Inequality or Being a Woman or Riding the Greyhound for the First Time

Lilian Juma

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or
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Covered in Adidas sweatpants, a jacket, high tops, and insecurity
Dressed for comfort and ready for thunder
Ready for a tempest, the eye of cyclone

The only melanin visible on my face and fingers
yet their eyes somehow configured into scalpels
my body a pending cadaver

It reminded me of the first time I wore a tank top,
and shorts above my knees in public,
It was 2nd grade, I switched out of my jeans before my mom saw me
and I felt liberty, athletic, and confident
until someone called it unbefitting for my body
and left me chubby, peculiar, and vulnerable

I navigate the runway- I mean bus aisle more hunch than strut
more cub than lion
more girl than woman
more woman than human
looking more like a snack, a meal, a prey than someone whom you’d be
blessed to share a plate with

I didn’t take a seat, no it was handed to me
The older man’s pity left me less 18 years and counting
and more pigtails and missing front teeth

I thought I wanted a window seat,
Just like thought needed a guy who would keep me warm, and his yoke
would be easy and burden light, I thought I could call him Adam and
he could mispronounce my name from Queen to girl, to hoe, to bitch
and it wouldn’t mean anything

I thought if I let him sit next to me, we’d respect boundaries, I didn’t
think he would consume everything, man spreading, and leave me
inside, shrinking, and thinking I was inconsiderate and have me
apologizing for my very existence

I held my bladder for 5 hours and fell asleep.
I held it like every time I bit my
tongue,
or clenched my fists
or every year I let my voice become a decibel less
For every line I crossed out,
or revised out of existence,
for every poem I left unwritten
For every smile I let slip,
and every time I let politeness exhibit more than sincerity
For every guy who rather converse with my chest and thighs than eyes,
that I let slide
For every injustice that I didn’t stand for
and every person I didn’t interrupt when I should have

My legs are sore now
this bus is more stoic than moving
more cage than liberty
more than can be fixed with a single amendment
less of a trip and more like waiting for other passengers to wake up