



FEW UNDERSTAND

An on-chain micro autofiction series

KALEN IWAMOTO

Block 0 [Genesis block]

7 January, 2021

The atmosphere in our house during the Christmas holidays was lively and boisterous, laced with something heavy and sinister that nobody talked about. But with the new year, the unease gave way to a sense of optimism and renewal, and I deemed it safe to end the news detox I'd instated to keep anxiety at bay. So, on January 7, I sat down to read the news. The day's headline in the New York Times read, "Trump incites mob. Rampage in Capitol forces evacuations; It's 'part of his legacy,' a Republican says". Below it, there was a photo of rioters scaling the wall, about to storm the Capitol. At that moment, the sinister thing cracked open and I was ambushed by the kind of dread that takes hold of an arachnophobe watching a spider egg hatch.

Is this the end or the beginning?

Block 1

11 January, 2021

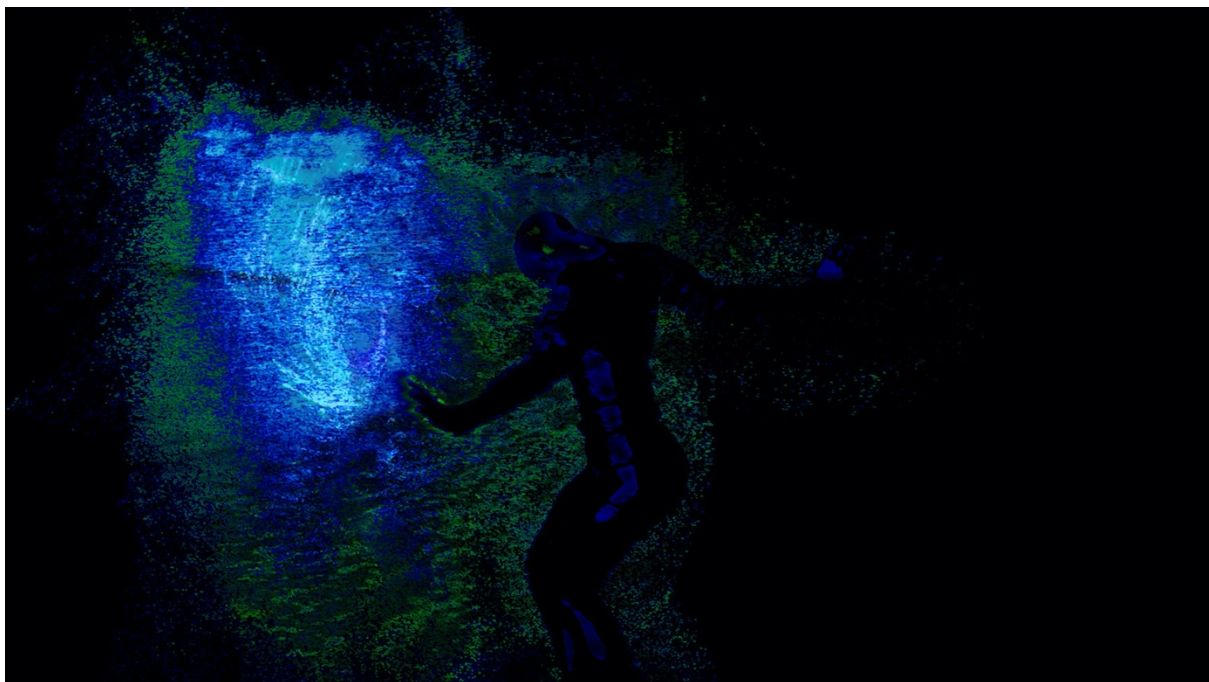
Is this the end or the beginning?

This is what I ask myself at every big turn in my life — a breakup, a move to a new city, marriage, childbirth — as I fall into the gap that opens up between the end of one thing and the beginning of the next. In that liminal space, that vertiginous moment between identities, just for a moment, I am untethered. This is always both exhilarating and terrifying. For a brief moment, I can glimpse the seams and the hand at work, stitching my life together. I witnessed this while waiting for contractions after my water broke. I witnessed this on the train to Paris when I was leaving Amsterdam for good.

