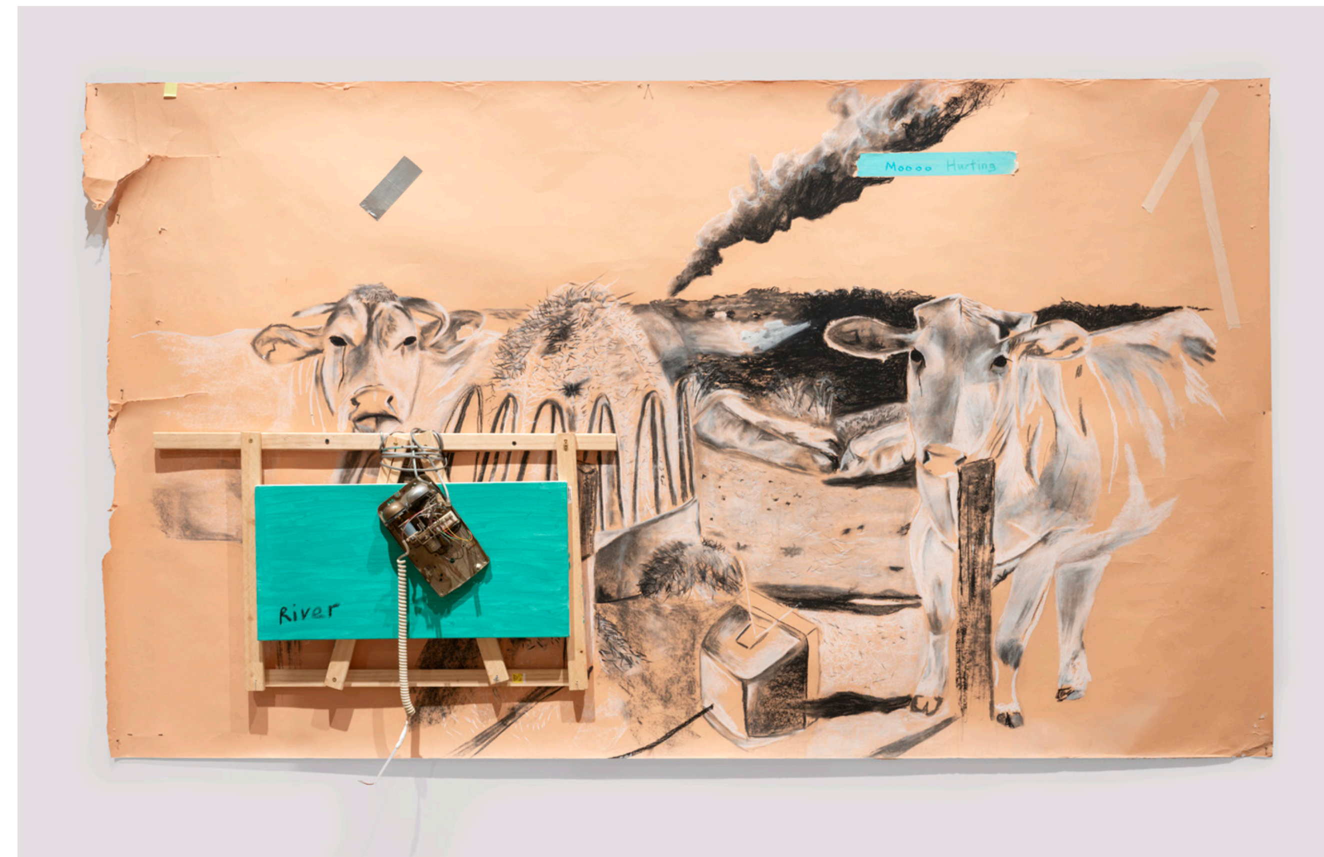
CA: That's a real practice, you know. In one of the clips I saw of your work, someone was singing "Stormy Weather."

CJ: Oh, that's my mom.

CA: Oh, wow. So that's a whole other layer. I pull "Stormy Weather" into my work a lot, so when I heard that, I was just like, Goodness, why are we not friends? Can you speak a little bit more about gospel? I also felt a tint of the blues. What is the importance of these genres to your creative work?

