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I'm So Lucky to Know You

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Konrad, Melody. "I'm So Lucky to Know You" (2020). *Audre Lorde Writing Prize*.

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I'm So Lucky To Know You.

Melody Konrad
ENCW-303 Kelly Daniels
Spring 2020
Personal/Reflective Prose

If you take the number one bus, my place is the mid-way point between when the bus driver pulls in for a break at Wal-mart and pulls up at the transit center for a change of shift. I can go either direction, based on if I want to cross the street, leave the house, or be seen standing too long at the sidewalk. Once I'm there, on the number one bus, I can go anywhere I want, really. And if I don't like where I get to, it's thirty three stops until home.

The transit center is downtown. Our downtown town is a feeling. The down. The transit center hasn't printed transit slips in years, so you got people that just want to pay another dollar to get on another bus and get on their way. Crumpled up bills and cold quarters stumble out of pockets and wallets, but discreet. It's downtown, and there's always the chance someone might see your money. Rehearse it in the mirror. 'Sorry, hon. I only carry card.' You'll hand over your cash to the driver guilty and sweaty and you'll sit, and next time someone asks you to bum a smoke, you won't even check if it's the last in your packet. You really gotta quit smoking anyways.

There's a few kinds of people you'll get at the buses. Same all over, in the crush of the big cities and down in the farmland where bus routes are bus route. There's the mother. She pulls her baby by the wrist and balances groceries and the weight of the world on the hip that used to be his. No wonder he's so often crying. She pulls up blanket covers and fusses with hats and gloves. She apologizes, she apologizes, she apologizes. There's the girl with the eyes. Her apron, collared shirt, khaki dress pants, soft soled shoes all say the same thing. 'Another shift tomorrow'. Elderly women who still wear eyeliner that looks better than yours and sweaters you want to touch. Men that sit open legged and too close when the bus just isn't crowded enough to justify their bullshit.

Headed to work, family, the Paradise casino, they drip off downtown with me. They leave with the exhaust. When I get off downtown, I head to The River.

That River used to be everything to this town. Used to build up our civilization, us freshwater people. That river was the Nile's little sister- and we worshipped her with smokestacks. I used to watch them, spinning on the tire swing next to the water, and the clouds that weren't clouds never fully occluded the stars. When I last talked to some of our freshwater people about that time I dipped my toes in our river that night in June, the way they cringed

made me remember the way mosquitos had gone straight for my ankles- God, I thought. We are such drinkers.

I would walk the Riverwalk in the summer- but not too close, because the smell is no joke. It's fish and runoff and stale booze from fourth of July, and the corpses of ten thousand mayflies. It is the most beautiful river in the world, and in summer it reeks.

In the winter I remember New Years. Fourteen, fearless. Me, and my best friends and sparkling cider. We were such adults. We ate crab for the first time in our lives and nearly puked it out spinning, spinning, spinning on the tire swing and around each other. I screamed when you pushed me higher and I screamed louder when you stopped because I felt the stomach drop of freedom and I didn't know yet if I liked it- God. We were fourteen. We all swigged out of the same non-alcoholic bottle. None of us kissed even though we thought about it. The river watched us and the stars were so beautiful, and nothing even felt cold.

In the spring, I remember how you took me to the pagoda. I was dressed up and my make up was sticking to my hair in the way it used to when I was seventeen, and you were so lost. You had promised dinner, and I wanted dinner and all I got from you for a solid two hours was a walk in heels that pinched my toes and the unhelpful voice of google maps chirping in our ears. We did not argue in the way that we never argue. You're nervous and I'm irritable. I am thinking of endless bread bowls with a vicious fury, and you are thinking of what your gravestone will be. We dance in the pagoda. You ask me to prom, and we don't kiss. I clutch a teddy bear on the ride to a closed Applebees and I don't care so much about bread or dancing on toes that lack circulation or that neither of us have ever been able to dance. We found the pagoda, on the edge of The River, where it had always been.