Block 2
22 January, 2021

I witnessed this on the train to Paris when I was leaving Amsterdam for good. I was newly single, glad to be leaving the Dutchman and the city that scorned tourists and expats alike. In the four-seater compartment of my getaway Thalys, there was a young couple sitting across from me. They were both slouched in their seats, looking down at their phones. Leaning slightly away from each other, they wordlessly scrolled with one hand, while the other lay between them, interlocked. I looked down at my book but my eyes were having trouble tracking the words. I sensed an intense, noiseless struggle in the periphery of my vision and looked up at the couple's locked hands. They were playing thumb war.

Maybe it's true what they say about millennials.



Renaldo Maurice – Movement Portrait (from The Black Movement Project) (still) ~ LaJuné McMillian

Block 3
4 March, 2021

Maybe it's true what they say about millennials. As a borderline millennial, I've sometimes wondered whether the facile portrayal of our generation as lazy, entitled, multitasking brats could also be ascribed to me. Lazy? There was a time when I lacked the courage to pursue, or even name, what I truly wanted, and this translated into a listlessness that some might call laziness. Entitled? Don't we all deserve the best in life? Multitasker? I used to be incapable of this, but now I do toddler-weighted leg lifts while stirring the blanquette de veau with a baby on my hip, wondering if maybe Sheila Heti wasn't onto something. But surely not a brat? Maybe not, but I will say this. I have known the deep frustration of being given things in lieu of love.

Block 4
8 March, 2021

I have known the deep frustration of being given things in lieu of love. I remember, one evening, waiting in the snow in Vancouver, my bare legs shivering under my skirt. By the time his car finally pulled up, hours had passed. I slid into the back seat without a word and he hurried to apologize. His remorse thawed my indignation and I cried all the way home. He, on whom I depended for my safety and survival, had forgotten about me. Now I know that kind of dependence can be hard to bear. It's not easy being a dad.

Block 5
19 March, 2021

It's not easy being a dad. Especially when you have to deal with the daily hurdles and routine injustices that come with being an immigrant. My father is impassive on a normal day, brash and disagreeable when provoked, what one could call a stereotypical Asian patriarch. He was the child of poor Korean immigrants in postwar Japan and spent his days helping his family sift through the debris of war in search of scraps of metal to sell. He never talks about his past, but I'm certain that the cruelty he endured as a Korean boy in that time and place toughened him into the bully he later became and stunted his natural sensitivity and acute receptiveness to beauty. He once told me he dreamed of being the kind of person who could tell the difference between art nouveau and art deco.

Block 6
26 March, 2021

He once told me he dreamed of being the kind of person who could tell the difference between art nouveau and art deco. The comment made me think of Paris and the time I lunched at the bustling Bouillon Chartier, where the wine was cheap and the diners merry. Across the room, I saw an old man sitting alone amidst the swirling waiters. I was drawn to his stillness, how untouched he seemed by the din of clinking tableware and the guffaws erupting all around him. From the corner of my eye, I watched him as he ate his steak and fries and sipped his wine. My gaze traveled down, and I saw his shoes on the floor with the socks tucked neatly inside. His feet were bare under the table.

Block 7
2 April, 2021

His feet were bare under the table. So were the feet of many of the kids in the class. In this ramshackle classroom on the wrong side of the tracks in bustling Accra, I spent my

afternoons with children from destitute families. As my time at the school drew near, I announced that I would be taking photos of each of them on the last day of school. When the day arrived, the children paraded into the classroom in full regalia — puffy floral dresses, crisp school uniforms, traditional kente attire — and when I pointed the camera at them, one by one, they struck theatrical poses. When I was done, a young boy named Kwesi grabbed my arm and led me outside the school, where his mother was waiting. She pressed into my hand a small bundle of kelewele, which she cooked and sold on the street. She asked me to take a photo of her.

