

## **“IF WE ARE NOT TO DIE”**

### **Finding Softness at the Intersection of Politics and Literary Study**

**By Khira Hickbottom**

**March 2nd 6:00 PM Rogers Memorial Chapel**

My earliest memories of my writing practice are from the 5th grade. During the time of day slotted for free writing, I'd request a class roster from my teacher, Mrs. Butcher, and craft a tale of a class adventure—a trip to the book fair, a quest to find a lost class pet, etc. The roster was necessary to ensure I'd mention everyone at least once, giving all my peers a blip of dialogue or some other action. I read the stories out loud at the beginning of our reading time, invigorated by my classmate's palpable excitement when their name was mentioned.

Previously, my relationship to storytelling existed solely between two points—myself and whatever book I was attached to at the time, likely *The Hunger Games* or *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. My short classroom stories opened my eyes to both the unified and individual relationships emergent in writing. The written word had the power to create and sustain community as well as validate self.

I was a very anxious child, as I am now an anxious adult, but I found early on that language was power, that the words we choose have weight, that our silences speak as loudly as our voices. As we graduated from playgrounds to parties, there was a sort of collective recognition of the weaponry waiting beneath our tongues. We were not children anymore and words could hurt just as suddenly as they could heal.

I was black and queer and woman growing up in the Northeast corner of Indiana beneath a hegemony which deemed my existence an imposition. I turned, again, to writing, but this time because I could no longer speak, and found the open arms of Mary Oliver.

In her poem “Landscape” she writes:

**Every morning I walk like this around**

**The pond, thinking: If the doors of my heart**

**Ever close, I am as good as dead.**

I often find myself arguing with adults about the validity of English as a course of study.

In a world in which life is deemed an economic proposition, the pursuit of sustenance of the soul is lost on many of my well meaning mentors. How do you explain to those trained for mere survival that there can be more? How do I make my elders understand that if I do not remain soft, I am as good as dead?

My grandpa, Louis Gibson, was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1949. The world was on fire then and still is now. His parents tried to shield him from the sickness circling the country, but there is no way to protect a black boy in a nation that magnetizes bullets to his skin, that pathologizes his laughter. Along with thousands of other African American families in the 60s, they moved to the segregated suburbs of the Midwest, where racism painted itself in prettier pictures and hid behind a smile. My mother was born in Mobile, Alabama in 1973, the youngest of 10. By the age of 12, she found herself in Indiana in my papa’s care after her mother’s untimely death. All of this to say, I was raised by the ghost of escape, fed by breadcrumbs of survival.

Literature was my liberation, and I commit myself to it now in the hopes of saving us all.

In the words of C.S. Lewis, “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.” Let us, for a moment, examine the deserts of our lives. From mounting state violence and incarceration to the total collapse of

national public health infrastructure, it is a bleak time to be young and dreaming of a long and healthy life. However, I am not without hope, and I know you aren't either because you are here in this room, and to study literature is to hope.

Real sociopolitical change begins with our capacity to imagine, and our capacity to imagine rests on our ability to manipulate language. My fellow literary scholars are among the most revolutionary people I know, unbound by limitation and unwilling to restrict their dreams with the weak and superfluous qualifier of "in reality." They are intimately aware that language creates reality, and as the arbiters of language, we define ourselves. Words are both a window and a mirror, a malleable tool which gives way to self-determination.

It is the project of my life to evolve beyond the generational will to survive imbued in my body. I am building refuge in the dissonance between the words black, queer, and woman. I am urging myself to do more than just breathe.

One of my favorite poem's of Oliver's is also one of her briefest, "Instructions for Living a Life." She writes:

**Pay attention.**

**Be astonished.**

**Tell about it.**

What I found so easy to do at 10 isn't quite as easy now. Writing is agonizing. It is my greatest burden and motivator, my most troublesome conviction, but in the face of moments such as these, I am reminded to be steadfast. To study literature is to exist in isolation and community simultaneously. The task of maintaining an open heart is arduous when the alternative is hardened and ignorant bliss, but without you, who would notice the way the light filters through

water and how the trees are always whispering? Without you, who would remind all of us to hold out hope? To love in the meantime?

To those just now embarking on their academic journeys and to those decades into them alike, I urge you to keep going. The world is out there waiting, and if the doors of our hearts ever close, we are as good as dead.