

Caroline Cooper

The Lions

New York. The brutal, glowing city. The pushing into the subway car. The making and avoiding of eye contact. The work of it. The loving, whole, orgasmic organism of the city itself that grows and thrives and thieves and takes itself seriously even as it is absurd. I hold the city in my lap, my overlapping arms, it is a watermelon, full and ripe and explosive. It knows no boundaries and respects nothing but the masochism of the dollar. So brutal. The striving of the city and the work of acquiring her dollars—brutal.

I wondered, wandering and ditch-swimming at one point recently in Colorado, if I could be a woman apart. If I could separate myself from the city and meaningfully find definition, satisfaction, complete understanding in a place of fields and scarps and sky. I cannot. I dip a lingering toe in that water, marvel at the harsh, cold glacial drain and the dry crumbling mountains that surround. I see and appreciate the place, but I am nothing for this distance, this space, its begging hangdog expanses that leave the white people all around me (everywhere, only, white) glaring against the glare and talking in loops, looping loops of repeated observation: it's hot here. It's so dry. Drink enough water. Did you bring your water bottle? Do you have sunscreen? Did you put enough on?

It goes on and on and on and I can only stare and cough, the floury drift having caught in my throat, under my nails, my eye lashes, my ears, sheets, toilet paper. A land of coated drift, dotted with their drifters, white drifters, who mumble about the wars and the president and the problems and the solutions and the mumble for weed, the lucrative, pervasive high made available in this space of weedy legality.

I'm bored.

I left the city and fell asleep at an artist residency for six weeks and woke to write, here and there, to tape a poem to the wall above my bed and to deal lightly, sparingly, with matters of the day that do involve things like water and sunscreen and clearing your throat, the banality and their constants in this work of securing daily comfort—don't get burned, don't be thirsty, don't stand too long in the open, glaring sun.

Yes. Yes, mother.

Came back to New York, finally, with my heart in my hands,

Kestrel

watermelon-style, and my notes and my writing, things I have produced that help me feel defined and alive as someone who produces and is productive in society—adding value. My whole life spread neatly, a capitalist buffet.

And then the argument with the bank about a missed mortgage payment when they changed the terms of the auto pay system and they claim (Lies! Lies! I said, overriding customer service representative Pablo with my fury and my insistence), yes they claim that they had sent me a letter to this effect. Lies! I had no letter, I had only the option of making multiple payments in one month or going into arrears, trashing my Credit and being marked “delinquent” when here I was the one who had been making payments on time! and I was the one who was perfectly happy as a resident, a paying, conscientious resident in the land of autopay, who had nothing whatsoever to do with this change in policy! and who, to this moment, cannot locate any such notification amid the stacks and stacks of held mail, finally delivered, yet is now, unquestionably, being held to false, shifting expectations by a bank that has pursued action against me by going so far— already going so far— as to notify the four credit bureaus of my poor standing and for what? For what?

Here is a fact to know about me: A large, sprawling argument with the amorphous corporate Goliath always calms me. I heal as I announce, unflinchingly, that I am hostage. “You have made me a hostage,” I said, sotto voce. That my terms never changed. That I would make one payment per month in the agreed upon amount, no more, no less. That that was what, as a writer and sometimes teacher, I could afford. That changing of terms and then trashing my credit when I fail to meet these sly, slippery, quietly changed terms, is the height of treachery. “Deceit!” I shout. “Falsehoods! You lie!” The nation-fever pitch having caught in my throat, it jumps out my mouth.

You see? This is my happy place. My joy in being righteously right on the phone with a perfectly human, unsuspecting customer service representative who had exactly nothing to do, either and whatsoever, with this change. So you can see how, in this way, through these vital exchanges with the amorphous giant itself, that I must, while placed again, once again on hold, I must strenuously turn to the mirror and strenuously face myself, recognize myself. I am here, at long last, and this fight is the essence of me, supports me as I affirm, again that I am an animal, at home in the argument, at home in the world, at home in New York.

Gratitude to you, sweet Goliath we call Citibank, in whom I turned and in you, the amorphous space of you, who listens patiently but offers no recourse, no second option, I heard my own voice and my fury, my fight, and I saw myself fully and with grace and ease. I enjoy

myself and I appreciate the honest fight and true voice of my struggle that I unleashed, hard and heard yet also not heard (“I am so sorry,” the agent repeats, and I crow, “How will your apology correct my credit score? How *exactly*?”) and considered for a long time afterward. Never did I curse or scream, but always did I represent myself and that, alone, is worth the world. That alone is what will only and ever be useful in facing the Goliath and having an honest, if difficult, conversation about what is and isn’t working for us at this point in our anticipated relationship of thirty years, for such is a mortgage, the unrelenting weight of debt.

