

The History of Intimacy

I.

You remember it because it's a wound.
A cut, twenty cuts, the name
for the canings on the palm,
on the knuckles, on the buttocks,
a finely graded order of pain
that we who should not exist
were assigned for our failures.

II.

You keep you white, nuh,
Mike shouts in 1987 across the heads
of students sitting on Jameson Steps
and the sudden white silence shows
we are no longer in uniform in the quad
at Livingstone High, teasing hey, why
did you look through me
as though I don't exist. And this slipping
from being we called keeping you white,
but saying it out loud reveals
how we have learned
to measure our existence.

III.

In the video store after I've ordered a film,
my cousin elbows me, Why you putting on?
Putting on. Transitive verb. Putting on what?
Putting on skin, putting on
not nothingness.

IV.

When the Group Areas Act is abolished,
my mother aches to go back
to the street she was removed from
and it is we, grown attached
to the scar we call home, who say, No,
we don't want to live in a white area,
this time ceding it ourselves.

V.

In 1988 at Crawford train station, my brother and I find a blue plank hand-painted in yellow letters:

“Non-Whites Only” on one side

“Whites Only” on the other

thrown away by the fence next to the tracks.

Picking it up, we see the two sides

of the sign lay back to back,

each half resting against its opposite,

intimate and inverse

but unknown to each other.

We knew this was history

someone had made by hand then hidden

and tried to forget. We bring it home

and come across it sometimes in a corner

when we’re looking for something else.