

Mayday

His little finger pushes the middle of the letter "H" like it's a button on an elevator. Bends a bit back at the knuckle. I take the picture. I can't remember, did he trace each letter then, or poke them, one at a time? It doesn't matter. It was the beginning of something. If I could, I'd mark it with a red ribbon the way you're supposed to with books ("... for the beginning is where the wound is"). It was the Pivotal Moment you know to look for in a movie, but is so difficult to isolate in real life.

Things layered up around that instant. I try to remember the sequence of events. I have photographs from every day for months. I attempt to tell the story in order, but the pictures reveal little about chronology. It was a warm winter and a cold spring, so even the layers of clothes confound me. I know there was a phone call to the police. "Some strange white folks playing with the children." I know we ate pigs' feet with their parents on Easter. Does that mean they trusted us by then?

At the time, I was trying to figure out who I was, again. It didn't seem an existential question that time, as much as a logistical one. I'd always defined myself by my context, which had been art school for most of the previous decade. What did I look like now "turning thirty?" Someone had written "I AM" on a door down the street in capital black letters, "I" on the line by itself. (turning . . .) I took a picture there every day. Mostly alone, sometimes with whomever was visiting, often with my dog. Six months of daily pictures. (turning...) None of them look like me.

The police incident hit low and hard, a sucker punch to the gut. We thought it was obvious that we were the Good Guys. Certainly not because we are white, but because we were teaching the kids next door to count, thinking they should have learned it long ago. (They'd skip ahead to the bigger numbers, since those were worth more.) Plus, I had that four-by-six of Tony - the pivotal picture with him point-blank pushing on the word "HELP." It looked like evidence to me then, or more accurately, proof. I read an essay by John Bergen. It begins when the just cause is defeated and ends with the word honor. In the brief paragraphs between, it explodes the boundaries of what art is capable of doing. How could it be rectified, this time in our history where playing with kids in the park is understandable cause for suspicion? How can we ever trust anyone, when we've

seen corruption paint a film over anything we try to hold sacred? I started thinking a lot about heroes.

The boarded-up storefront had once been a Baptist church, and before that a dry cleaner. I painted red velvet curtains and magic acts, shadow rabbits and Rosa Parks. Things to believe in. It was always glorious to paint on Sundays. There was a church next door, and I could hear the singing, as well as see it in the vibration of color on the end of my brush when it touched the wall. I painted a kind of target on the door, below "I AM," because the place was becoming a point of contact. My neighbors began recognizing me at the post office, and we'd talk when they passed by. We'd move seamlessly from personal heroes to past lovers to politics. They stopped changing their posture like I was judging them when they saw me. I did the same. People would ask me for my "card." They'd get out of their cars at the stop sign and greet me from the bottom of the ladder. I made wallet size stickers with images from the painting - a shadow rabbit/duck conundrum. The cards didn't say my name or phone number anywhere, but no one ever noticed. I like to think they just wanted to leave with something.

As it turns out, so did I. I needed that painting way more than anyone in the neighborhood. Afterwards, I'd walk down the street and hear the dealers on the corner cut their derisive comments short when one of them would recognize me as "the painter-lady." And, honor of honors, I was invited to attend the Sunday service at the vibrating church. The act of asking "What am I now?" was the very thing that defined me in that community. Asking the question became the answer, just as the poet Rilke would have us believe. I look again at Tony's push-button Mayday, recognizing that he, too, wasn't asking but answering that call for help. It was all a tiny moment, I understand, but a moment where art was the right tool for beginning to repair the face of a building, the place of an artist, and a tiny bit of trust in a community.