How good it is to see oneself fully and in her true glory, her honorable fight, and to take her out afterward for the reward of a good bite and sip.

Yes.

Now then.

In a cafe in the West Village, the women across from me are all married and discussing their children as well as the trials of their lives as landlords, running the simple and the innocent into the ground for the benefit of that mighty, holding, anchoring, scalding dollar. The mortgages they too carry, but shoulder with greater ease and the fine promise of profit that lifts, always lifts, the weight of debt from their shoulders and spines. I listen carefully to their talk and bide my time, flag a waiter for a second glass of wine, the sun beaming in the sky.

I am not like them. I am separate and apart. I hold my own court and divination, flirt with the waiter and go home alone, happy, sated, attractive in and by my solitude. I am an animal dressed in shearling and fine linen, yet I hold no court, speak to no one, refuse service in the end, and die alone.

Yes, this is the animal in me. I make decisions and attempt, make an honest attempt, at my life but it is the animal who takes it. Feral and alone, I can appreciate roadside lounging but feel, acutely, this home and worth here, amid the city’s own bulk and brutality, always churning, always taking more, crushing souls and dreams in equal measure and rapidity, for such is the truth of debt.

I will harbor no man.

I will procreate never.

I will enjoy my sated and full life.

I will engage the animal as one.

But money, always money. Money must be made and presented. It must be held in hand and account, both, and reassuringly checked, affirmed. Yes, it is still here. And it is increasing, growing. This is important. For when money is not affirming and growing but instead being siphoned away in the million little ways it goes—the metrocard, the hair cut, the slightest overcharge on a cafe bill before

Kestrel

which I sit and, in my most restrained, most polite voice, call the waitress back to say, um, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry (always apologizing, apologizing everywhere, paving whole roads and freeways with the lavish condensation of my apologies), but I think there is a mistake here. I think this should be \$15, not \$20, yes when money goes that way I feel the lion of money sitting squarely on my chest. Breathing hungrily. Its paws folded neatly but ready, always ready.

The lion takes the shape of a waitress who guffaws and regards me, haggard, for she is exhausted by the demands and retributions of her own lion work, and attempts to say no, you got this one not that one, so \$20 is right. There is nothing wrong with this.

But no, no that's all wrong, too, and now we are at the inroads that not even my apologies will smooth, make supple and smooth, so it is back to the menu, back to the earlier waiter's notes to check and recheck. Was it this one or that one? And the whole time I am feeling the lion on my chest. I am quelling the animal and keeping calm and doing my best to protect the money, what little I have, which I have spent, stupidly, on all this wine and delicious things in celebration of my resolution to sit in Central Park and sell my poetry, for what? for money.

Always, always, money.

The waitress finally says to me oh! It was that one and *not* this one? Oh! I will correct the bill. And she goes away and comes back and places a new bill, now slightly reduced, before me. It is correct. I pay and leave a tip equal to the amount in dispute which possibly makes me savvy or possibly makes me an asshole.

The exchange has left a terrible taste in my mouth, green and tinny like I had been sucking on old pennies the entire time rather than drawing down glasses of white wine into my mouth and stomach, both waiting and eager. They are pets of the money lion, for they too must be looked after and attended to, which exhausts me and largely leaves me broke.

People say to me— you should just write the way you talk! You're so funny! And maybe if I could figure out how to do that I would have more money and feel at ease, like a woman tied only to a sedated and happy lion. Things are great for now— the lion is really just fine and even a bit regal, having been sedated in an honest way and not poisoned by anything like the spoils of theft, for example, which I would only sit there and feel bad about, no. The lion is sedated and happy with the spoils of honest and hard work.

But the lion is still tied to me, always tied to me. I wish I could find a way to magically dissolve these chains and leave the lion. Peacefully walk away with no ill will and perhaps only with the idea

that the lion could take care of itself now and I would just look after me. Alone.