CJ: In the clip you saw, I brought my mom with me to Art Basel Hong Kong for a performance at Empty Gallery. I wanted the performance to give people the kind of chills you get listening to gospel and the blues. When I perform live, I usually find myself flooded with emotions at some point. It's very cathartic. That's how I felt as a young child in the church, and that's the feeling I'm trying to share.

Gospel music and the blues are ways of escaping and communicating interdimensionally, and I feel safe when I think about gospel music because I'm surrounded by my grandmothers. So when I'm sonically building a space, I have to really sit inside myself. It's like I'm invoking the holy spirits, if you will. My work is really about speaking to my ancestors, especially my grandmothers. My maternal grandmother Charlene—who I'm the namesake of—died from complications in childbirth. Since I never met her, I'm always so interested



opposite: Installation views of *Zoo or an Orchestra*, Artists Space, New York City, 2023. Photo by Filip Wolak. Courtesy of Artists Space.

in who she was, who she would have been—I've heard she was this really kind, beautiful person. I'm often thinking about the high mortality rate of Black women during childbirth and how it is still so prevalent. It's important to give Black women their flowers while they are here with us and to protect them, at all costs, against the contagions of a sick society. So whether it's with soldering irons, paintbrushes, tape, or synthesizers, I'm constantly trying to find a way to build shields of protection in my work. Amulets. These are the things that I'm trying to birth into the world, and this kind of alchemy is fundamental to my work.

CA: Our mothers and grandmothers, they were the forerunners of both these genres. Yes, there was a male choir, but it ain't nothing like church on Women's Day.

CJ: (*laughter*) Oh, whew!

CA: Our grandmothers singing in church—that's the only place they have sung in their lives, without break, even though their voices are ten times better than whoever the pop darling is. They're only known to us—we carry that history. We carry that legacy. Our revolutionaries, we carry that.

You said you wanted people to feel *chills*. Do you apply that to other forms of entertainment for yourself? Once I became a so-called professional musician, my capacity to listen to any type of music live shrunk. Is there something you need from the media or sound environments that you take in?

CJ: I really enjoy being in the woods. (*laughter*)

CA: You said, I'm not talking about no stage, I'm talking about the woods!

CJ: Since I live in the city, there's always a lot of loud sounds permeating the walls. There's no way to tame sound. My neighbor's sound is my sound; my sound is my neighbor's sound. I enjoy being able to give my whole auditory system a break for a moment and listen to the sounds of nature. Different birds, waterfalls. I also really enjoy listening to Toni Morrison's voice in interviews.

CA: Oh my gosh! I do this at least several times every three months. It's one of my favorite things to do.

CJ: In terms of what I've been listening to, I went to a show the other day. Have you heard of African-American Sound Recordings? It's Cities Aviv's side project. It's experimental and sometimes ambient. What I saw felt improvisational. I like to see Black folks having the space to experiment and play as an act of resistance. The freedom is kind of unhinged and I appreciate that. There was a lot going on and, in some parts, the performance felt like free jazz. Then it broke down into noise. Sonically, it's nice to have people who aren't adhering to traditional arrangements, instrumentation, and rules of production.

CA: Definitely. I perform in a similar way because I'm a part of Irreversible Entanglements, a free jazz or improvisation group. A lot of people were upset we had the audacity to do that. I never thought that being free would cause so much *whatever* in people. All these people—promoters and so on—would say we're supposed to follow these rules, but we're not an army! This freedom, the audacity to play free, should be embraced rather than be something to be penalized for. And I mean that on all levels.

CJ: They don't want us exploring beyond the boundaries that they've put in place. You've got to stay put and play your role. I was around thirty when I went back to college to get my undergraduate degree after reading Assata Shakur's autobiography—something just clicked. Before then, everybody kept saying to me either, "Char, you're never gonna go back and finish it" or "You haven't finished college yet?" I had left for a minute to explore music and see what was out there in the world. I wanted to work and I didn't want to be in school—I was studying communications and public relations and it didn't feel right. After working in retail for eight years, I went back and got my degree in Black Africana Studies, where I focused on radical Black feminist thought. That really changed my life; it *saved* my life. Protecting or developing a radical imagination allows you to explore beyond the parameters that have been set forth.

