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## THE SIGNAL

Stacy Nathaniel Jackson

I died twice. Stopped breathing. Didn't have a heartbeat.  
Gramps pointed his long gun—not at me obviously,  
but toward the ocean defensively  
where I nose-dived like a kite on Bird Island.  
His dog Shiva licked my face as I flickered in and out.  
I'd been slammed in the chest running from rebel sympathizers.  
It was close. I'd almost made it. But—  
by the time I stopped breathing, there was no pain.  
I wasn't feeling anything other than shame.  
*I'm sorry. I should have been more careful,* I said to Gramps.  
My mouth didn't move though. Wasn't necessary.  
We could communicate, signal each other—without speaking.  
We were tele-talkers.

I grew up in the flatlands, on the west coast, in Oakland  
a day away from Gramps' barrier island by plane.  
Mama hated the 2<sup>nd</sup> sphere where we lived. Our neighborhood  
had wasted like a ghost forest. Still standing. Standing still.  
Gramps wanted us to move across country with him,  
Mama resisted though; she said districts outside the spheres  
had had a history of biopolitical intolerance and violence.  
Gramps told her Bird Island was better than the spheres.  
The water was cleaner. The air was clearer.  
Birds continued to migrate. Sea turtles returned to nest.  
Mama eventually allowed me to visit Gramps by myself.

I used to love visiting Bird Island as a kid.  
When I got older, Gramps taught me handyman  
tricks, how to gut a fish, how to defend myself.  
It wasn't unusual to find casings in the dunes  
around Little River inlet at the site of the Uprising.  
Bird Island was a rebel holdover.  
A central post of the retrench movement.  
In middle school, I didn't catch the significance  
of what any of that meant. I was oblivious.

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## CALLALOO

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I remember one weekend Gramps took me  
to the pancake house on the mainland.  
Some guy with a floppy belly was in line.  
He wore baggy shorts and a holster on his hip.  
For whatever reason, I couldn't keep my eyes off  
the stars and bars logo on his t-shirt,  
the turtle tattoo angled on his hairy white calf.  
The man glared back.  
Gramps tried to interrupt my staring  
by asking me what I wanted to eat.  
I always had chocolate chip pancakes and milk.  
Before I could answer, Gramps popped me  
in the arm with a worn-out menu.  
*Anessa, don't stare.*  
*You might start something up in here.*  
His mouth wasn't moving. But I could hear.  
I started bugging. It wasn't just the frown on Gramps' face.  
Voices had occasionally entered my mind on blast  
like music streaming from several sources at once.  
I had never told anyone about the sounds, not even Mama.  
In the pancake house, I didn't understand why Gramps  
was "saying" what he was "saying" without speaking  
until the man made a motion toward his pistol grip  
and snarked "Go back to Aa-free-kah!"  
Gramps put his arm around me as the man passed.  
I was scared.  
*It's okay. We're alright.*  
I was glad Gramps was rumbling around in my head.  
The next morning while pouring his coffee,  
Gramps said he needed to talk to me about something important.  
I was leery. Anxious really.  
Did he say something to Mama about the pancake house?  
Gramps and I spoke every day.  
Why announce we needed to have a *conversation*?  
Turns out it was his version of "the talk."  
He explained signaling. What it was. How it worked.  
Gramps said it was genetic. A Y chromosome mutation.  
His great grandfather passed signaling along to his son.  
And his son.  
On down. Until now.  
I was a surprise to Gramps, he said.  
It was presumed there was no Y on my gene map.

That evening Gramps, Shiva and I went for a walk.  
We took turns throwing a floating ball into the surf.

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## CALLALO

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Gramps followed Shiva into the water.  
I followed Gramps diving headfirst as the tide shifted.  
After wave jumping, happy and wet without towels,  
we walked toward the pier, a violet sky over our heads.  
I saw them as we got closer to the public walkway.  
There must have been over twenty people,  
beach chairs semi-circled around a flagpole,  
watching the sun set. Others were playing  
cornhole and smash ball. Planted in the middle  
of their circle were rebel flags, double hung.  
*Don't say anything*, Gramps warned  
as he reached to tether Shiva's leash tight.  
I wasn't going to do or say anything stupid.  
But...

*Don't!*

The next summer, for the first time in my life  
I wasn't sure I wanted to be anywhere near Bird Island.  
Gramps apparently thought we should go along to get along,  
keep our mouths shut around rebel sympathizers.  
Otherwise, he wouldn't have taken his United  
States of America garden flag down.  
Sharing Gramps' gift, speaking without speaking,  
sometimes hearing other people's thoughts secretly  
was hard enough. I was a teenager now; confident I knew  
how to handle my business. But Gramps' way,  
trying to stay invisible in a rebel beach town,  
I wasn't feeling it.