Block 8

9 April, 2021

She asked me to take a photo of her. Flanked by my sisters, she leaned on the café table and cupped her face in her hands. Tilting her face at its most flattering angle, she smiled demurely at the camera, visibly practiced in the art of posing. My mother was middle-aged then, and her looks had withered due to a lack of attention, the passing of time and the ordinary troubles of life and her imagination. But when she was a young, my mother was beautiful, stylish and inordinately proud. She used to work at a department store in Japan, and one day, her boss asked her to model for their catalogue. She always acted like this was no big deal, but my father assured us that she had held on to the catalogue, which was buried away in a secret corner of her closet. I wonder if she ever looks at it.

Block 9

18 April, 2021

I wonder if she ever looks at it. She found it in the sock drawer of her recently divorced linguistics professor, 20 years her senior, with whom she was having a fling the summer of our graduating year. It was a photo of his ex-wife with a cutout of his own eyes taped over hers. She tore it out of his journal and brought it to my apartment later that day. She'd insisted from day one that she'd never fall in love with him, but she kept gazing at the photo and asking me what I thought it meant. I looked at the photo, then at her, and shrugged. We've all done crazy things for love.

Block 10

14 May, 2021

We've all done crazy things for love. My first love was a beautiful, half-Japanese bad boy from the postwar Balkans with a jaded and weary outlook on life. He clung to the idea of me and my sheltered innocence, and loved me for living in a world he couldn't believe in anymore. When we broke up, I dated around his absence for the rest of my young adulthood, seeking in every potential flame something of him — his sad eyes, his broken nose, his demeanour, his gait, his hands, his intensity, the way he touched me, the way he

loved me. I kept exploring the memory of him in other men until 8 years after our breakup, when I got an email from him, asking for my forgiveness. It set me free.

Block 11

16 June, 2021

It set me free. That first night of freedom, I spent alone in my new apartment in Paris' Latin Quarter, a 100 ft² *chambre de bonne* — a maid's room, once upon a time. I lay on my mattress and studied the mottled stains that had bloomed on the ceiling, and eventually, fell asleep to the uninterrupted hum of the water heater, punctuated by Friday night revelries from the bar-filled streets below. The next morning, I awoke to the peal of church bells, and it felt quaint and idyllic to my North American ears. I got up, shuffled the half step to the small *oeil-de-boeuf* window and looked out onto Paris' iconic zinc rooftops and the hundreds of chimney pots staccatoed against the sky. I stood there for a long time.

Block 12

4 August, 2021

I stood there for a long time. I had been scanning Marie Vassilieff's Wikipedia page, and gasped at what I discovered. She was a fascinating multifaceted artist, whose Montparnasse atelier was a major hub for the greatest artists of the Ecole de Paris: Picasso, Modigliani, Léger, Matisse, Soutine... Later, to keep her struggling foreign artist friends from starving during the war, she opened her famous canteen, where people would come for sustenance and camaraderie.

What was her Madonna doing in this flea market, deep in the French hinterland? I ran back to the stall where my husband stood, still holding the framed collage of the Virgin Mary and dove. On the bottom right corner, the date 1931 and Vassilieff's signature.

"Get it!" I panted.

He held up the framed artwork to the stall's vendor. "How much for this, monsieur?"

"That frame's old-fashioned, but in good condition. 1 euro."

Kalen Iwamoto is a translator, crypto writer and artist based in France. Her crypto-native conceptual writing takes blockchain technology and crypto culture as its point of departure, and focuses on play and exploration to push the boundaries of the NFT medium.

Few Understand is a chain of micro autofiction stories that is structured like the blockchain — the last sentence in one block becomes the first sentence in the next. It is her first series on the Ethereum blockchain.

LaJuné McMillian is a new media artist and educator, creating art that integrates performance, extended reality, and physical computing to question our current forms of communication. They are

passionate about discovering, learning, manifesting, and stewarding spaces for liberated Black realities and the Black imagination. LaJuné believes in making by diving into, navigating, critiquing, and breaking systems and technologies that uphold systemic injustices to de-commodify our bodies, undo our indoctrination, and make room for different ways of being.

A selection of moving image visuals from *The Black Movement Project* are shown on stillpointmag.org.

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