CA: Is that also when you came up with the term "Afro-fractalist"?

CJ: That happened around the time I was in grad school at Pratt. I started this project called the World Research Lab, which is essentially a Black archive or time capsule. The first two projects for the Lab were a human rights film called *Library Vortex* and a data analysis of Black land theft in the United States from 1900 to 2017. Through those two projects, I realized how the capital-*F* future was a ploy to pacify Black people and full of empty promises; Black futures have been colonized and commodified through things like land theft. That had me thinking about nonlinear spatial temporalities, which led me to researching fractals. At the same time, I did a residency at the School for Poetic Computation. The teachers were incredible, and it was there that I found the specificity I was looking for in Afrofuturism through Afro-fractalism.

Afro-fractalism is a way of defiling a linear, colonial, capitalist temporality. It makes the future less of a destination and more of an ongoing rehearsal or ritual. The future and the past are happening constantly and simultaneously. For me, Black futures take the shape of a fractal. A fractal is about feedback, iteration, and looping. The output of one operation becomes the input of the other. It utilizes coordinates, some of which are free and some of which are not. It's important to understand the frameworks of systemic exploitation we inherit. Afro-fractalism is not overdetermined by the boundaries of the past or present; rather, it is cogenerated. That is to say, radical imagination does not exist in the absence of capitalist exploitation but in relation to it. These fractal relationships open up the freedom of infinity or a fugitive path.

opposite: *Hamburglar*, 2024, acrylic, graphite, and collage on plywood, 48 × 24 inches. Photo by Connor Creagan. Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York City.

I'm inspired by all the different branches of Afrofuturism I have encountered so far, so I added my own strain to integrate the boundless possibilities that thinking about the world in fractals opens up. You can't draw a mountain or a cloud with straight lines. It's a simple equation with results so complex and large that it's bigger than the universe, so small that it surpasses the quantum. The idea that the part is the whole, that there is no beginning or ending—that's really profound. These ideas do something with time that no one wants us to do. They encourage us to think beyond Euclidean worlds. When I talk about my future ancestors or my past ancestors, I don't know that they're not the same. My experience of the world is that the past, the present, and the future are all happening at once.

CA: Since we're talking about past and future ancestors, can you talk about how Black revolutionaries inspire your work? Who are the anchors for you?

CJ: Back in undergrad, at SUNY New Paltz, I had this amazing professor—Dr. Cruz Bueno—who is now a great friend of mine. Having this woman who was just so loudly proud to be Black as a professor was so special. The thesis class I had was titled The Black Woman.

CA: What a class to take.

CJ: My family, especially my mom, was a great inspiration. She had so many great Black authors on the bookshelf when I was growing up. And going back to school to finish undergrad, I learned more about Shirley Chisholm, about Zora Neale Hurston archiving Black folklore in the South, how she was kind of a sound artist herself. I learned about Octavia Butler—I wish I had known about her growing up. But people come to you when it's the right time.

Just after undergrad, I went to Pratt to study data analytics and visualization. I took different archival and library courses, and what I learned there made me realize the importance of bringing to the forefront the people I respect, who were catalysts for me in my education and creativity. In my art, people who inspire me are always represented somewhere. That's why I made the *Periodic Table of Black Revolutionaries*, which is comprised of Black women, trans, and queer folk.

above: Still from *We Were Water*, 2022, digital video, 4 minutes 57 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

CA: Mm-hmm. I would love to speak about another important aspect of your work: film. You make videos in addition to working with painting, sculpture, and sound. They also appear in your performances and exhibitions in various ways. What's integral to include in these films?