The lion is money and maybe the lion is also children, the prospect of the child I now feel certain I will never have, which is information that passes over me like weather. I feel no particular emotion about this. It is simply factually accurate, like saying “Today is Friday” or “Cafes have tables and chairs where people can sit and linger a while to think and write.” It’s not a big thing anymore. It is only a truth, one of many that I know.

But sometimes I do feel a little sad, and I have considered that sadness carefully. Why sad? What is that sadness about? And I realize the sadness is about one thing, maybe two. The first is that I am sad for my parents, who would have loved to have had a grandchild and feel that I would have enjoyed mothering a child up and into existence. I feel a sadness from my parents that comes back to me and emanates back out to them and we cycle through this when I am with them, which is hardly ever anymore.

The second thing might be a sadness for the denial of this core element of my being—the generative truth that is at my biological center. This also makes me sad.

Already it is so late! I never understood time or realized its passage and movement, and yet now I can see most of my friends have actual children with their own identities and interests. They don’t have babies, they have little people, mini citizens who say things about what is going on in the world and have points of view, however much they might just be parroting back what they hear at home, they are still articulating coherent positions with fully formed sentences. My non-existent child with my nowhere partner is not even a collection of cells. My child is an imagined idea in the generative space of my mind that feels like make believe.

The child would require more money, as well as very good insurance, all of which would make the lion grow gigantic and ferocious and furious with hunger. I would have to feed the lion, by way of good day care and healthy mashed up foods and excellent, meaningful entertainment with a real message and a heart of gold. All of that is what the lion, tied to me and roaring its demands, must have. I don’t know how I would do this and, more to the point, I don’t think my solutions to this problem would a) be enough or b) ameliorate the longing and sadness I would feel in my new role.

I do not want to be tied to the money lion and I don’t want to spend all my time trying to keep another person alive.

But then I wonder, what do I want to spend all my time on? What could be more important? We celebrate people who have solidly answered this question by saying, “My work is so meaningful and

Kestrel

gives me so much joy, that's what I do." These people make things like beautiful dresses or the perfect hamburger. But even those things are designed to somehow heighten the life and happiness of the ideal person, someone who has the lion sedated for years upon luxurious years at a time. This person insists her work is important and fulfilling but this is not what society hears or believes. Society says no, even as you wear that beautiful dress and eat that perfect hamburger, you are unfulfilled. You think you know your own mind but you do not and the lie you are telling yourself is so big that it cannot be believed in full and will, over time, fall apart. By sixty you will no longer recognize this lie, any truth at all within this lie, and your realization of extensive self-deception will leave you breathless and panting in the middle of the night, sweating and kicking the sheets off, hungering for a life you neither had nor created and no longer have time to create. Your sadness will break you, Society whispers in that three a.m. hush, and you will come to pine for an illness that will send you to an early grave. Your own life will be cut short for having not created life. That was the deal, and by not holding up your end of the deal you have forfeited certain pleasures, unimaginably enjoyable pleasures, Society pants, breathless, that will remain forever abstract and therefore haunting.

In this way, womanhood is exactly like holding a mortgage of which the agreed upon terms will never change. There is no difference.

So what does this person do? This person likely buckles, has a child, and searches the eyes of the child for an insight into the soul, sometimes her own soul and sometimes the soul of the lion, but look, also, at the woman who carried this child and birthed him or her into the world. Is this person happy? No. This person has only created another person who, also, is chained to the lion.

We treat women like shit when they don't have a baby and we treat women like shit when they do. So one plus one always equals zero in this calculation. I can't see past zeros, all the zeros everywhere. I try to push the zeros aside and point, even, to the lion but still Society shouts, "No! You have not done the agreed upon thing to do! You have failed! You are in arrears! A failure!"

When I was in Colorado, I met a woman with two children. She made her living giving hoola hoop lessons and she sometimes got a babysitter so she could sing karaoke at the one bar in town on Saturday nights, and she flabbergasted me. This woman had made all her choices, confident and cool and fully formed and regret-free, while tied to a lion that was somehow sated by hoola profits, and she was only twenty-four.

I told my aunt I was scandalized, that the woman was way too young and would miss out on the hard and good work of thinking

about herself and listening to herself and her true interests and realizing those interests in a meaningful, lucrative way in the world that would be respected and possibly even respected by the lion, if things went well.

“What are you talking about?” my aunt asked. “She is not too young to have children! She’s fine. A lot of people don’t go getting a bunch of degrees and thinking about things all day, like you do. A lot of people just live their lives.”

I just said, “Oh,” which is another word for zero.

