PUNCHING THE AIR

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1

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PART I

BIRTH

Umi gave birth to me

at home
She has a video
and every birthday
she makes me watch

When I was little
I would run away

Umi would laugh and say
Come here, boy
You gotta remember
where you came from!

She'd chase me around
that small apartment
and I'd cover my eyes and
pretend to be gagging
That's nasty, Mama, I'd say

That's life, Amal
You have to respect it
she'd say

Umi was in this inflatable pool
in the middle of our living room
with the midwife next to her
My father was holding the camera

She was taking deep fire breaths
eyes closed tight, not even screaming
almost praying
Then the midwife plunged
both her hands into the pool

And then
there I was rising out of water
Squirming little brown thing

barely crying
big eyes wide
as if I'd already done this before
as if I'd already been here before

Umi says
I was born with an
old, old soul

OLD SOUL

The thing about being born
with an old soul
is that

an old soul can't tell you
all the things you weren't supposed to do
all the things that went wrong
all the things that will make it right again

The thing about having an old soul
is that
no one can see that it's there
hunched over with wrinkly brown skin
thick gray hair, deep cloudy eyes
that have already seen the past, present, and future
all balled up into a small universe

right here, right now
in this courtroom

COURTROOM

I know the courtroom ain't
the set of a music video, ain't
Coachella or the BET Awards, ain't
MTV, VH1, or the Grammys

But still

there's an audience
of fans, experts, and judges

Eyes watching through filtered screens
seeing every lie, reading every made-up word
like a black hoodie counts as a mask
like some shit I do with my fingers
counts as gang signs
like a few fights counts as uncontrollable rage
like failing three classes
counts as being dumb as fuck
like everything that I am, that I've ever been
counts as being

guilty

CHARACTER WITNESS

We're in the courtroom
to hear the jury's verdict
after only a few hours of
deliberation

and Ms. Rinaldi, my art teacher
was a character witness
It was the first time
she saw me

in a suit and tie
like the one I was supposed to wear

to the art opening at the museum

Or the one I was supposed to wear
to my first solo show in the school's gym

The suit I was supposed to wear
to prom, to my cousin's graduation
to mosque with Umi

is the suit I wear to my first trial

It's as if this event in my life
was something that was
supposed to happen all along

GRAY SUIT

Umi told me to wear a gray suit
because optics

But that gray didn't make me any less black
My white lawyer didn't make me any less black

And words can paint black-and-white pictures, too

Maybe ideas have their own eyes
separating black from white as if the world
is some old, old TV show

Maybe ideas segregate like in the days of
Dr. King, and no matter how many marches
or Twitter hashtags or Justice for So-and-So

our mind's eyes and our eyes' minds
see the world as they want to
Everything already illustrated
in black and white

ANGER MANAGEMENT

Did you ever see Amal get angry?
the prosecutor asked Ms. Rinaldi

It's the most important question in my trial
Am I angry Am I violent Am I—

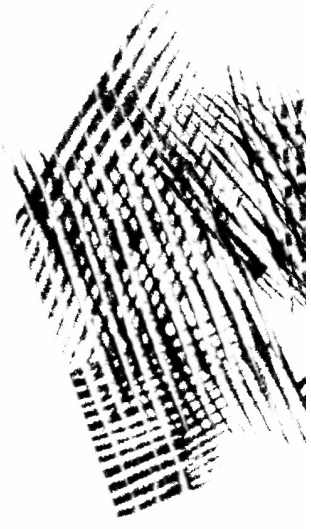
Objection, Clyde said

Sustained, the judge said

Did Amal ever display emotions that were—

Yes, Ms. Rinaldi said
That's why I work so hard with Amal
To channel his anger into his art

And I know, I know
that right then and there
she didn't even have to look my way
because she won't see me
She's never seen me
She only sees my paintings and drawings
as if me and what I create
are two different worlds



There's a stone in my throat
and a brick on my chest