CJ: Myself, I think. I spend so much time looking out, and it became important for me to actually see myself, to start getting comfortable and be like, "Char, you look good!" My mom, my grandmothers, and my aunts were all role models for me, but the thing that I was deprived of growing up was seeing myself reflected in film or media, except through negligent misrepresentations of Black women. I began creating at a time when footage hadn't been taken out of the archive and put together in a way that resonated with me, so I needed to create my own films to show the joy and struggle. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon talks about how Blackness is equated with wrongness for children at an early age, and how it has an extremely negative impact on our mental health, so I think it's important for me, as a Black dyke, to make something like a time capsule of myself being silly and free. I record everything on tapes—digital is not going to last, so these tapes are like artifacts to me.

I have a niece, so it was also important for me to do this work for her, for all Black youth. I've done workshops quite a few times with youth at the Schomburg Center, and they're amazing and so talented. They're teaching me; I'm their student.

CA: That idea of centering yourself is so beautiful. What you're saying is so spot on. It's not just about overcoming what we didn't see for ourselves but also for others. It's for others who have been disregarded, tricked, and used that we're so future-visioning. This is generational healing work as well.

I loved the images I saw of *Zoo or an Orchestra*. We need to talk more about that. We also need to talk about this Hamburglar.

CJ: (*laughter*) I had to send that painting to you.

Whether the title of the exhibition—*Zoo or an Orchestra*—is interpreted as a statement or a question is up to the viewer. I've always wondered what the difference was between zoos and orchestras, and my exhibition questions and blurs those lines. There are four different movements in the exhibition. When you enter, there's a space that is designed after my grandfather's grocery store in Mississippi. His store was like a third space for the Black community, but then he found God. In finding God, he gave up his grocery store, this community space, and his farm. So all over the show, I had these paintings that said, "Found God Lost My Wife," "Found God Lost My Dog," "Found God Lost My Job." I was trying to convey this notion that you can't have religion without economic sacrifice. The paintings are also about inheritance and generational wealth, the things that get taken from you, and how you get manipulated, especially within the context of Black land theft. The breakdown of how it works is insane.

left: Installation view of *Zoo or an Orchestra*, Artists Space, New York City, 2023. Photo by Filip Wolak. Courtesy of Artists Space.

After you walk through the grocery store, you see Dr. Dorothy Porter Wesley's library. She was a librarian who completely changed the way we access information, taking it from the Dewey Decimal System, this racist, bigoted system that only classified Black people under slavery or colonization, to something more inclusive and integrated. She took books filed under those two categories and disseminated them throughout the library. Black folks don't just exist in the places you put them. It was important for me to highlight all the incredible work she had done for society.

The next section is the memory laboratory. I set up two stills to make remedies or potions for all that ails you. There was also a sonic distillation happening in this space. The exhibition was pretty rowdy, with a lot of motors and everyday objects turning on and off sporadically, acting unpredictably. There were over fifty records from my mom's collection, a few radios that went in and out of tuning. The space was designed to sound like radio stations changing as you traveled through different states—from Christian radio and rock to country, blues, and so on. I wanted the space to feel like an oracle.

The last movement is a garden, with trees moving on motors, drawings on paper, and a large TV blasting static. I included sculptures I made of creatures that are the keepers of my grandmothers' souls. Charlene was buried in a pasture, but my grandfather forgot exactly where. So it's an attempt to find her and give her a proper resting place. A place where her family can go visit.

CA: And the inspiration behind the Hamburglar?

CJ: I used to have nightmares about the Hamburglar growing up—of this white man stealing my food, not because he was hungry but because it was fun. With McDonald's being in every hood, I really got to thinking that, through their food, they were doing something nefarious to me, some type of experimentation, changing my impulses, my molecular makeup. Down at the bottom of the painting, there's a photo of white kids on the steps of a federal building, holding up a target from a shooting range with a black silhouette on it while their mom takes pictures of them. Then there's Hamburglar with his stripes, me and my brother as children—these Black kids who look like they're in a lineup—and playgrounds drawn in the background that are all rusty with sharp metal and wrapped in barbed wire. The painting is thinking through the loss of innocence for Black children and what that feels like.