Or the artist I met who has two children, one fourteen and one nine. One night we sat together over by the little creek that ran past the residency, and he also told me his age, so I looked at the whole picture of his life, from the vantage point of my night seat by the creek and the joint we were sharing. “Damn!” I exclaimed. “You started a family really young!”

“Not really,” he said. “I was thirty-three when my first child was born.”

I do not understand time, do not understand the order of things, that things need to be done in order and on time or they will not be done at all.

I wonder at the root-stump of my indecision. I struggle to make most decisions, wanting to try everything and unable to commit. I wonder if one of the core messages of my childhood—“you can be anything you want!”—contributed to this misperception of time. Perhaps this idea of being anything I want translated in my mind to “You should try everything first, before you make any real decisions.”

I look in the mirror most mornings, washing my face or allowing the froth of toothpaste to dribble out of my mouth, and I see a middle-aged woman. “You are in the youth of middle age,” my aunt tells me. “And I am in the youth of my elderly years, or possibly the elderly years of my middle age.”

She is one-third of my whole family! She is someone I am close to, and then there are my parents. That’s it! How meager. Once all three of these people were in a pool together, and I sat on the edge of the pool, looking at them, and I marveled—my whole family is in this water.

My brother has schizophrenia and has talked repeatedly and in detail about killing my parents. My uncle voted for Trump and has openly lamented the end of Jim Crow law. My cousin and his family I haven’t seen for so long I’d probably walk right past them on the street.

That’s it!

So I will sit here and contemplate the stirring lion and my youth of middle age. I will work on understanding time and the ways

Kestrel

that both time and decisions work, and realize that by allowing time to pass and by not making any decisions at all, or making decisions that were the wrong ones and left me broken with despair and heartache, in need of repair which takes more time, that I have in fact made a decision. I have lived decisively. I have tried many things, most of which were wrong for me, but a few of which were right. My being decisive looks like not making decisions and not taking action, but rather standing around and marveling as others make decisions and take action. But that, the work of standing and marveling, is in itself a decision, however unpopular! Ah well, I will close the door of my apartment alone at night and pour a glass of wine and stare at the life around me, the things I have acquired, and find within them the lion's eyes. I will sit and look into the eyes of the lion and say, "Be still," and also "peace" and this, too, is a form of mothering, however meager and unpopular.

When I saw my uncle again, briefly, and looked at him, I saw a real, living artifact of white American racism, poised and created, poured and burnished, by over seventy years of complacent American life. I wanted to ask him, honestly, "Why are you racist? What joy does that bring you?" But I did not.

I have been trained to behave in accordance with the laws and principles of family, of "getting along" and of "not causing trouble" and of "letting everyone be." So I poured and burnished my external being to conform to these requirements. But I allowed my internal being to ask these questions and to listen, carefully, to the answers. Here is what I heard:

"Because putting other people down is one of the few things that makes me feel good these days. Because by building such walls and celebrating division I have experienced unparalleled advantage and that, that advantage, I am unwilling to share. Because sharing such advantage heightens my sense of vulnerability and threatens me with the suggestion that I will experience less success as a result of greater competition across an equal playing field, one made more equal by the absence of prejudice. That I never sat and listened honestly to my own heart but rather became an orthopedic surgeon as my father before me, a career I have since trashed by starting a war with my business partner and then stealing opioids from the office in an attempt to feel better, however artificially, when the racism and dishonesty failed to bring me long term happiness. That I feel bewildered by these many losses and my consequent struggle to find a place in the world, even at this late date, the middle age of my elderly years, all of which is evidence of my failure to understand time and its consequences."

I listened carefully to these truths and when his internal being

was done speaking, I thanked him for his honesty, one of the last true goods in the world that is free to provide and always available to everyone, in abundance, at any time. Honesty can bring the lion great discomfort in the short term, and the lion will struggle against it mightily more often than not, but true honesty will also bring the lion peace over time and this, which is priceless, can help to ease the chain between the lion and the person. In this there is value that even the lion can see, though the lion cannot quantify it and therefore struggles, still, sometimes, though less and less. All of this is good.

My internal being bowed to his internal being, even as his external being continued to stand before me, legs spread, the stance of dominance, still choosing to languish in the false comfort of racism, division, and hate.

“So, Carrie!” His external being bellowed, still choosing to call me by my childhood name which I have long renounced and long made clear I prefer my full, adult name, Caroline.