In the summer, I am 21, and I am with a man I love, and he loves me, and I take him to my river place because I don't know any other way to soothe what is broken between two people. In the parking lot there is an impromptu party, bass blasting from their cars. They're drinking and we've bought cookies and we sit up in the castle near the slide and listen to music. This, I think, is healing. He will push me on the slide and I will take my shoes off and he will carry me on his back through the woodchips and it will be so much love. The River is downtown. My town, our town- there have been 25 deaths from gun violence in the last year. This is

downtown but this is my river. I was fourteen and I was dancing. I was sixteen, and I was dancing. It is not even midnight.

A man is violently beaten. We watch them yell and come for him from the castle. I take my earbuds out. A man that I love leaves my side and I sit there, I just sit there. A man I love is a man who tries to stop fights, and tries to protect the people on the wrong end of the concrete and the kicking boot. A man I love is so stupid and so outnumbered. I don't know who else there is to hold him back but me. I run for him, and I pull him away. He doesn't want to go, but A man I love loves me so much. He goes for me, and we leave the thugs to look at The River. My voice is panicked as I scream at him in the car never to do it again, never to be so stupid, that he has a future- we drive in silence. I think about bus routes home.

In Fall, I was sixteen. My hair was the color of the dying leaves. A high school dropout, unemployed, hanging to the thread of my mother's promise that tonight, we will see a play. The Civic Center downtown is \$50 too much, even for two tickets to the nosebleeds. I wait for her to get out of work at The River. There is a little steel 'used to be something' that hangs off the earth and into the water. If you slip slide down the prairie grass and the stones and the branches and don't twist your ankle in the process, it is a dock where you can sit. It is warm in the summer, and it is big enough to lay all across on. I sit there, listen to music. Write. I look out into The River and see something splashing- too big to be a fish, a beaver? I sit there the entire hour, and I find threads. Beavers, skippable rocks, music that's beats line up perfectly with the little waves that lap at my dock, steel that holds you up from drowning.

The transit center is a warming center in the winter. The bus drivers know their riders- I hold the 2nd shift's chinese take out on my lap and she tells me about her children. The riders know each other. I snuggle in to a window seat and the two ahead of me twist backwards: "Do you know what the wife did? She was on the bus last night with him from down on Sheridan, that knows my cousin." The bus rides are warm and when you lean your cheek against the glass it buzzes and knocks your whole head around.

Two stops before my house, homeward on the route, is a Community College. It is the first college I have ever been to and the buildings are named after trees- Birch, and Cedar, and Dogwood. I feel lost in this forest. Clean off my GED, I am no college girl. I dropped out

freshman year before anyone insisted upon me the importance of other three letters like MLA and GPA and PHD. I do not know whether to raise my hand or slink out to the bathroom as though my very existence is an imposition on the institution of higher education. I do not know how to study for more than an hour without the words on the page beginning to look like 'watch netflix, eat pancakes, this won't be on the test'. The professor goes through the powerpoint too fast for me to take notes and what am I supposed to take notes on and am I good enough?

I withdraw from a class my first semester that summer. I am not good enough. Even when I have a 4.0 the next two semesters, I am no college girl.

There began again, a weaving of threads. I began to collect 'Good things'. Getting an A on a test, going to the gym, doing well at work. I hoarded successes. I had forgotten I was in a Forest until I started felling trees and growing my house in the clearing.

For two years, that college was the run in your stocking that you never pull- it holds everything together, even if it is glaringly obvious that it is never going to last forever. I found myself there, much in the way that a mother finds her lost child in the grocery store. There were a lot of tears and some yelling, but God- the relief of finding something. I found English, I found my people, I found baristas that made my coffee the right way and remembered my order. I loved everything about college, from the ugly carpets in the cafe to the glass doors in financial aid so everyone could see the very sweat on my forehead.