CA: It's incredible. When I was nine, I had a burger and it got me so sick. After that, I went on a crusade, calling McDonald's my enemy because it

Circadian, 2024, acrylic, grease, and bleach on plywood, 24 × 48 inches. Photo by Connor Creagan. Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York City.

made my stomach hurt. To hold on to that so hard as a kid, you start to look at it now in a different way. And for a character to be a burglar! McDonald's is like the Trojan horse coming to make it easy for us to access food, mean-while moving us away from community economics like you talked about with the grocery store.

I see in your work a hacking of what is supposed to be technology and redefining that for yourself. Audre Lorde said this best: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." It's a different set of rules that we have to stay dedicated to.

CJ: Oof!

CA: Sometimes people think you need the master's tools to build this house, that they need to play this game real quick and then come back around. You have to accept people's choices, though, because you can't rush it. It's where they're at. But what about our tools? What about dissolving this label of "master"?

CJ: Yeah, it's very divisive. Not to be cliché, but knowledge is power, and to know yourself is even more empow-ering, right? A lot of people have tried to tell me what I wasn't going to do, what I couldn't do, and who I was in an attempt to devalue my self-worth. But I get to decide that. That valuation is not up for debate.

CA: It's for us to speculate what we can do. I imagine that, on the other end, you get people saying things like, "Wow, you got another exhibition? How'd you get that?" What do you mean, *how*?

CJ: Oh, trust me, you're right.

CA: People be surprised—

CJ: Surprised!

CA: —about a Black woman's success? Or a trans person's success? Especially when you're not using the master's tools.

CJ: Exactly. The scrutiny of Black women is diabolical.

Sometimes I'll get comments about the materials I choose to work with, like, "You work with cardboard though." When Jay and Danielle from Artists Space came to my tiny, messy campus studio to talk to me about my work, it was very affirming. I really felt seen by them after feeling a bit isolated and alienated. I was working on my thesis and I had no funds—like zero. I owed my landlord. It was wild. Columbia—where I did my MFA—had just bought all these expensive Mac computers, and the engineering of these boxes they came in were next level. My friend Merry, who helped install these computers, told me to come check them out. I made my whole thesis exhibition out of those boxes.

Right before the opening of my solo show, I could hear and see myself much more clearly. I was learning a lot and I felt good, and I stopped stressing over the people who didn't think I deserved it.

I love when my work resonates with people, when they can see themselves in it. People came to the show and were just telling me like, "I love the Afro Sheen over there with the electronics and the hot comb, but *why*?" They didn't get that I had all these things assembled together because I wanted the frequency to hit in a certain way. I wanted it to be a specific sensorial experience.

CA: People are just scared. We're too used to being ashamed of the things that held us. Just because we don't understand things immediately, the power to speculate about what these things can mean is important. It can't just have one meaning. We've got our families, see how they took one thing and made it five things!

I love the risks that you're taking, too, because, you got to understand, a lot of people are desperate to get to where you are, to have the audacity to paint, to do art, to be a creative. There are so many things that people would do to get to that position. And so you've got to keep pushing yourself to really stand your ground. There's a lot of temptation to be other, to believe that you gotta be a little bit like some-thing else for you or for your dreams to be possible. Especially now, we're in the thick of it.

For my last question, I want to ask you about poetry and sculpture.

CJ: Poetry and sculpture, they're kind of the same.

CA: Oh, that's beautiful. Well then, how about you hit us with that?

CJ: Listening to Pat Parker read her poetry made me think about the poetics of language, about how to construct or structure feelings and experiences into sentences, and how that also applies to sculptures. I appreciate how the simplest language, like short sentences, can move large feelings. Audre Lorde talked about how creativity is a class issue, and how poetry is the voice of Black and Brown women, of the poor and working class, because it doesn't cost a thing. And the writer and scholar Dr. Moya Bailey, rooted in disability justice, calls for plainer language, the importance of demystifying or detan-gling complex themes to make them more accessible and therefore allowing them to reach a larger audience.

The materials that I use—plasters, wire, cardboard, tape, glue—are similar. They're very forgiving, economical materials that I respect but use without feeling so precious about them. They are able to keep up with my pace and messy spirit. They allow me to reach a kind of flow state where I'm not over thinking the process, outcome or finan-cial impact of it.