The week before I died,  
I ordered a lawn flag for Gramps' house: a rainbow  
pride peace sign. I kept it wrapped flat in my roller bag.  
I struggled for a minute after I got to Gramps' house—  
worried the flag might make us targets.  
I concentrated on celebratory memories like graduating  
from high school so Gramps wouldn't sense anything.  
My skills hadn't fully matured. Distress. Danger.  
That's when signaling kicked in for me.  
Finally, two weeks had passed.  
I opted not to ask Gramps for permission.  
I waited until early evening when I pulled out the trash.  
I put the peace sign in the front yard planter box,  
despite his cautionary guidance to me last year  
about tolerating political differences and what not.

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## CALLALOO

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The next morning, Shiva and I went out the back door  
onto the public walkway toward the beach for a walk. I  
heard hooting and hollering. Closer now, I saw a circle.  
They were punching, kicking, taunting someone.  
After the beat down, they shook hands and hugged.  
Was this a rebel initiation?  
I could see someone with my sign.  
He wore a military tactical vest over his t-shirt.  
Screaming, he lit my sign on fire.  
His circle of supporters went berserk.  
"That's mine!"  
I yelled without thinking about action and reaction.  
Shiva took his cues from me as anger flowed down leash.  
His piloerection was on full display.  
Then Shiva lunged, begging me to let him loose.  
I slid forward as he pulled.  
Attention shifted to me and Shiva.  
I backed away. I imagined how Gramps would deal  
with our situation: observe everything, say nothing.  
My eyes traced up and over the dune.  
I could see incoming turtle tracks.  
The militant wannabes had lassoed a loggerhead.  
More than likely a female who had traveled back to land  
during nesting season. Unnerved, I unleashed Shiva.  
"STOP!" is what I said. *ATTACK* is what I thought.  
Shiva was over threshold. I was scared  
I had lost control of a 140-pound Great Dane.  
Fearing the worst, I imagined Shiva  
biting someone's neck. It wasn't a command!  
Shiva leapt; his fangs intending to inflict deadly force.  
Why didn't Gramps warn me Shiva could hear signals?  
Blood pooled in circles like a lazy river.  
I ground my feet into the sand to hold my position. The  
rebels scattered away, dragging their wounded  
over the dune toward the inlet.  
I shifted my thoughts to the loggerhead.  
*We need to help her.*  
Shiva mouthed the slipshod ropework, moving his snout  
back and forth like he had a good hold of a rag doll.  
I was concerned we couldn't free the turtle without harm.  
But a mature sea turtle weighing 300 pounds

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## CALLALO

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turned out to be an anchor. The rope loosened.  
I pulled to help. Mama turtle came out hot,  
slow but hot, her mouth wide open.  
She waddled toward the shoreline.  
Shiva stayed close to me. Blood on his jowls.  
I was petrified. Detergent would get it out.  
But how was I going to explain this mess to Gramps?  
Shiva sauntered away from me into the surf.  
"I guess we're swimming," I said to no one—  
still amped, and followed him into the water.  
I dove under an incoming wave to clear my thoughts.  
I decided to swim further, leaving Shiva onshore  
until my feet had nothing to hold.

I saw them before I heard their motor churn.  
A jet ski turned the corner out of the inlet.  
The riders were angled ninety degrees.  
They should have been parallel to the beach.  
*Gramps, I'm in trouble*, I signaled.  
If the jet skiers were from the rebel group,  
no doubt they wanted to mow me down.  
I didn't want to wait to find out.  
I dove and dolphin kicked underwater.  
I had wanted to be a rescue diver since I was nine.  
Gramps and I trained so much my lungs had adapted.  
I was more stressed about popping up than passing out.  
Three minutes was the longest I'd swum without a breath  
in a pool or the ocean. I had a choice: push past my limits  
or take a chance and sneak a breath. I reversed my descent.  
That's when I heard Gramps holler my name. *ANESSA*.

I stayed underwater, surfacing after I don't know how long.  
Looking toward land, from my vantage point, people  
at a distance on the beach were the size of gnats.  
I tipped my head and floated.  
Soon, I heard the jet ski again gathering speed.  
Its engine sounded like a weed whacker.  
It happened fast.  
The jet ski's bow nearly struck my head.  
I sucked air before descending,  
swam underwater in an erratic but intentional zig zag.  
Eventually I could see the sandy bottom, feel the surge  
of waves breaking overhead. *Don't stop*.  
I didn't. Not until the rebels beached their jet ski  
into me intentionally.

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## C A L L A L O O

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Neuroscientists say they can prove your life rewinds  
before your eyes when it's time to die. I mean, yeah,  
I can vouch for that. Sort of. When I died, there was  
seeing and feeling. I was swimming.  
Not in the Atlantic but Mama's belly.  
I could feel pressure on my chest before  
I spit fluid and inhaled my first breath.  
There were bright lights. Hands. Skin wiping.  
A chorus of voices trying to coax me into the world  
through Mama. I saw my past, my beginning.  
Before I transitioned things went blank. Grey-black.  
Researchers say hearing is the last sense to fade.  
It didn't happen like that exactly. I continued to hear  
Gramps after my last breath. He was inconsolable.  
Although he was grieving, I could hear him signaling  
*I got you.*