I loved it so much that I worked there. Late winter, the library let me in, and I simply didn't leave. I liked the desk up front, and the regulars that asked me about the weather, and if I'd please open the window so they could see the snow. It was an easy job- almost a con, really. I did homework more often than I shelved anything or fixed a printer. I read whole books leisurely, and chatted with my boss about his next gig playing the alphorn and his trip to Ireland. I put off locking up to shoot the shit with security, holding my hands over my ears while him and my supervisor talked about new episodes of our show- traitors, they'd watched it without me.

Libraries inevitably teach you something. Graduated from reading in the stacks criss-cross as a child, I've been gainfully employed at three of them over four years, so take it from the professional. It's never the books that do it.

First, it was Angie. Angie, was a librarian. She liked my hair because she said her son would like the blue (it reminded him of his favorite character in his favorite show), and I liked her because everyone liked Angie. Patrons came in express, asking her full name. I used to sit and listen to her help people. And because people are people, and people can be so warm, Angie let me see her work. I met Z. Z was short on eyesight, and she had trouble now with emails and facebook posts and looking up Brad Pitt in 'His New Thing'. Z made dresses out of ties, and they were just beautiful. She told me I had to model one for her someday and tell everyone exactly where I got it. Z came in to see Angie every Saturday, no fail. There was a teacher. She was still learning back then, and she came in printing up kid's books and worksheets. She was abrupt and sarcastic and like a cat that had picked a person, gentler than a kiss around Angie. She came around to me too, eventually. We talked about her son, who was good for nothing and probably out getting girls pregnant as we spoke, and about kids, who were learning too quick and growing up too fast.

Angie used to talk about her sons too. Both of them had I names, biblical, and I called them 'Uppercase I' and 'Lowercase I'. That always made Angie laugh. She loved to talk about her boys. Their star signs, what they got for christmas, what sport they were into, how much she loved every hair on their big heads. Every mom I've ever met has shown me pictures of their babies, but even by those standards, Angie had a lot of pictures.

I didn't know what happened to her for a few months. It's that way sometimes, with coworkers, you just figure that your shifts don't match up and you wait for next month. I'd known she had cancer. It was just, that when my boss told me, as I was clocking out and getting my coat that she had died, I hadn't expected it, that's all. I knew that that was what happened, with cancer, sometimes. That death was real and it was as close as illness. I just didn't realize it could happen to Angie.

If Angie had still been there, she wouldn't have let my second lesson happen, and I know that down pat. She was a mother like that. As it was, I did what we do, and I learned.

There were regulars in the library. A professor, and a retiree who was always 'just heading out for a round of golf', a kid that always ate crumbly foods, and The Guy. The Guy was the reason that we had to keep the lights on in the computer lab. He was soft spoken, but he was

the type to strike up a conversation when it was just him and me in the back.

“Where do you live?”

“Oh. Around here.”

“Yeah, but where at.”

“Down by Richwoods, by the school?”

“I’m just asking because I’ve seen you waiting for the bus. You know, I could always give you a ride home.”

“Oh, thank you, but it’s no problem. I have a bus pass and everything. Thanks though.”

He would watch- but he was soft spoken. I was told to assume kindness, so I assumed kindness. Summer rolled around, professional length skirts. I logged him into the same computer every time he came, I was used to the routine, but I don’t think he was so used to the skirt.

“You have a little fuzz-”

I think, on tv, this is where the woman snaps. There is a moment of blissful, escapist ‘Girl Power’. She tells The Guy off and she owns her body. She has never been groped before. A man has never ‘picked fuzz’ off her ass. She knows exactly what to do, and she is confident.

“Oh. Thank you.”

TV girl is not used to it. She is not unsure between heartbeats as to whether there was really something on her skirt and would it matter? Should he have touched me? Men have touched me before, and done worse. This, is work. This is not supposed to happen at work. This will happen again.

I mention this to my boss the third offer to take me home. I break down into tears in the break room, carry on with my shift, and wonder what took me so long to do it. I think that surely, it must mean that I am a liar and ruining his reputation by accusing him of any small untowardness. I am wracked by guilt, not TV girl’s vindication. My Boss does nothing, and I continue to check in The Guy. I wear pants.