“So, Carrie! Why aren’t you married yet? What happened?”

I allow myself to feel the spark of shame in my heart, shame for having defaulted on the mortgage of womanhood as my uncle presented it to me. I see the spark and I recognize it, but I do not let it catch fire to the whole of me, to shred me with its burning flames of shame. I smile at the flinching, momentary heat, and it is extinguished.

“I don’t know that everyone does get married,” I say. “Getting married isn’t for everyone.”

By saying this out loud, and by speaking the truth of my finally cool and fire-retardant heart, I have laid the mortgage of womanhood out plainly before us both. I have turned on all the lights and I point now, indelibly, to the bold print. It is not fine print, it is bold print, before us both, plain to read:

“All women will get married and have children and, in doing so, find true happiness through the fulfillment of their ultimate duty, which is serving others, which includes but is not limited to all those who have existed, all those who currently exist, and all those who are yet to come.”

I point to this language, which is plain and easily understood by all, and take out a large highlighter. I highlight the full text to make even more plain and clear that this is the contractual language to which I refer and with which I now take issue.

I am changing the terms of the mortgage of womanhood. I still live in the house, and the house is often lovely, but I will no longer be making payments. I look into the banker-cold eyes of my uncle, who would like to continue to insist that the terms of the mortgage are still good and inviolable, even, and I say, as is my way, that I am sorry. I apologize, as is my way, to ease his discomfort with the smooth paving

Kestrel

of my apology, which costs me nothing, and say, “These terms no longer apply. They have been rendered null and void. I will no longer be making any payments whatsoever, in any form or any currency. Nor will I be moving out of the house, which is often lovely. You may speak to any lawyer you wish, at any time, which often makes us Americans feel better or perhaps the phrase is ‘in control’ but that is up to you. And I remind you that lawyers are very, very expensive.”

My internal being, with its hands on this contract and the highlighter beside, stands before my uncle’s internal being, which only stares back at me in vague amazement. No being, internal or external, has ever spoken to my uncle in this way before.

The silence of my uncle’s internal being is intolerable to him, so he relies on his external being and its worn and familiar script, to reply, “Well, I think you’ll find that doesn’t make anyone very happy.”

I am glad for this response. It is easy, a soft lob over the net, and I trifle with it a moment before spiking it back, hard and with the full force of my truth, which finds and gathers strength in the false judgment of others.

“I’m not interested in everyone’s happiness, over which I have zero control. Only my own.”

“Well,” my uncle stammers, incredulous and stepping back from the fully highlighted mortgage of womanhood, which now also features the word VOID in all caps and presented on the diagonal across the text. I gently pick up the contract and gently tear it in half, so as to ensure not the full voiding of the contract, for that has already been done, but my uncle’s full understanding of its expiration, which he may or may not ever fully accept. It happens. Many contracts have been terminated to the displeasure of one party or another. It is not the end of the world but the end of one understanding, which will now become another, and this can take some time. It is no problem for this to take time, for time itself is a concept few people truly understand or allow for. The time some people need to accommodate the new reality of the voided mortgage of womanhood is not my time. I may or may not even check to determine the status of this accommodation. It is not my business.

“Good luck with that,” my uncle says.

It is possible to hear this statement, spoken by his external being while his internal being remains mute and witnessing, in one of two ways:

1) The statement may be considered sarcastic, deriding the revised terms and conditions as might have been offered to the first person who ever tried to catch a lion to be placed in a zoo for which people will pay money to see. “Good luck with that,” the bystander says to the aspiring zoo keeper, knowing that the lion is

fierce and should always be allowed to stay wild and free, that the aspiring zookeeper will likely be destroyed in an effort to catch and hold captive the wonderful, wild lion. The aspiring zoo keeper is a fool, whose mission will bring only failure and death, and therefore only luck can be offered and even that is not authentic, an authentic extension of luck and good will, but a disingenuous statement of false hope. Or:

2) My uncle is offering me a true wish of good luck from his internal self that is speaking honestly from the position of one trapped by a cold and hateful external self but that can still feel and see and therefore conceive of and extend the expression of true and genuine good will and fortune.

I decided that my uncle has spoken to me from the second position, the true expression of good will and fortune. In that moment my internal and external selves reached a beautiful moment of complete alignment, allowing me the full inflation of air in my lungs and love in my heart, which I used to say, "Thank you."