For a performance I did at Artists Space, I asked my friend Emmy to read June Jordan's "Apologies to All the People of Lebanon." I told her to just keep reading it over and over until she felt like stopping. To take breaks when she needed to, to repeat lines that stood out to her. Mix it up, *you* are the filter. We don't need an effects pedal, microphone, nothing—you be it! The room stopped when she read these words that have been passed down to us. It felt like an incantation. That was what I was looking for. There are things that can really change the world just by speaking them into existence, just by being a vessel, allowing them to move through you and then out of you.

Entitlement by Rumaan Alam

Asher and Brooke passed a Taiwanese costumed as a Tibetan, a gentle con artist tying bracelets to the moist wrists of tourists: a blessing for a dollar, what a bargain! Her handbag's straps crossed her chest like a car's safety belt. A block from the steakhouse where they were expected, there was a chrome diner. Asher marveled that the species endured, extolled their simplicity. Brooke thought this his way of suggesting it. "We should eat here," she said. He was amused. She'd be okay with that? A sandwich instead of a steak? Of course she would! She was game. She was a good time. She was eager to please. The lone waitress was a much-mascaraed Greek who brought weak coffee in shallow cups. She called them sweetie. She committed their orders to memory, shuffled toward the counter, and recited them to the Salvadoran tough at the grill. The other patrons were a man gnawing a gyro and a woman crumbling saltines into Manhattan clam chowder, both staring into cellphones.

"Lunch with the big boss and it's only a five-dollar grilled cheese. I hope you're not disap-pointed." Asher Jaffee was the sort who could refer to himself as the big boss without irony, without a twist, without a wink. That was just what he'd been, for years and years.

"Not at all." Easier, wasn't it: no complicated salad, no worry whether it was expected or frowned upon to order wine. She could focus on small talk. "How was your trip?"

Asher and Carol had celebrated their silver anniversary with a monthlong jaunt. "It was fun." What a bore, Europe: buttered toast and foreign newspapers, shuffling through churches, trying to be appropriately cowed. It was impossible to stay on top of the college basketball finals. He loved Carol but they were impatient with each other. Asher was not himself without an office. "But I'm glad to be back. Brooke, how old are you?" He believed himself old enough to ask with impunity.

"I'm thirty-three." A personal question but one she didn't mind answering. Her mother had always crowed about her own age, never hesitated to pronounce it: forty-three, fifty-one, sixty-two. To be anything but proud of living however long you made it was empty vanity, one of men's tools for keeping women in check.

He nodded like this was the correct answer. "You're married?"

But surely this question was not legal. Brooke's instinct was to laugh but that would have been too much to explain away so she simply shook her head.

Asher had seen her roll her eyes at him in the conference room. She was a cool character. The waitress deposited their food. He picked up a single french fry, too hot to eat. "Pretend I don't know anything about you." A flash of lying in bed at the George V, squinting at a résumé on his tele-phone. But no one had mentioned that Eileen's girl was Black! Maybe you couldn't these days. Times changed, and you adjusted. He would never have said "colored" anymore.

Brooke thought of the trouble she'd taken with that single page. "I studied at Vassar."

Asher thought people put too much stock in college and said so. "My only degrees are honorary. Where did you grow up?"

"Here, in the city."

Outer borough kid still, Asher loved Manhattanites. He thought them sophisticated. "And what do your parents do?"

"My mother works in reproductive health. She's trained as a lawyer. But she's more of an advocate." How to explain a mother like Maggie? It was a particular burden to have an extraordinary parent. She didn't bring up a father. The sort of omission you leave alone.

"And since college you've been—"

"Teaching. In the Bronx. Endeavor. It's a charter." She elided the first, lost year of her adult-hood. Two years after 9/11, the economy had been frail enough that Brooke had fled home, found a part-time stint at a shop that sold (yes) high-end yarn. The alumni office connected her to the Vassar grad who ran Endeavor. She had no education in education, but this didn't matter.