On a summer day, I could walk home from The College- it is only a few bus stops. In winter, I do not want to sludge through the unshoveled sidewalks or risk my life walking just a little into the road. I take the bus the little ways back. Home is a place where the tree we planted when I was a child has grown big enough to conk me on the head when I want to take the trash

out. It is cracked sidewalk, and leaky windows. It is the midway point- the door that I exit from and enter into at the days bookends.

When I was younger, whenever I cried, for splinters or for playground heartbreak, I used to say 'I want to go home'. As sure as I was that blown eyelashes would get me wishes, I was sure every time I was miserable that I wanted to go home. This made very little sense to anyone when I was sat on my own porch, curled on my own couch, or tucked in my own bed snot faced and bawling that I really, truly, desperately wanted to go home. I do not think I knew what home was. It was not so much the building- the building wasn't very good. It had leaky windows and basement flooding and clutter. I wanted the feeling of being home. I wanted someone to make me feel the way I felt when I got through the door and I was safe. I wanted to know that my special things like my scooby doo wallpaper and my pooh bear would be here for me within arms reach. I wanted to know that I didn't have to ask to go into the fridge. I wanted to feel safe.

I always felt safe at the other end of the route. The number one bus runs from down-town to Wal-Mart, but depending on how early you're riding, that's not just how far it goes. It goes past the kind of Prairieland that reminds my ancestral midwestern soul of burning. Nestled, in between the prairie and the soybean field that never seems to get picked, is My Library.

It is the kind of library that breaks all your previous mis-apprehensions that libraries are quiet. Wailing children chew on blocks and tear pages out from books and sit on their daddy's lap to hear the same book read the hundredth time. There is music on Sundays- no more Rock N' Roll. 'We'll never do that again', Barb told me sharply, from beneath her glasses and a smile. 'You could hear that all the way in the back'. It is always folk americana, with banjos and harmonicas. Sometimes old couples dance together within my view, giving each other skillful arthritic twirls and kisses and I shelve my books and inside I want that, I want it, as I put Nancy Drew back in place I vow to whatever God created folk americana I am going to have it.

My library is, much like any library, special for the people. All the mothers that took an eighteen year old girl under their wings and watched her awkwardly grow into being a woman, like she was supposed to be. In winter, their cars were warm and playing Dolly Parton- they drove me from the prairie to the bus stop. At my library, I got wherever I needed to get safe- we left at close in a woman-pack, and they closed ranks around the young. There was always food in

the break room. Cake, fruit, coffee. It wasn't uncommon to walk in and hear 'Did you see we have cupcakes in the back? Go get a cupcake'. They didn't care I wasn't clocked in, or that I wasn't on break, I was always fed by them.

When The Guy intruded into the sacred space that is my shelves- I walked into the back on shaky legs.

"Hey. Remember me?"

I remembered him. I remembered him the entire time I put the Hardy Boys back, and a little more when I did Junie B. Jones. I remembered him as he sat, cheerful and tranquil at our computers. I went to the back, and when I told My Library, I stayed there. They didn't let him near me. The other page on shift met my eyes- she had been followed around through the DVD's until she broke out into a cold sweat. I had been asked out in the paperback romance section. She had felt shivers up the little hairs on her neck when a man discussed her right to her back. She stayed in back with me for a little while, I got a sister.

I got a brother, and I watched him grow up. He was the only boy among all of us, and so special like that. For the first year he worked, we were separate. We liked to pretend that we didn't believe that the other *really* existed, like unicorns or good first dates. He was painfully young, the kind of young that told me about his prom dates and let me shelve right next to him when the prom date went bad. He doesn't know what he means to me, in the way that boys that age don't know how incredible they are, and how much they'll do one day. He liked, especially, the Stephen King in the horror section, so we talked, especially, about Stephen King.

"But it wasn't a happy ending, there's never a happy ending in those books, man. They never end up living, just surviving. I hate that."

And he told me, and I'll never forget, and one day it'll be on my skin:

"Maybe survival was our happy ending this time."

I got to watch my mothers become mothers- Mary already had one and got another, a special little boy that completed a nuclear family. I had thought that must be perfect. He was soft and small and her daughter was blonde and named for flowers- she had the white blonde hair

only the littlest of girls have, and it was so fine I believed that it would spin into a gold that would put straw to shame. When I left that place I loved, I heard that little flower girl had cancer, and that her hair was falling out. She is six years old, and I am twenty two, and I thought of Angie. It happens to the beautiful and the kind and the young and the *close*. I was not there to bring Mary flowers.

I was there for Jillian. This was her first baby, carried in the thick summer heat at the same time Mary's back was hurting with her son. The two of them were pregnant together, and the smell of ginger tea and a little bit of morning vomit tended to linger around their desks. Jillian was special. She was the librarian that loved me, because she was the children's librarian and I had refused to grow up, just like her. She was a loaner of music, a prankster, a nationally ranked Irish dancer who had the nerve to never teach me her moves. She was this beautiful, complex woman- she collected library cards from around the world. I hadn't understood much, before, that one could lead a fulfilling life past thirty in a town that wasn't on TV, and Jillian gave me that something so special. I could grow up and it could be the best most okay part of my life. It could be what I was working towards.

Jillian was looking for baby names around the time I had been at My Library only a few months. She kept it a devious secret, and we were all bursting to know if in the end the kid would pop out an Ethel or a Maeve or a Josephine. We did not care much except that it was the only important thing in the world (Mary had already told us her son's name, handed down from a grandfather). So it comes late summer, when the back sweat gets unbearable and dress code still demands you wear sleeves, and Jillian does not come to work. She does not come to work for several days, and I am not afraid for Jillian because the gossip vine in My Library is more efficient than those in small southern towns. She gives birth to a healthy baby girl that will grow up to wear squeaky shoes and try to steal my carts from me with surprisingly strong toddler hands. She will have blonde hair.

There is a vending machine in the break room, and that is where I learned Jillian's daughter's name. I was very casual about not knowing the very most important thing in the world, but only because I had a snickers. Maybe two snickers. I was cornered there, with melty chocolate on my hands, there by the sunchips-behind-glass.

“Do you know what Jillian named her daughter yet?”

“No.”

The weight of the world was oozing down between my nails and I couldn't even lick it up in polite company.

“She named her the same as you.”

“What?”

“She named her *your name*. Didn't you know she liked that name?”

Jillian will probably always tell friends and family that she named her the same name as mine after a Doctor Who character and I didn't have much to do with it at all, and in fact, my presence in the library wasn't a factor at all. But when I was a bawling mess in the break room with only five minutes left to my break and not enough cold water in the world to splash away my sniffing happy tears- I maintain that I was at least partial inspiration, and that that child got her love for squeaky shoes and shelving carts from The Big Version. One day, she'll take over my job.

Debs, who retired the same year I left, when so many of us left, used to drive me to the bus stop. Her car was a little broken down, and always had an audiobook on the floor. She would drop me at the door and she would say 'take care now' or 'see you tomorrow' even if she wouldn't- Debs kept us all in line, but she was the kind that watched to make sure I got in safely before driving away. I used to go inside Wal-mart just to watch Debs drive away, even though the bus stop was a little walk away.

There's a little bench at the bus stop at Wal-mart, where you sit your groceries and not your ass. The bus drivers always pull up early in the winter, even on their break. They load us in with our slush-squishing shoes and we sit there thawing for the rest of their break. Then, it's the entire route of the number one bus in front of us.

I could take it the whole way- go to the transit center, and then for another dollar another bus and anywhere. I could flee to other libraries, and sit in their stacks and read their books, like an infestation. I could find a starbucks and drink their fancy coffee, or go to a Kroger and see if their discount aisle works better for groceries. I could see the same people on different buses,

like I'm never going anywhere different at all, if I go to the transit center, my whole world opens up.

Or I could go thirty three stops. I want to go home.